

Genesis 11, 1–9 and its Sumerian Predecessors in Comparative Perspective: Early Views on “National Culture” and its Nature

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Abstract. *The paper discusses some key texts from Ancient Mesopotamian and also Hebrew mythologies which may have had several indications and contained many ancient understandings about the early views on the modern notions of a nation, national culture and the role of language on these beliefs. The possible connection of the Sumerian epic tale Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta is discussed in context with the Enuma Eliš myth in context with Hebrew Genesis’ the Tower of Babel story and the character of these text and the nature of their evolution is analysed. Based on some Sumerian royal correspondence, hymns, and epic literature and the worldview presented in Sumerian literature it is concluded that that certainly and especially a sort of a language based cultural and also ethnical understanding about a “distinct nation” culturally separate from “other” nations already existed more than 4000 years ago; reflected in many ways similarly also in the stories of Hebrew Genesis.*

Rezumat. *Articolul de față discută o parte dintre textele esențiale din Mesopotamia antică și din mitologia ebraică ce ar fi putut include unele indicații și cuprinde numeroase înțelesuri cu privire la noțiunile moderne de națiune, cultură națională și rolul limbajului în perceperea acestor concepte. Posibila legătură dintre acestea și epopeea sumeriană Enmerkar și Stăpânul din Aratta este discutată în contextul mitului Enuma Eliš, al Genezei ebraice și a legendei Turnului Babel, fiind analizate totodată și caracterul textului și evoluția sa. Plecând de la surse ce cuprind corespunzătoare regale sumeriene, imnuri și epopei, precum și de la viziunea asupra lumii ce este prezentă în literatura sumeriană, sunt trase concluzii cu privire la un anumit limbaj cultural și o înțelegere etnică a unei „națiuni distincte”, separată de „alte” națiuni. Aceste noțiuni existau, astfel, cu mai mult de 4000 de ani în urmă și au fost reflectate în numeroase moduri în Geneza ebraică.*

Keywords: *Sumerian mythology, Hebrew Genesis, Enuma eliš, Ancient Near Eastern religion, culture and ethnicity, Old Testament, comparative Mythology.*

The story of the tower of Babel in chapter 11 of the Hebrew *Genesis* is undoubtedly one of the best-known in the Bible’s entire Old Testament.² This is evidenced by the use of the figure of speech ‘Babel of nations’ across the whole Christian cultural space to characterize a city or a place where people of many different nationalities speaking different languages live side by side. However, few know that the tower of Babel has a prototype as early as in ancient Sumer,

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² See also ESPAK 2017.

approximately more than 2000 years BC, in the Sumerian epic tale *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, which in turn may have predecessors in spoken tradition. The story, written nearly 4000 years ago in Ancient Sumer, has transformed and changed according to the mythological and ideological needs of the nations or cultural areas as it was transferred via written and oral tradition of different nations. The Babylonians used the Ancient Sumerian tale according to their understanding and needs in approximately 1000 BC to write down their myth *Enuma Eliš*, and the authors of the Old Testament did so considerably later. Different interpretations and receptions among the people have produced and continue to produce different conceptions and viewpoints to this day.

Old Testament’s story of the tower of Babel, nowadays indisputably the best-known expression of this mythological tale, begins with the description of the nations reaching Sumer (שנער) and settling there. Next, according to the local custom, they start molding clay bricks and then burn them to make them harden. Bitumen,³ which was found in abundance in local water bodies, was also used. The people who settled in Babel decided to build themselves a city and erect in its center a ziggurat which, in Genesis, probably refers to the Esagila temple of Marduk who gradually became one of the principal gods after the arrival of Amorites in the Mesopotamian territory. In Sumerian, Esagila (é-sag-il-la) means a temple with a raised/upwards-striving head.⁴ However, the god Yahweh is not pleased with the construction because people who can build a tower reaching high to the heavens together would be omnipotent while united. They would be able to transgress the rules and restrictions established by Yahweh himself. The authors of the text, presumably living during the time of exile and promoting the new monotheist ideology, probably also referred to the cult of a false god Marduk that is ended by Yahweh. Yahweh descends to Earth from his heavenly spheres, which the united people are attempting to reach, mixes up the languages of the people who used to understand one another, and disperses the people, who neglect their construction, across the world.

1	ויהי כלהארץ שפה אחת ודברים אחדים:	The whole earth had one language and the same words.
2	ויהי בנסעם מקדם וימצאו בקעה בארץ שנער וישבו שם:	And it came to be, as they journeyed from the east, they found a plain in Sumer and they stayed there.
3	ויאמרו איש אל־רעהו הבה נלבנה לבנים ונשרפה	And they told each other: „So! Let us form bricks and burn them

³ See HEIMPEL 2009, 25ff.

⁴ See also ANTHONIOZ 2014.

	לשרפה ותהי להם הלבנה לאבן והחמר היה להם לחמר:	so they would be well-burned!“ And their building stones were bricks and bitumen was their mortar.
4	ויאמרו הבה נבנה־לנו עיר ומגדל וראשו בשמים ונעשה־לנו שם פן־ נפוץ על־פני כל־הארץ:	And they said: „Let us build a City for us and a tower, with a top (reaching) the heavens and let us make ourselves a name, so we would not be scattered all over the earth.“
5	וירד יהוה לראת את־העיר ואת־המגדל אשר בנו בני האדם:	And Yahweh descended to see the city and the tower the sons of man were building.
6	ויאמר יהוה הן עם אחד ושפה אחת לכלם וזה החלם לעשות ועתה לא־יבצר מהם כל אשר יזמו לעשות:	And Yahweh said: „Behold! The nation is one and their language is one. And this (building work) is (only) the beginning of their deeds. And now they have no limitations whatever they plan to do (in the future).“
7	הבה נרדה ונבלה שם שפתם אשר לא ישמעו איש שפת רעהו:	So! Let us go down and let us mix their languages, so they would not be able to understand one another’s language.“
8	ויפץ יהוה אתם משם על־פני כל־הארץ ויחדלו לבנות העיר:	And Jahweh scattered them from there upon the surface of the entire earth and they went away from building of the city.
9	על־כן קרא שמה בבל כי־שם בלל יהוה שפת כל־הארץ ומשם הפיצם יהוה על־פני כל־הארץ:	That is why (this city) is called by the name Babel, because there Jahweh mixed the languages of the entire earth and from there Jahweh scattered them upon the surface of the entire earth.

The explanations of this story usually mainly refer to the Babylonian myth *Enuma Eliš* which describes the erecting of temples for the gods after Marduk prevails in a mythological battle and becomes the chairman of the pantheon of gods. The myth describes how the bricks were made for the temple, and Marduk’s own temple Esagila, with the head or the tip of its tower reaching the heavens, was completed. Marduk himself gives the order to build the city and start molding the bricks to the gods (VI 57–58) who then start the construction work (VI 59–64):–

^da-nun-na-ki it-ru-ku al-la
šat-tu iš-ta-at li-bit-ta-šú il-tab-nu
šá-ni-tu MU.AN.NA ina ka-šá-di
šá é-sag-íl mi-ih-rit ZU.AB ul-lu-u re-ši-šú
ib-nu-ú-ma ziq-qur-rat ZU.AB e-li-te
a-na ^da-num ^den-líl ^dé-a u šá-a-šú ú-kin-nu šub-tú
ina tar-ba-a-ti ma-har-šú-nu ú-ši-ba-am-ma
šur-šiš é-šár-ra i-na-at-ta-lu qar-na-a-šú
ul-tu é-sag-íl i-pu-šu ši-pir-šú
^da-nun-na-ki ka-li-šú-nu pa-rak-ki-šú-nu ib-taš-mu
5 UŠ ^dí-gì-gì šá šá-ma-ma u 600 šá ZU.AB ka-li-šú-nu pah-ru
be-lum ina BARAG MAH šá ib-nu-u šu-bat-su
DIGIR.DIGIR AD.MEŠ-šú qé-re-ta-šú uš-te-šib
an-nam ba-ab-ì-lí šu-bat na-ár-me-ku-un
nu-ga-a áš-ru-uš-šu hi-du-ta-šu tíš-ba-a-ma

The Anunnaki gods worked with the hoes,⁵
within one year formed its bricks.
When the second year arrived
raised the head of the Esagila temple, worthy of the Apsu temple.
They built the temple tower of Apsu to be high
To Anu, Enlil and Ea their dwelling place they made and secured.
Majestically he sat in front of them
The roots of Ešarra his horns were looking upon
When they had finished the works of the Esagila temple
all the Anunnaki gods built their own shrines.
Three hundred Igigi gods of the heavens and six hundred of the Apsu gathered together.
Bel in his great shrine they had built for him as his dwelling place
his divine fathers he sat down to celebrate.
„This is Babylon, your dwelling place!
Rejoice about it, sit down in joy!“

While it is obvious that the authors of *Genesis* must have been familiar with the text of *Enuma Eliš*, the main “loan”, or rather “adaptation”, of the story of building the great temple tower in the Hebrew version mostly originates from the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of*

⁵ TALON 2005.

Aratta. Yet this Sumerian text is rarely analyzed as a source used by the authors of *Genesis*.⁶ It is possible that the researchers concentrating on more recent Middle Eastern cultures are not well acquainted with early Sumerian material, or the “loan” from 1500-year-old material into the Hebrew text is considered too unlikely due to the length of time separating the two works.

The Sumerian heroic tale about Enmerkar describes a conflict between the Sumerian state of Uruk and Aratta – a state of heretofore unidentified location, possibly an imaginary mythological state. When analyzing the text, it seems likely that the state of Uruk had sent a messenger to Aratta, demanding that the local government surrender to Uruk and pay tribute.

It is possible that the text describes Enmerkar’s – the Uruk king’s – desire to build a new sanctuary called “Mountain of holy/clean me-s (Sumerian holy principles)”. It also seems likely that the messenger was instructed to demand from Aratta workers or materials for this purpose. The following words were said to the Lord of Aratta by Uruk’s messenger (128–134):⁷

ge₂₆-e-šè-àm^d en-líl-bàn-da ki-en-gi-ra-ke₄
 en^d nu-dím-mud šà kù-ge pà-da
 kur me sikil-la-ke₄ ha-ma-dù-e
^{geš}taškarin-gen₇ hi-li ha-ma-ab-ak-e
^dutu agrun-ta è-a-gen₇ si-múš ha-ma-ab-gùn-gùn
 zà-du₈-zà-du₈-bi urin ha-ma-mul-e
 agrun-agrun-ba šir kù nam-šub du₁₂-a-ba

I am the one whom the junior Enlil of Sumer,
 Lord Nudimmud in his sacred heart has chosen.
 A mountain of pure me-s let them build for me!
 Like a boxwood tree luxuriant let it be for me!
 Like Utu rising from his chamber let its brilliance be shining for me!
 Let its door-posts in its guard radiate for me!
 In its chambers holy songs and incantations are performed!

The above message is followed by the part of the story titled the incantation (*nam-šub*) of the god Enki (here with his other name Nudimmud), and it seems that the messenger is supposed to present the incantation or song to the Lord of Aratta, as he was instructed to do so by the deities and the ruler of Sumer (lines 135–155):

nam-šub^d nu-dím-mud-da-kam e-ne-ra du₁₁-mu-na-ab
 u₄-ba muš nu-gál-àm gíri nu-gál-àm

⁶ FRAHM 2010, 16–17.

⁷ MITTERMAYER 2009, 76–77.

kir₄ nu-gál-àm ur-mah nu-gál-àm
ur-gir₁₅ ur-bar-ra nu-gál-àm
ní tèg-gá su zi-zi-i nu-gál-àm
lú-ùlu^{lu} gaba šu gar nu-tuku
u₄-ba kur šubur^{ki} ha-ma-zi^{ki}
eme ha-mun ki-en-gi kur gal me nam-nun-na-ka
ki uri kur me-te gál-la
kur mar-tu ú-šal-la nú-a
an ki nígin-na ùg sag sì-ga
^den-líl-ra eme 1-àm hé-en-na-da-ab-du₁₁
u₄-ba a-da en a-da nun a-da lugal-la
^den-ki a-da en a-da nun a-da lugal-la
a-da en-e a-da nun-e a-da lugal-la
^den-ki en hé-gál-la en du₁₁-ga zi-d[a]
en géštu-ga igi-gál kalam-ma-ke₄
maš-su digir-re-e-ne-ke₄
géštu-ge pà-da en eridu^{ki}-ga-ke₄
ka-ba eme ì-kúr en-na mi-ni-in-gar-ra
eme nam-lú-ùlu 1 ì-me-àm

The incantation of Nudimmud recite to him!

When there was no snake and there was no scorpion;
was no hyena and lion was not;
no dog and no wolf were there;
no terror approaching, no fear being there;
so mankind had no rival.

At that time, the lands of Šubur and Hamazi
in harmonious language; and Sumer, the great mountain of magnificent me-s;
Akkad, mountain that is fitting;
and the land of Martu, peacefully were lying down.

Sky and earth in its totality (the whole world), the well-protected people;
to Enlil in one language they all may speak!

At that time, for the contesting lords, the contesting princes, the contesting kings;
Enki for the contesting lords, the contesting princes, the contesting kings;
for the contesting lords, the contesting princes, the contesting kings –
Enki, the lord of abundance, the lord of just decisions,
the lord of knowledge and wisdom of the land,

the leader of the gods,
chosen in wisdom, the lord of Eridu:
In their mouths the tongues were different all that he had put there.
The tongues of mankind became one

However, Wilfred G. Lambert believes that it is not clear that this was the messenger's task and that the reading of the following incantation was the job of this particular messenger; thus, he finds that the interpretation remains uncertain.⁸ While different researchers have proposed different interpretations and nuances and are not in agreement about the details of the story,⁹ the idea, taking into account the wider context, seems clear enough. The fact that Enmerkar sent the messenger to the Lord of Aratta with exactly the purpose of demanding Aratta's surrender seems to be confirmed in the later parts of the story where the Lord of Aratta tries to explain that he will not surrender to Uruk since he himself is also a powerful lord. The incantation of Enki begins with the explanation that originally, or "in the perfect being of things", all human languages were the same. Mankind had no enemies, and all nations celebrated the main deity of kingship – Enlil – in union. The incantation goes on to talk about rivalling kings and rulers who probably ruined mankind's original harmonious existence. However, Enki's "language-political decision" can be explained in two different ways. Either Enki mixes the languages of different rulers to prevent them from paying tribute to the god Enlil in the same language – for instance, in order to confuse the enemy before the battle between the two states. Or Enki wants to turn all languages into a single one for the purpose of making all rulers of the known world worship Enlil in harmony and understanding. The aim of the text might be to claim that the conflict only occurred because different rulers were using different languages, making it obvious why they did not want to worship Enlil (i.e., the state of Uruk) in harmony (i.e., surrender) and using the same language (i.e., Sumerian). Thus, the text also refers to Enki's role in assigning languages and all norms of civilization for humankind (i.e., for the nations of the known Middle Eastern world of the time), as the myth *Enki and the World Order* also claims. In order to subject all nations to the power of Uruk (i.e., Sumer), Enki now demands that all these nations should speak the same language. In that case, the function of Enki's incantation would not differ considerably from the Middle Eastern medical incantations whose purpose was to cure some illness or ailment. Enki's incantation can be interpreted as a cure to an illness defined as "different opinions" and "different languages".

The text does not seem to refer to the rivalry between the major Sumerian deities Enki and Enlil (the alleged theological difference between Nippur and Eridu)¹⁰ which the title used for Enki – "junior Enlil of Sumer" – could be said to indicate. Rather, it refers to the fact that

⁸ LAMBERT 2008, 95.

⁹ MITTERMAYER 2009, 57ff. and 122–123; VANSTIPHOUT 1994, 135ff.; VANSTIPHOUT 2003, 64–65; ESPAK 2015, 195–198.

¹⁰ JACOBSEN 1992, 403–416 and HALLO 1990, 187–199.

Enki acts on behalf of Enlil and other major deities of the Sumero-Akkadian pantheon to reinforce the influence of Sumer (and, therefore, also of its deities) as the center of the civilized world. Bendt Alster also concludes that “The point is the opposite of the generally held opinion: Enki unified all mankind by making them address Enlil in one language, that is, in Sumerian. This is likely to reflect the aspirations of Šulgi’s empire, and does not represent a “Babel of tongues.””¹¹

Nudimmud’s incantation describes the imaginary ideal state of affairs where, due to the wisdom of Enki, the organizer of the whole Sumerian civilization, all states will recognize the Sumerian god Enlil as their lord and must therefore also accept the Sumerian language and civilization as supreme. Herman Vanstiphout comes to the same conclusion: “On the whole, and in a general sense, I think we must agree with Alster’s solution. The text means that mankind shall speak in one tongue, which is Sumerian, and that the Lord of Aratta has to submit to this.”¹² However, Wilfred G. Lambert does not agree with Alster, claiming that the incantation refers to the early epochs of mankind and describes how the god Enki, similarly to the story of Babel in *Genesis*, changed the original single language into several different languages. While he concedes that the Sumerian text lends itself to a completely opposite translation where the original diversity of languages was turned into one single language by Enki, he argues that “considering the diversity of languages existing in the known world of Sumerians and Babylonians the first alternative (as well as the opinion of the majority) is probably true.”¹³ Lambert also adds that, in either case, the ancient people believed that human language was instituted by gods, i.e. mankind’s knowledge of language was definitely of “divine” origin. In his analysis, Lambert does not refute the logic proposed by Alster but seems to rather rely on “personal preference” or his “vision” of what might be “right”. The language/languages of gods were undoubtedly considered to be the prototype of human languages, but Nudimmud’s incantation is not a philosophical discussion over the nature or even the birth of human language, it is an “adventure story” of a fixed scope about a simple message that the messenger was supposed to convey to the Lord of Aratta. It appears to be an order to “speak the same language”, which also means an order to follow Sumerian rules and requirements. It is very likely that the story was written during the era of the Neo-Sumerian Empire, possibly during the reign of Šulgi (ca 2094–2047 BC), when Ur was the uncontested capital of Sumer. This was a period when the linguistic diversity of the conquered nations and states was indeed a fact of life, and, especially during Šulgi’s reign, the problems of language were also discussed. On the one hand, having incorporated a multitude of nations into his

¹¹ ALSTER 2006, 31.

¹² VANSTIPHOUT 1994, 151.

¹³ LAMBERT 1999, 221–222.

empire, the ruler needed to show his respect or tolerance for other languages. This is indicated vividly by one of Šulgi's own hymns (Šulgi C, lines 121–126):¹⁴

[eme] [mar]-tu níg eme-gi-ra-gen₇ hé-[en-ga-zu-àm]
 [x x] x lú kur-ra hur-sag-ta du x
 [silim] ha-ma-né-éš eme mar-tu-a inim hu-mu-ne-ni-gi₄?
 eme elam níg eme-gi-ra-gen₇ hé-èn-ga-zu-àm
 x x elam^{ki}-ma nidba x x-bur₁₀-bur₁₀-re-éš
 silim ha-ma-né-éš eme elam-ma inim hu-mu-ne-ni-gi₄

I know Martu language as well as Sumerian!
 When the mountain-people walk in the mountains
 and they welcome me, I answer them in Martu!
 I know Elamite language as well as Sumerian!
 ... when they bring offerings from Elam ? ...
 And when they welcome me, I answer them in Elamite!

On the other hand, the Sumerian language as well as Sumerian seed (numun ki-en-gi-ra) were in the center of the Sumerian civilization and governmental thinking. Both were considered to stand above all other cultural phenomena. It is, for example, well stated in one of the letters of the last Ur III king Ibbi-Su'en to Puzur-Šulgi (line 19) where he describes the contestant to the throne Išbi-Erra in very sombre terms and describes him as unsuitable for kingship because of his non-Sumerian origins (^miš-bi-èr-ra numun ki-en-gi-ra nu-me-a)¹⁵ The best-known descriptions of a foreign nation in terms of hate and true despisement come in the from the mythological-historical text known under the title *The Curse of Akkade* (lines 155–158) where the nomadic Gutian tribes are described or demonized as half animals and half humans:¹⁶

gu-ti-um^{ki} ùg kéše-da nu-zu
 dí-m-ma lú-ùlu^{lu} galga/arhuš ur-ra úlutim ^ugu₄-bi
^den-líl-le kur-ta nam-ta-an-è
 ŠID-ŠID buru₅^{mušen}-gen₇ ki àm-ú-ús

The Gutians, people who do not know permanent settlement
 With human feelings / way of thinking but with the instincts of a dog, body shape like that of
 a monkey

¹⁴ CASTELLINO 1972; ETCSL 2.4.2.03.

¹⁵ ETCSL 3.1.20.

¹⁶ COOPER 1983, 56–59.

Enlil sent them down from the mountains
Like locusts they are covering the entire land

The text probably reflects the ideology or sentiments of the times of the beginning of the Ur III dynasty or even earlier. Naturally, the hatred towards the Gutians is not something unusual, since this tribe or larger entity of peoples were indeed hostile intruders and occupiers of Sumero-Akkadian lands in Mesopotamia.¹⁷

According to the ideology of the Neo-Sumerian Empire, when the Gutians and all the other more or less important national or tribal groups were already defeated or incorporated into the Ur III state or its sphere of influence, kingship and the role of the center of civilization were first and foremost supposed to belong to the city of Ur. The epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* probably tries to show that this was the case in the known world already during the mythical kings of Uruk who lived more than half a millennium earlier and in the “ideal” politics of the state of Uruk that was Sumer’s nexus of power at the time.

While the context and peculiarities of the Sumerian text can be analyzed and also “deciphered” primarily in the ideological-religious context of the Sumerian and Akkadian sources of the 2nd millennium BC, the logic of the Sumerian source text can in no way explain the convoluted way that this “adaptation” or “modification” of the abovementioned Sumerian epic ended up among the holy scriptures of the Jews. It is obvious that the authors of *Genesis* must have had access to the Sumerian source text since a corresponding epic did not exist as an extension among the more recent Akkadian-Babylonian myths and stories. The possibility that the story of the tower of Babel found its way into the “epic” of *Genesis* via oral tradition seems negligible. Therefore, it is most likely that the Jewish scholars encountered the text in Babylonian libraries during exile. The reasons for inverting the punch line of the text also provide several possibilities for interpretation. It is possible that after the Persian conquest, when the return of the Jews to their homeland became possible, there was a need to create a story about the Babylonians becoming overly arrogant, losing their fear of god and building sanctuaries that reached the heavens. That is, they wanted to become too powerful and impose their language and culture on the rest of the world. This would partly be in accordance with the idea of the Sumerian story. However, such aspiration towards unified ruling of the world brought about the vengeance of the god Yahweh, manifested by the confusing of the languages, which in turn eliminated the possibility to claim the status of the main cultural or political power. Thus, the Jews might have ascribed a theological source and reasoning for the Babylonians’ defeat in the war. *Genesis* in its “original form” was most probably largely written or compiled during the periods when Babylon had been overthrown and the considerably more tolerant Persians had taken their place. This gave the Jews a chance to once again return to

¹⁷ See ESPAK 2016, 78ff. for a more detailed overview.

their homeland, and, in order to encourage them to do it in a situation where most of the Jews who had already settled in the city of Babylon, the center of the world's civilization, probably did not want to return anywhere, such stories could just as well have had a mostly political function which naturally cannot be easy for us to understand two and a half millennia later. *Genesis* – like Estonian *Kalevipoeg* – was undoubtedly a political program for the birth of a “nation” or restoring its “self-confidence”. It is possible that similar intentions and emotions are also expressed in the story of the tower of Babel.

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