

TOWERS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The Hebrew word for tower is *migdal*, an apparent derivative of *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.

The Scriptures indicate that towers serving as fortifications varied in placement and structure. For instance, the “strong tower” in Thebez that Abimelech attacked 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 city walls. Towers were usually located where the city was most vulnerable, such as at the gates.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 26:9,15 tell how Judah’s King Uzziah (early eighth century BC) used defensive towers in Jerusalem to give archers a place to shoot and where catapults could launch stones onto the approaching enemy. Obviously, these towers’ roofs had to be solid in order to support such siege weapons.

Archaeologists have uncovered a number of towers at various locations in Israel. Some were separate from a city’s walls, but it was more common for square towers with flat roofs to be incorporated into massive walls.³ For instance, the fortress of Kadesh Barnea was a rectangular structure measuring about 131 by 197 feet with walls approximately 13 feet thick. Built 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

With fortified towers providing protection from dangerous enemies, biblical writers often associated Yahweh with towers (see Ps. 61:3; Prov. 18:10).

Probably the best-known tower in Scripture is the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), 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. Most likely, it 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.

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.⁵ 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.

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. Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel.”

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