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## The City of Babel and Assyrian Imperialism

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## PREFACE

The XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (IOSOT) was held in Leiden from 1 to 6 August 2004 under the Presidency of Professor Arie van der Kooij. Konrad D. Jenner was Congress Secretary. It was preceded by the IVth Congress of the International Organization for Targum Studies (held 29–30 July), the XIIth Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies (held 30–31 July), and the XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for Masoretic Studies (held 2–3 August).

The editor of this volume is grateful to the Organizing Committee, all of the invited lecturers, and Brill Academic Publishers for their collaboration in readying this Congress Volume for publication as quickly as possible. It will help all the participants to remember the Leiden Congress not only as a scientific but also as a pleasant and memorable event.

A. Lemaire

THE CITY OF BABEL AND ASSYRIAN IMPERIALISM  
GENESIS 11:1-9 INTERPRETED IN THE  
LIGHT OF MESOPOTAMIAN SOURCES

ARIE VAN DER KOOIJ

I. *Introduction*

The stories about primeval times in Genesis 1-11 abound in motifs and traditions which are of Mesopotamian origin. The most telling example is, of course, the Flood narrative. In this opening lecture I will deal with Gen 11:1-9, commonly designated as the story of the Tower of Babel, as well as with a related passage in Gen 10 that is concerned with Nimrod and Mesopotamia (vv. 8-12). The choice of Gen 11:1-9 may seem appropriate since it explains why I have to deliver my opening lecture to an international meeting in a language which is not my native one. It is my purpose to deal with the interpretation of Gen 11:1-9 in two respects: (a) by discussing the issue of literary unity, on the one hand, and (b) by reading the text in the light of Mesopotamian sources, on the other. The emphasis will be on the latter, because the text itself draws our attention to Mesopotamia, as is also the case with Gen 10:8-12. Moreover, up to now this aspect has not been dealt with in much detail.

II. *The issue of the literary unity*

As to the question of whether Gen 11:1-9 is a literary unity, or not, opinions differ. Some consider the text of this story a literary unity, others do not, and those who do not, offer divergent solutions. Some are of the opinion that the story is the result of (two) parallel texts (recensions), whilst others hold the view that an original version of the story has been reworked, be it once or more than once. Thus, the situation concerning our text is most confusing which, in a sense, fits the contents of the story.

The issues at stake are not so much related to a difference in terminology and language as is the case between a priestly and non-priestly

style of writing, but concern matters of 'coherence'. In this lecture I will discuss the following issues which seem to be the main ones:

1. the relationship between the motif of 'city' and that of 'tower';
2. the question of the twofold descent of God;
3. the relationship between v. 7 and v. 8;
4. the question of whether the motif of dispersion is of a secondary nature.

(1) As is well-known, Gunkel advanced the view that the text as it stands contains two versions, a city-recension and a tower-recension.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have argued that both elements are to be seen as two motifs which may differ in origin (in terms of oral transmission), but which make sense together in the text.<sup>2</sup> Others still regard an early version of the building of the tower as the base-text that has been reworked and expanded in terms of a city story,<sup>3</sup> or the other way around.<sup>4</sup> However, the idea of building a literary critical analysis on the city and the tower as two separate motifs is not convincing. Recently scholars have argued, and rightly so, that 'city' and 'tower' belong together as this is fully in line with ancient Mesopotamian culture.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it is not appropriate to label our story as being about the tower of Babel. Rather, it is a story about the *city* of Babel (hence the title of this lecture).<sup>6</sup>

(2) The question of the twofold descent of God. In v. 5 we read that YHWH 'came down (יָרַד) to see the city and the tower which was being built by men', whereas in v. 7 the Lord states, 'Let us go down (נִרְדָּה)'. This seems to be a doublet, and thus an argument to be used for a literary critical analysis of the text. But, in this case too, there is no compelling reason to conclude that there is any discontinuity in the

<sup>1</sup> H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, HKI,1 (Göttingen, 1901).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. C. Westermann, *Genesis*, BK I/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> See C. Rose, "Nochmals: Der Turmbau zu Babel," *VT* 54 (2004), pp. 232-233.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. G. Wallis, "Die Stadt in den Überlieferungen der Genesis," *ZAW* 78 (1966), pp. 141-144; L. Ruppert, *Genesis*. 1. Teilband: Gen. 1,1-11,26 (Würzburg, 1992), pp. 485-494.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede". Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauzählung (Gen 11,1-9)*, OBO 101 (Freiburg/Göttingen, 1990), pp. 314, 377. See also C. Levin, *Der Jahvist*, FRLANT 157 (Göttingen, 1993), p. 128; M. Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte. Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Genesis 1,1-11,26*, BZAW 265 (Berlin, 1998), p. 91 Anm. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, p. 372.

story. First, v. 5 is about YHWH alone, whereas the phrase in v. 7 refers to YHWH and the members of the divine council.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, according to v. 5 the Lord came down "to see etc." Westermann is of the opinion that v. 5 is about "ein direktes Eingreifen gegen den Bau".<sup>8</sup> However, just as in Gen 18:21, the expression "to come down to see" means that the Lord came down for inspection, like a judge (cf. Gen 18:25), in order to know what is going on. Vv. 6-7 then contain his report and the plan of action he recommends to the divine council.<sup>9</sup>

(3) The third issue which is often raised, concerns the relationship between v. 7 and v. 8. The difficulty here is that v. 8 does not correspond to v. 7: the latter verse has it that the language of men will be confused, whereas the former tells us that the Lord dispersed them all over the earth. So the order of actions creates a difficulty. Read in a straightforward way, the logical order of the actions seems strange indeed, but this reading does not take into account the stylistic aspects of the passage of vv. 8-9. Both verses display a nice balance:

v. 8a	A	motif of dispersion
v. 8b	B	leaving off the building activities
v. 9aa	C	name of Babel
v. 9ab	B'	confusion of language
v. 9b	A'	motif of dispersion

The underlying logical order—confusion of language, leaving off the building of the city, naming the city, being dispersed all over the earth—is expressed in a particular stylistic and structural way: v. 8a (A) and v. 9b (A') form an inclusion, which clearly underlines the motif of dispersion. So, in order to establish this inclusion the motif of dispersion had to be mentioned first in v. 8a. B and B' are clearly related to each other because the stopping of the building activities is the direct consequence of the confusion of the language. Since this latter motif functions as the explanation of the name of the city, it is mentioned in B' and not in B.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For "us" in the sense of the divine council, see e.g. Witte, *Urgeschichte*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>8</sup> Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 719. Witte speaks of a "Theophanic" (*Urgeschichte*, p. 93).

<sup>9</sup> For another suggestion, see Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, p. 313.

<sup>10</sup> For the naming of the city introduced by על כן, followed by a clause introduced by כי שם, see Gen 21:31.

(4) In connexion with this—third—issue, there is another question to be considered, namely, the well-known theory that the motif of dispersion in v. 4b, 8a and 9b should be seen as an expansion to an earlier story. In line with Seybold and Bost, Uehlinger regards the clauses containing the verb פָּרַץ as secondary, for two reasons: (a) they are marked by what is called “terminologische Stereotypie”, and (b) these clauses are “syntaktisch nur locker mit ihrem Kontext verbunden”.<sup>11</sup> In his view, these “glosses” are meant to connect Gen 9:19 (“their descendants spread [נִפְצְזָה] over all the earth”) and the pre-priestly table of nations (Gen 10\*), on the one hand, with an early version of Gen 11:1–9, on the other. “Die ‘Glossen’ implizieren ..... die Anerkennung der genealogischen Zerstreung als eines nach der Flut ordnungsgemässen Zustandes, gegen den sich das Projekt der Menschen in Gen 11,1–9 explizit sperren will”.<sup>12</sup>

Witte too is of the opinion that the clauses are to be seen as additions, as part of a post-priestly redaction. Unlike P (10:5, 32) where the neutral verb פָּרַד is used for the dispersion of the nations, the clauses in Gen 11 reflect a usage of פָּרַץ which is marked by a negative connotation conveying the idea of punishment by God, to be compared with texts such as Dtn 4:27; 28:64; 30:3. Thus, unlike P the clauses in Gen 11 testify to an interpretation of the dispersion of the nations “als Folge eines Strafhandels Jahwes”.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there is a clear difference of meaning here, so he argues, between פָּרַץ in Gen 11, on the one hand, and (the related verb) נִפְצְזָה in 9:19 on the other, because the latter is, as פָּרַד in Gen 10, a term conveying a neutral (“wertfrei”) connotation.

Both scholars share the view that the clauses about the dispersion are of a secondary nature, but both do so on different grounds.<sup>14</sup> Issues at stake are the matter of terminology, of syntax, and of the connotation of the verb concerned.<sup>15</sup>

The clauses in vv. 4, 8, 9 display a particular idiom, but this is hardly a reason to consider them as secondary. This also applies to the matter of syntax since one wonders why those clauses should be seen as loosely connected with their context. As I have argued above, in vv. 8–9 the

<sup>11</sup> Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, p. 308.

<sup>12</sup> Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, p. 327 Anm. 166.

<sup>13</sup> Witte, *Urgeschichte*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. also Levin, *Jahvist*, pp. 129–130.

<sup>15</sup> There is, of course, also the issue of the redaction critical relationship between Gen 11:1–9 and the preceding chapters (Gen 9–10), but this falls outside the scope of this paper.

motif of dispersion has been expressed by way of an inclusion which sheds light on the relationship between v. 7 and v. 8a. But what about v. 4b? This verse tells us that mankind decided to build a city with a high tower and by doing all this to make a name for themselves, that is to say, to realize a position of power and fame. V. 4b then explains that this decision was motivated by the argument "lest (לֵאמֹנָה) we be dispersed all over the earth". Uehlinger is of the opinion that the clause, "and we shall make a name for ourselves", should be seen as the purpose of the building project. This makes sense, but it does not exclude the possibility of an additional, underlying concern as is formulated in v. 4b.

From a compositional point of view it strikes one that the motif of dispersion has a crucial place in Gen 11:1-9. The story as it stands has two parts, vv. 1-4, about man, and vv. 5-9, about God's reaction to the action of mankind (see also below). In both cases the verb *פָּרַס* is found at the end of each section. Mankind built a strong city, with a high tower, in order not to be dispersed (vv. 1-4), and God eventually did disperse mankind all over the earth. The inclusion in vv. 8-9 strongly suggests that the matter of dispersion was held to be most important. Apparently, the story as it stands is meant to explain why mankind is living spread out over all the earth.

Thus, the story is marked by a strong contrast between the building project on the one hand, and the matter of dispersion, on the other. Most important in this respect are vv. 6-9: the city-project of mankind is presented in these verses as the building of a position of unlimited power.<sup>16</sup> They are able to do this since they are "one people" with "one and the same language" (v. 6). Mankind is depicted in our story as being highly interested in a position of supreme power by building a strong city to live in. The concern expressed in v. 4b is that living spread over the earth would not serve their purpose.<sup>17</sup> It is just the opposite of living in one big city.

<sup>16</sup> For the statement in v. 6 ("nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them") compare Job 42:2.

<sup>17</sup> It has been argued that v. 4b, if read in the context of Gen 11 as a whole, is to be understood as a transgression of the commandment that man should fill the earth. See C. Houtman, "... opdat wij niet over geheel de aarde verspreid worden. Notities over Genesis 11:1-9," *NTT* 31 (1977), p. 106, and P.J. Harland, "Vertical or horizontal: the sin of Babel," *VT* 48 (1998), pp. 527-532 ("Reading J and P together"). This may be so, but the story as being part of a pre-priestly stratum creates a different picture, since there the decision that mankind should live spread over the earth is taken by God in the light of the building of Babel.

This leads to the intriguing question whether the dispersion should be taken as a form of punishment, as scholars have argued, or not. Does the verb פָּרַץ convey a negative connotation as in texts like Dtn 4:27; 28:64; 30:3? I do not think so. The situation in Gen 11 is different from that in the texts just mentioned. In the latter, a particular people, the people of Israel, is dispersed as a result of violent actions of powerful enemies, whereas in Gen 11 the dispersion is the result of the confusion of a common language, that is to say, mankind is no longer one people with one language, but has become many peoples, each with their own language. Thus, the confusion of language is a subtle, but effective means of reaching a particular goal, namely, that mankind will live spread out over all the earth.

It therefore is not so obvious to regard the element of dispersion as a punishment. But what about the building project? If this is to be considered as sin, then the dispersion carries the notion of punishment. Most scholars hold the view that the city project should be seen as sin, as hubris.<sup>18</sup> It is true that the building of the city and the high tower symbolizes a most powerful position of man, but the judgment of God, in v. 6, seems not to reflect the idea of bad behaviour. Rather, as is clear from vv. 6-7, since they are one people with one language they have the possibility of creating a position of unlimited power, a form of power which is similar to that of God himself. This does not come as a surprise since it is in line with man's position as formulated by God himself in Gen 3:22: "The man has become like one of us".

In my view, the story in Gen 11 is not about sin and punishment.<sup>19</sup> The measure taken by God is part of the *destinies* determined in primeval times which, in line with Mesopotamian mode of thought, are meant as explanations of the world order as it is.<sup>20</sup> In Gen 11 the explanation is given of why the divine decision was taken that man should speak different languages and, as a result, should live spread out over the whole earth. In this way, God set limits to the power of man. Seen this way the verb פָּרַץ does not convey a negative connotation; its usage is in keeping with Gen 9:19 (related verb [פָּרַץ]) and 10:18.

<sup>18</sup> For a survey, see Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, pp. 254-290. See also Harland, "Sin of Babel," pp. 515-533.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, p. 575; E. van Wolde, *Words become Worlds. Semantic Studies of Genesis 1-11*, Biblical Interpretation Series, 6 (Leiden, 1994), pp. 100-104.

<sup>20</sup> See H.W.F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London, 1978), pp. 74-76.

In brief, as far as literary criticism is concerned, there are no compelling reasons to consider the text of Gen 11:1-9 as the result of two recensions, nor as the outcome of a basic story which has been expanded at a later stage, or stages. The story as it stands presents itself as a coherent text. This does not only apply to the contents of the text, as stated above, but also to the stylistic aspects of it.

As has been argued by scholars in the last four decades,<sup>21</sup> seen from the literary point of view the text of our story displays a well-considered structure which suggests a well-thought-out composition. As said before, the text has two parts, vv. 1-4, containing the action of man, and vv. 5-9, about the reaction of God. V. 5 forms the axis of the story, "the inverted hinge" as it has been termed by Van Dyke Parunak.<sup>22</sup> The story is further characterized by the repetition of particular words and other stylistic features which need not be discussed here.<sup>23</sup>

The story as it stands can be seen as a coherent text, both stylistically and conceptually. But, although the story is marked by an internal logic, one wonders why the several motifs—the issue of one language, the building of a city with a tower, the creation of many languages, and the spreading out of man all over the earth—have been put together. What may have been the significance of all this at the time the story was composed? So the question arises of why the building of a city with a tower is considered an illustration of supreme power. Furthermore, what may have been the significance of the contrast between the building of the city and the motif of spreading out of man over the whole earth. In order to deal with these and similar questions I will now approach our text from a broader perspective by reading the story in the light of Mesopotamian sources.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis. Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, SSN 17 (Assen, 1975), pp. 11-45; P. Auffret, *La sagesse a bâti sa maison. Études de structures littéraires dans l'Ancien Testament et spécialement dans les psaumes*, OBO 49 (Fribourg/Göttingen, 1982), pp. 71-90; Van Wolde, *Words*, pp. 84-89; Witte, *Urgeschichte*, pp. 95-97.

<sup>22</sup> H. van Dyke Parunak, "Transitional Techniques in the Bible," *JBL* 102 (1983), p. 543.

<sup>23</sup> For the issue of the relationship between the stylistic structures and the matter of the content of the story, see Van Wolde, *Words*, pp. 89-94.

### III. *An interpretation in the light of Mesopotamian sources*

The work of Uehlinger, entitled *Weltreich und "eine Rede"*, is the most important contribution to the study of Gen 11:1-9 to date with respect to a reading of our story in the light of Mesopotamian sources. It is the first one in which the question of the relationship between the story and the culture and history of Mesopotamia has been dealt with in great detail.<sup>24</sup> Having reconstructed what he considers the original version of the story he then pays special attention to the motif of "one speech" ("eine Rede") in verses 1 and 6, which, in his view, is not so much denoting one language, but rather unanimity. In a long and rich part of his work (Ch. ix [pp. 406-513]) it is argued that this motif actually reflects a well-known expression in royal texts from Mesopotamia, viz. *pū išēn*, "one mouth". It is often stated, particularly in royal inscriptions in the period from Tukulti-Ninurta I up to and including those of Sargon II, that the king "caused" nations and countries "to have one mouth" (*pā išēn šuskanu*), i.e. made them speak with one voice, in the sense of being subservient to one authority, the Assyrian king (cf. Von Soden, AHW, "machte (die Länder) eines Sinnes"). The use of this motif is part of the imperialistic ideology of some Assyrian kings ("Herrschaftstopos", as Uehlinger calls it). On the basis of a comparison between this and other motifs—the building of a city and tower, the making of a name, the notion of "one people"—in the reconstructed version of Gen 11:1-9 on the one hand, and Mesopotamian political ideology on the other, Uehlinger draws the conclusion that the story is best understood as reflecting and criticizing New Assyrian ideology and rhetoric of world dominion. In view of the fact that the story ends up with the stopping of the building of the city Uehlinger argues that the building of Dur-Sharrukin by Sargon II, and the fact that the building of this city was not finished after the mysterious death of the king (in 705 BC) is to be seen as the historical background and setting to the original version of Gen 11:1-9. In his view, the early version of Gen 11:1-9 was not yet part of the pre-priestly Urgeschichte, but represented a so-called "construed myth", a myth which, in this case, offers a theological reflection of the building of Dur-Sharrukin.

<sup>24</sup> For earlier contributions to the subject, see Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, p. 230. The difficulty of these contributions is that their focus was mainly on the tower and not on the city (with a tower).

This is a very stimulating theory, but it also raises questions concerning the following points: (a) the original story as reconstructed by him is stripped of specific details referring to Mesopotamia, such as the name of the country (Shinar) and of the city (Babel), and (b) the motif of one speech should be taken, in his view, in the sense of unanimity rather than in the sense of one language. Since, as argued above, there are no compelling reasons to doubt the literary unity of Gen 11:1-9 the question arises of what the result may be of a comparison between Mesopotamian data and the story as it stands. Furthermore, the motif of "one speech" in Gen 11 does not only convey the notion of unanimity, but also that of one language.<sup>25</sup>

I share Uehlinger's view that the combination of several motifs in Gen 11:1-9 makes good sense indeed, if understood as reflecting, in one way or another, the building of Dur-Sharrukin by Sargon II in the final decade of the eighth century BC. This applies to the building of a strong<sup>26</sup> city with a high tower, to making a name for oneself, and to the element of stopping the building of the city. The building of Dur-Sharrukin, the new capital, was not finished because of the ominous death of Sargon II in the year 705 BC. The making oneself a name—a well-known topos in royal inscriptions of Assyria—conveys the notion of power and fame, but it might well be that its relationship with the building of the city mirrors the fact that the city of Dur-Sharrukin was named after its builder, King Sharrukin (Sargon). More interestingly, the elements, in the Genesis story, of mankind as one people with one speech in relation to a new city, resemble a particular topic that is characteristic of inscriptions from Dur-Sharrukin. The text reads thus,

Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland, ..., I took as spoil at the word of Ashur, my lord, by the might of my scepter. I caused them to have 'one mouth' and settled them therein (i.e. the new capital).<sup>27</sup>

According to this passage peoples of different languages living all over the earth are brought together into one place, the new city of Dur-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. my review article, "The Story of Genesis 11:1-9 and the Culture of Ancient Mesopotamia," *BiOr* 53 (1996), cols 28-38. See also H. Seebaß, *Genesis I: Urgeschichte (1,1-11,26)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1996), p. 281.

<sup>26</sup> For the notion of "strong," cf. the use of *baked* bricks in v. 3 instead of dried ones.

<sup>27</sup> For a recent edition of the texts from Dur-Sharrukin, see A. Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen, 1994). The passage quoted above is to be found on pp. 43, 47f. [shorter version], 72, 79f. (translation on pp. 296, 298, 306, 311, respectively). See also Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, pp. 470-471.

Sharrukin. Furthermore, all peoples should speak with one voice which means, as noted above, that they accept one authority, namely, that of the king of Assyria who claimed to be the king of the world. In a way, all peoples should be one people. One touches here on a policy of globalisation *avant la lettre*.

As becomes clear from the inscriptions from the new city, the building of Dur-Sharrukin symbolized the supreme power in the sense of world dominion of Sargon II. This too sheds light on the fact that in the Genesis story the building of a city with a tower is considered an illustration of supreme power.

However, the question arises of how to account for the differences, that is to say, for the fact that our story is about "one speech" not only in the sense of unanimity, but also of one language, as well as for the fact that it is a story about Babel. The answer is that the Genesis story is a narrative which is set in primeval times. Babel is one of the oldest cities of Mesopotamia (cf. Gen 10:10) and as such fits very well into a story in ancient times. The choice of this city has also the advantage of being appropriate for the word-play between "Babel" and the verb *bālal*, "to confuse". Furthermore, the motif of explaining the change from one language into many languages is also a topic which suits a story set in primeval times. In addition, this also sheds light on the fact that it is about mankind, and not about a king.

So I would suggest that Gen 11:1-9 is a story about the early days of mankind which has been composed in such a way that it mirrors major events and ideological claims known from the last decade of the eighth century BC. It may be compared to a coin having two sides, resulting from a technique which is widespread in world literature, viz. of setting a story in the past, and yet speaking about the present. It is based on the idea of a certain analogy between events in the past and in the present. It is interesting to note that this phenomenon has parallels in the time of Sargon II: at his court texts were composed about the early history of Sargon of Akkad which are clearly alluding to the time of Sargon II.<sup>28</sup> The story about the city of Babel in Gen 11 seems to belong to such a category of literature. Babel is Babel, but

<sup>28</sup> See A.K. Grayson, "The Empire of Sargon of Akkad," *AJO* 25 (1974-1977), pp. 56-64; B. Lewis, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero who was exposed at Birth*, ASOR DS 4 (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 101-107; Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, pp. 496-503; W. Horowitz, "Moab and Edom in the Sargon Geography," *IEJ* 43 (1993), pp. 151-156.

can then be seen in analogy with a city like Dur-Sharrukin; mankind as being one people with one language making the attempt to realize a position of supreme power by building the city of Babel can be viewed then in analogy with Sargon II's striving for world domination which culminated in the building of Dur-Sharrukin and in making all peoples of "one speech".

There is, however, one element which still needs our attention, the motif of dispersion. As we have seen, this motif is crucial because it marks the end of the striving for supreme power. Read against the background of Assyrian politics it mirrors, in a contrasting way, a crucial element of these politics, viz. bringing peoples together into one area, and more in particular into one city according to the inscriptions from Dur Sharrukin, by means of mass deportations.<sup>29</sup> Seen from the perspective of our story, Sargon II made an attempt to realize a situation where people and power were concentrated into one place as it was in the beginning. But seen from the same perspective Sargon II was violating the international order as set by God according to Gen 11, namely that all peoples should live spread out over the earth. Thus, the motif of dispersion makes perfect sense in the story if read in the light of Assyrian politics of mass deportations.

#### IV. *Genesis 10:8-12*

I now would like to draw the attention to the story about Nimrod and Mesopotamia in Gen 10:8-12, in order to see whether it may throw light on the interpretation of Gen 11:1-9 as outlined above. It reads thus:

Cush became the father of Nimrod: he was the first on earth to be a mighty man.

He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said,

"Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord".

The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Kalneh, in the land of Shinar.

From that land he went out to Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah, that is the great city.

<sup>29</sup> On this subject see e.g. B. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden, 1979).

As to the relationship between this passage and the story of Gen 11 opinions differ,<sup>30</sup> but it is clear that both have some elements in common, namely, the land of Shinar, the city of Babel, and the motif of city building. The last item is a most fitting characterization of Mesopotamian culture, especially of the kings of Assyria.

The figure of Nimrod plays a prominent role in the passage. As to the name itself an identification with Ninurta is the most reasonable one.<sup>31</sup> He is not presented here as a god, but as a king, in line with the royal characteristics of Mesopotamia. The motif of a king as a mighty hunter is a well-known topic in royal inscriptions of Assyria, not of Babylonia. As Oppenheim put it, "Nimrod, 'the mighty hunter', was an Assyrian king".<sup>32</sup> The topic is attested in inscriptions from Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076) onwards, and is related to the figure of Ninurta. So e.g.,

By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, I killed on foot 120 lions with my wildly vigorous assault. ... I have brought down every kind of wild beast and winged bird of the heavens whenever I have shot an arrow.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars have tried to identify Nimrod with a single monarch of Mesopotamian history, but this does not seem to be a relevant question, because in the passage as a whole his name does not refer to one king. Rather, Nimrod functions as a symbolic name for Mesopotamian kings in general, first in ancient Babylonia, then, at a much later stage, in Assyria (see also below).

The second part of the passage, vv. 10-12, is dominated by the listing of several cities, four in the land of Shinar, and four in Assyria, respectively. The beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod is described in terms of four cities in the land of Shinar: Babel, Erech, Akkad, and Kalneh. These are ancient cities in the south of Mesopotamia—

<sup>30</sup> This concerns the question of whether the passage in Gen 10 is of the same author as the story of Gen 11. See e.g. Witte, *Urgeschichte*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. W.G. Lambert, "Assyrien und Israel," *TRE IV* (Berlin, 1979), p. 272; K. van der Toorn and P.W. van der Horst, "Nimrod before and after the Bible," *HTR* 83 (1990), pp. 12-15; Uehlinger, "Nimrod," in: K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P.W. van der Horst (eds.) *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. (Leiden, 1995), col. 1181.

<sup>32</sup> A.L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia. Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago and London, 1964), p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, Part 2 (Wiesbaden, 1976), p. 16 (Tiglath-Pileser I). On Ninurta and the motif of "royal hunt," see now A. Annus, *The God Ninurta in the Mythology and Royal Ideology of Ancient Mesopotamia*, SAAS 14 (Helsinki, 2002), pp. 102-108.

Babylonia—with Babel as the first one. It is still not quite clear how to interpret the name Kalneh. It is a well-known option to read this word as *kullānāh*, “all of them”,<sup>34</sup> but this does not recommend itself since it is more plausible to take the word as the name of a city. One might think of Kullaba, a city in Babylonia.<sup>35</sup>

The next part, vv. 11–12, is about Assyria. It is said that he, Nimrod, who is the subject of the verb,<sup>36</sup> went out from the land of Shinar to Assyria. There he built cities, four in number, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen. The last one is the only one with information about its location, and more intriguingly, it is stated that it is “the great city”.<sup>37</sup>

The cities of Nineveh and Calah are well-known, the latter being built as the royal capital by Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC),<sup>38</sup> but the other two, Rehoboth-Ir and Resen, still represent enigmatic names. What about these two cities? It strikes one that both names are in Hebrew: Rehoboth-Ir means “squares of city”, and Resen is a Hebrew word for “bridle”.

It has been suggested that Rehoboth-Ir be regarded as being in apposition to Nineveh: Nineveh, the broadest city.<sup>39</sup> However, since the Hebrew text is marked by the usage of the object marker in all four cases (... וְהָיָה ... וְהָיָה ... וְהָיָה ... וְהָיָה), the idea of an apposition, or a similar construction, does not recommend itself. Rehoboth-Ir as designation—City with squares—points to an important city.<sup>40</sup> Which city might be meant? As we know from Assyrian sources, there was one city in Assyria—the city of Ashur itself—which often is not referred to by its name, but by a designation, namely, “the City”, or “the Inner City”.<sup>41</sup> An interesting case is to be found in one of the oracles of

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Witte, *Urgeschichte*, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> This suggestion was already made by P. Jensen in 1895; see J. Skinner, *Genesis*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1930), p. 210. For Kullaba, see Fuchs, *Inschriften*, p. 351 (“Ur, Uruk, Eridu, Larsa, Kullaba etc.”); see also p. 362.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Witte, *Urgeschichte*, p. 110, Anm. 121. “Ashur” in the sense of “to Assyria” is also found in Hos 7:11. At other places the name with locative termination is used (אַשּׁוּרָה).

<sup>37</sup> It has been suggested to regard the phrase “the great city” as apposition to Nineveh or Calah (see Lambert, “Assyrien,” p. 272; Sasson, “Rehovot Ir,” *RB* 90 [1983], p. 94), but syntactically speaking this is not plausible.

<sup>38</sup> See Grayson, *Inscriptions* Part 2, pp. 113–121.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Sasson, “Rehovot Ir,” p. 95; Van der Toorn, “Nimrod,” p. 5. For a slightly different reading, see E. Lipiński, “Nimrod et Assur,” *RB* 73 (1966), p. 85 (“avec des places urbaines”).

<sup>40</sup> The element of “squares” is always related to great cities, not only in Palestine (e.g. Jerusalem, see Lam 2:12), but also in Mesopotamia.

<sup>41</sup> For “the City,” see e.g. P. Garelli, “Tablettes Cappadociennes de Collections

encouragement to Esarhaddon where the following listing of cities is given: "the Inner City, Nineveh, Calah and Arbela". Just as in Gen 10:12 an appellative ("the Inner City") is given here together with real names of other cities in Assyria. In the light of these data it seems plausible that Rehoboth-Ir actually refers to the city of Ashur.

As to Resen attempts have been made to interpret the name in the light of Akkadian words, such as *risnu*, "irrigation", or more in particular, as based on *Res eni*, "Fountain-head", the name of a settlement not far from Nineveh.<sup>42</sup> However, the search for Akkadian equivalents has not led to convincing proposals. In my view, Resen is to be regarded as a Hebrew word ("bridle") which is used as a symbolical name for a particular city in Assyria.

The word רֶסֶן evokes the picture of an Assyrian custom of humiliating defeated enemies (rulers) by putting bridles or nose-ropes on them. A well-known depiction of this practice is provided by a series of stelae executed by the order of Esarhaddon after his successful campaign against Memphis in Egypt (671 BC). The Assyrian king is presented here as someone who is holding an Egyptian king (presumably Tirhaka) and a Phoenician king with a nose-rope. It has an inscription that reads inter alia,

(Esarhaddon) the king of kings of Egypt, Patros and Kush (...)  
who holds kings with a bridle (*mukil šerret maliki*)<sup>43</sup>

More interesting, however, is the fact that a reference to this practice is found in Assyrian sources which are related to a particular city, namely inscriptions of Sargon II which all are from Dur-Sharrukin. The phrase involved reads thus,

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diverse," *RA* 59 (1965), pp. 151, 155, 158; and for "the Inner City," see e.g. the Indices in SAA (State Archives of Assyria) I, IX, X. The latter designation of Ashur is attested as early as the inscriptions of Adad-narari I (ca 1300 BC). Initially, it referred to the old city of Ashur, but later on it was used for the city as a whole.

<sup>42</sup> For the former suggestion, see Lipiński, "Nimrod," pp. 85–86, and for the latter, see Lambert, "Assyrien," p. 272.

<sup>43</sup> See R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* (Graz, 1956), pp. 96–97. For a parallel in the Old Testament, see 2 Kings 19:28 (par Isa 37:27); cf. C. Uehlinger, "Figurative policy, Propaganda und Prophetie," in J.A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress Volume Cambridge 1995* SVT 66 (Leiden, 1997), p. 306; A. van der Kooij, "The Story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib (2 Kings 18–19). A Sample of Ancient Historiography," in J.C. de Moor and H.F. van Rooy (eds.), *Past, Present, Future. The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets*, OTS 44 (Leiden, 2000), pp. 115–116.

I put bridles (*šerretū*) on the rulers (or, usurpers) of the four regions of the world.<sup>44</sup>

This phrase which is not attested in royal inscriptions of other Assyrian kings, clearly conveys the notion of world dominion.<sup>45</sup>

In the light of these data it is likely that Resen as the designation of a city actually stands for the new city that was built by Sargon II, viz. Dur-Sharrukin.<sup>46</sup> First, the (symbolical) name Resen fits the idea that Dur-Sharrukin was the city which symbolized Sargon's world power as is clear from the inscriptions from that city, such as the so-called Cylinder Inscription which was composed in commemoration of the founding of the new capital. Second, the location as given in Gen 10:12 fits, roughly speaking, the place of Dur-Sharrukin, halfway between Nineveh and Calah to the north.<sup>47</sup> And, thirdly, it also explains why Resen is called "the great city". As is clear from Assyrian sources as well as from excavations, the new capital was a most impressive city indeed.<sup>48</sup>

The notion of world dominion may also account for the number of cities, both in Babylonia, and in Assyria, in Gen 10:10–12, for in both cases the number of "four" reminds one of the *four* regions of the earth. If so, this passage describes in a nutshell two phases in the political history of Mesopotamia: the phase of world power in early times (one might think here of Sargon of Akkad<sup>49</sup>), and that of New Assyrian imperialism culminating in the reign of Sargon II.

<sup>44</sup> See Fuchs, *Inschriften*, pp. 33, 46, 56, 86, 193 (translations on pp. 290, 297, 301, 313, 343 respectively).

<sup>45</sup> For a similar expression in the Old Testament, see Isa 30:28 ("a bridle [יָרִיטִים] ... on the jaws of the peoples").

<sup>46</sup> This suggestion has also been made, albeit on implausible grounds, by Van der Toorn, "Nimrod," p. 6, and by Y. Levin, "Nimrod the Mighty, king of Kish, king of Sumer and Akkad," *VT* 52 (2002), p. 365.

<sup>47</sup> According to Gen 10:12 Resen was located "between" Nineveh and Calah. However, "between" is not necessarily meant in a precise way. Compare the phrase "between the eyes" which actually means "on the front of the head".

<sup>48</sup> See RIA II, pp. 249–252 (E. Unger); P. Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon King of Assyria* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>49</sup> Compare Levin, "Nimrod the Mighty," pp. 359–364. I do not think, however, that Nimrod is modeled after Sargon of Akkad, as Levin argues, but rather after Sargon II.

V. *Concluding remarks*

The passage of Gen 10:8–12 does indeed support our interpretation of the story in Gen 11. Both reflect in one way or another Assyrian imperialism, and both mirror a specific feature of the imperialistic ideology as expressed in texts from Dur-Sharrukin: in Gen 11, the passage about peoples from all over the earth who were brought to the new capital and who were caused to have “one mouth”, and in Gen 10, the expression about the “bridle” on the rulers of the world. Both stories are closely related. The building of Babel was modeled after the building of Dur-Sharrukin. The former—the first city mentioned in Gen 10:10–12—is characterized by the expression עיר ומגדל, “city and tower”, whereas the latter—the last one mentioned in Gen 10:10–12—is called העיר הגדולה, “the great city”.<sup>50</sup>

There is, of course, a difference between both passages, since from a chronological point of view the Gen 11 story goes further back in time than the passage about Nimrod. The story of the building of the city of Babel forms a backdrop to the passage in Gen 10. Nimrod, the hero-king, is not the builder of Babel, but may be seen as an heir to mankind in Gen 11 as far as the pursuit for supreme power is concerned.

According to Gen 11 mankind could build up a strong position since they were one people because they spoke one and the same language. However, afterwards, as soon as there were different languages and, as a result of that, different peoples living spread out over the earth, things were different. In this situation, world dominion could only be realized by force, by subjugating nations with different tongues, by not respecting their borders,<sup>51</sup> and by mass deportations. From this perspective, the name of Nimrod might well be taken as conveying the notion of rebellion (Hebrew מרד), since in striving for supreme power he did not respect the order of things as decided by God in primeval times.

The story of Gen 11 represents a sophisticated text which embodies evidence for a critical reflection on New Assyrian imperialism by focusing on the building project of Dur-Sharrukin by Sargon II as the climax and failure. By setting the story in primeval times the author was able

<sup>50</sup> In Assyrian sources the phrase ‘the great city’ can convey the notion of royal capital.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Isa 10:13.

to indicate that world domination would be a violation of the order of things as destined by God at the beginning of history.

Thus, a reading of the story in Gen 11 in the light of Mesopotamian sources turns out to be worthwhile. It sheds light on the combination of the several motifs in the story which seems puzzling at first sight. Viewed from a perspective broader than an inner-biblical one, the Gen 11 story as it stands makes perfect sense.

The city of Dur-Sharrukin was inaugurated in the year 706 BC. Only one year later—705 BC—Sargon II died an unexpected death in battle, in Anatolia. "His death rocked the ancient world".<sup>52</sup> In line with the thinking of the time, Sargon's death and the fact that he "was not buried in his house" were regarded as a sign of divine wrath for grave offences committed by the king. Thus according to the Assyrian text called "The Sin of Sargon".<sup>53</sup> The result was the abandonment of the still unfinished city of Dur-Sharrukin.

One can easily imagine that the scribal elite in Jerusalem considered the death of Sargon II as a punishment by YHWH for not having respected the world order as set by God. One can also imagine that the way these events were looked upon created a hope of return to their own country for all the Israelites who had been deported to Assyria.

And now my final remark. We in Leiden have Abraham as our father—Abraham Kuenen. We still regard him highly, though not uncritically. In his view the passages of Gen 10 and 11 are part of the so-called Jahwist source. In line with his view, and despite recent alternative theories,<sup>54</sup> I regard our passages as belonging to the earliest stratum in the Pentateuch.<sup>55</sup> This early stratum represents a literary work that was written at the end of the eighth century BC, in a period which was marked by the first serious crisis ancient Israel had had to face due to New Assyrian imperialism.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> K. Lawson Younger, "Recent Study on Sargon II, King of Assyria: Implications for Biblical Studies," in: M.W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger (eds.), *Mesopotamia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 2002), p. 319.

<sup>53</sup> For this text, see A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, SAA 3 (Helsinki, 1989), pp. 77–79. For the phrase 'was not buried in his house', see p. 77 (l. 20').

<sup>54</sup> See the works of H.H. Schmid, C. Rendtorff, C. Levin, J. Van Seters, E. Blum, and others.

<sup>55</sup> Texts ascribed to the Elohist are, in my view, of a later date (presumably towards the end of the 7th century BC).

<sup>56</sup> I thank Dr M.E.J. Richardson for correcting the English of this article.