

Ever

The Significance of Ancient Towers

BY T. J. BETTS

TO BUILD A TOWER WAS apparently a common practice in the ancient Near East. These towers served different purposes and varied in religious significance. The Hebrew word for tower is *migdal*, an apparent derivative of the word *gadal*, which means to be great or large. Towers served two basic uses in ancient Israel. Some were a part of city fortifications, while others served as watchtowers overlooking pastures and farmlands in the rural areas.

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The Scriptures indicate that towers serving as city fortifications varied in placement and structure. For instance, the “strong tower” in Thebez that Abimelech went to attack was located in the center of the city (Judg. 9:50-51). Fortification towers in the center of cities were often attached to a temple. Other defensive towers were part of walls. Towers were especially located where the city was easiest to approach and especially at the gates—because these were the most vulnerable parts of the cities’ fortification networks.¹ Also, Assyrian reliefs indicate these towers had windows near the top.² Undoubtedly, the openings provided vantage points for lookouts or watchmen (see 2 Kings 9:17). Second Chronicles 26:9 and 15 tell how Judah’s King Uzziah (early eighth century B.C.) made use of defensive towers in Jerusalem: “Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, the Valley Gate, and the corner buttress, and he fortified them.... He made skillfully designed devices in Jerusalem to shoot arrows and catapult large stones for use on the towers and on the corners” (HCSB). Obviously, these towers’ roofs had to be solid in order to support such siege weapons. Abimelech was mortally wounded when a

woman cast down a millstone from the top of a tower, crushing his skull (Judg. 9:52).

Archaeologists have uncovered a number of towers at various locations in Israel. Some abutted against walls but were not part of the walls, while more commonly others were square towers with flat roofs incorporated into massive walls and projecting out of those walls.³ For instance, Uzziah probably erected the fortress of Kadesh Barnea. Its rectangular structure measured about 131 by 197 feet; its walls were about 13 feet thick. Incorporated into the fortress’s outer defenses were eight rectangular towers: one tower at each corner and a tower in the center of each wall surrounding the fortress.⁴ One of the most significant discoveries in Jerusalem is what is called the Israelite Tower discovered by Nahman Avigad in 1975. It is a 22-foot tall and 13-foot wide rectangular tower from the eighth century B.C. The tower is composed of large rough-hewn boulders filled with small stones in the space between. Arrowheads from the site lead archaeologists to believe that the tower was standing at the time of Nebuchadnezzar’s siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.⁵ Towers from the Hasmonean and Herodian

Page 27: Tower at the Mar Saba Monastery, which is located in the Judean desert between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. The monastery was founded in A.D. 482 by a monk named Saba; his teachings reportedly had a strong influence on the Byzantine emperor Justinian.

Below: Foundation of the ziggurat at ancient Ur. The fired-brick outer covering protected the mud-brick core. Measuring about 201 feet long, 150 feet wide, and about 100 feet tall, the original tower’s construction began under the leadership of King Ur-Nammu of the Third Dynasty of

Ur (about the 21st cent. B.C.) and was completed by his son King Shulgi. The ziggurat was built to honor Nanna, the moon god and patron deity of ancient Ur.

Right: Royal Sumerian hymn called “The Song of Ur-Nammu, King of Ur.” The text begins by prais-

ing the city of Ur and its temples and next honors the king: “I am Ur-Nammu, the shepherd. May life be my reward. For Nanna I have built a temple.” The hymn ends with by recounting the king’s divine lineage: “Kingship has descended from the heavens unto me.”





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periods (142-4 B.C.) appear to have been even larger. One such rectangular tower near Jerusalem is 33 by 30 feet in dimensions at its base.⁶ These towers were a visual statement of power. They not only protected the people of the cities, they also intimidated any enemies contemplating attack.

With fortified towers providing protection from dangerous enemies, biblical writers, not surprisingly, associated Yahweh with towers. For instance, David said of God, “For You have been a refuge for me, a tower of strength against the enemy” (Ps. 61:3, NASB). And Proverbs 18:10 says, “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe” (NASB). Yahweh was Israel’s protection against its enemies.

Another type tower was the watchtower. These stood in the vineyards and on the farms and pasturelands of ancient Israel. Archaeologists have discovered over a thousand of them alone in western Samaria in the north of Israel. They typically ranged from 12- to 15-foot squares with about 2½-foot thick walls of uncut stones.⁷ The floors were either cobbled stone or beaten earth. The towers provided housing for the owners and



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Left: Watchtower overlooking grain fields near the Valley of Lebonah in northern Judea.

Above: Among the ruins at ancient

Jericho is the base of a round Neolithic tower dated to about 8000 B.C. The tower, which measures about 33 feet in diameter at the base and

28 feet tall, has an internal staircase. Especially considering that workers had only stone tools, the tower was a remarkable engineering feat.

farmhands who were working—especially at harvest. The towers also served as places to store equipment, tools, and produce. Furthermore, they allowed the owners to look over their fields and provided a place from which watchmen could keep an eye out for any threats. The towers afforded the people working in the fields who were some distance away from home some measure of protection against raiders. Although the hinges on the watchtower doors were similar to those on defensive towers, the watchtowers were apparently mainly for protection and not so much for waging a fight against attackers. Watchtowers were evidently designed to provide those inside a measure of protection from local raids until help could arrive from home or local authorities.⁸

Probably the best-known tower in Scripture is the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). It was built in the Plain of Shinar in southern Mesopotamia. Scholars believe the Tower of Babel was quite different from most other ancient towers in both structure and purpose; it was neither a watchtower nor a defensive tower. Most likely, the Tower of Babel was a ziggurat, a stepped pyramid with a square base, layered, and having a flat top. The dimensions of the square bases ranged anywhere from about 60 to 300 feet on one side. The top usually had an altar on it.

The biblical writer probably did not call it a ziggurat because ziggurats were not part of Hebrew culture or



Dated to the 4th cent. B.C., this defense tower at Sebaste is considered to be the finest surviving Hellenistic monument in ancient Samaria.

Below: Fragment of a dedicatory brick from an Elamite ziggurat; dated about 1234-1227 B.C. The cuneiform inscription reads: "I, Untash-Napirisha, son of Hubar-n (umena, king of Anzan) and Susa, have attained (my victorious life. My health) has been prolonged; (I have not suffered a) shameful death in (my) victorious wars. (According to my desire, in the temple) I laid the brick of entrance (of kukunu and upkum; I dedicated it to the god) Inshushnak of the (Holy City. It came) up before Ishushnak as a present from me." The words in parentheses are restored from other ziggurat bricks, all with the same inscription.

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language. One would expect the writer, when talking about the tower, to borrow the foreign term then in use, to make up a new word for the structure, or to use an existing Hebrew word that was as close as possible in meaning. Genesis 11:4-5 appears to have taken the last option, using *migdal* (from a Hebrew root word meaning "to grow up, become great") in place of "ziggurat," which has an etymological root meaning "to be high" in Akkadian.⁹ In ancient Mesopotamian religion, the people understood their gods to be like humans. The ziggurats appear, therefore, to have served as stairways for the gods to move from one realm to another.¹⁰ If the people in Genesis 11 had such beliefs, readers should not be surprised that God came "down" without any need of their tower and demonstrated by His power that He is far greater than any mere human-like god. 6

1. C.H.J. De Geus, *Towns in Ancient Israel and in the Southern Levant* (Leuven, Belgium: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2003), 16.

2. *Ibid.*, 19.

3. Samuel Rocca, *The Fortifications of Ancient Israel and Judah 1200-586 BC* (Long Island City, NY: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 21.

4. *Ibid.*, 39.

5. Suzanne F. Singer, "Jerusalem's Babylonian Siege Tower" in *Ten Top Biblical Archaeology Discoveries*, ed. Joey Corbett (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeological Society, 2011), 137-41. [online, accessed 15 January 2015] Available from the Internet:

thepathlight.com/uploads/ten_top_biblical_archaeology_discoveries.pdf.

6. V. Tzaferis, "A Tower and Fortress Near Jerusalem" in *Israel Exploration Society* 24 no. 2 (1974), 85.

7. Shimon Applebaum, Shimon Dar, and Zeev Safrai, "The Towers of Samaria" in *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 110 no. 2 (1978), 91.

8. *Ibid.*, 91-100.

9. "גָּדַל" (*gadal*; grow up, become great) in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 152-53; John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 155-75. [online; accessed 15 January 2015] Available from the Internet: www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bbr/tower_walton.pdf.

10. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel."

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