

## B

## Baal

See BA'Ī.

## BĀBIL

Bābil, the ancient Mesopotamian city in present-day Iraq, is mentioned once in the Qurʾān (Q 2:102) as the abode of Hārūt and Mārūt, two fallen angels (see ANGELS). The context in which Bābil appears is the attitude of the Children of Isrāʾīl (*q.v.*) toward the Qurʾān and the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, who came to them *confirming what they already possessed; yet a party of those who were granted Scripture aforetime cast the Divine writ behind their backs as though unaware [of what it says]* (Q 2:101). This is followed by a reference to some Israelites learning sorcery from Hārūt and Mārūt in Bābil: *And [they] follow that which the devils used to recite during the reign of Sulaymān—and Sulaymān did not disbelieve but the devils disbelieved—teaching people sorcery and that which had been sent down to the two angels, Hārūt and Marūt, in Bābil; although these two never taught anyone without first declaring: “We are but a temptation, so do not disbelieve.” And yet they learned from these two how to create discord between a man and his wife; even though they could not cause harm to anyone save by Allah’s leave, still they learned what harmed rather than profited them, knowing well that he who bought it will have no share [of good] in the Hereafter. Evil indeed is what they sold themselves for; had they but known!* (Q 2:102).

Bābil (Babel in English, from Akkadian *bāb-iltu*, “gate of god”, through Biblical Hebrew *Bavel*) is considered to be a derivative of *balbala*, infinitive noun of *balbal*, meaning confusion, thus named because here the tongues were confounded when the tower built by Nimrūd was destroyed (Qurṭubī, *sub* Q 2:102). Another opinion about the confounding of tongues is that when Allah Most High decided to differentiate the children of Ādam (*q.v.*) by language, He swept all mankind by wind into the plain that was afterward called Bābil, where they were given their separate languages, and were then scattered again in the same way (see LANGUAGE AND SPEECH) (Farāhīdī, *sub* *b-l-l*; cf. Genesis 11:5-8). Abū ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Barr (368-463/978-1070) held that the best account regarding the confounding of languages is the narration from Ibn ‘Abbās (3BH-68/619-688), that when Nūḥ (*q.v.*), upon him peace, landed at the bottom of Mount Jūdiyy (see ARK; MOUNTAINS), he founded the city and gave it eighty

names. One day their language was confounded into eighty languages, Arabic being one of them; some of them could no longer understand one another (Qurṭubī, *sub* Q 2:102).

Elsewhere in his exegesis, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) reiterates that it was in Bābil that Nimrūd built his Tower and adds further details: it was 5000 cubits high, 3000 cubits wide, and two *farsakh* (approximately nine kilometers) long (see WEIGHTS AND MEASURES). It is this tower that was destroyed by Allah, either via an earthquake or by a wind as stated in Q 16:26: *Those before them devised plans, but Allah destroyed their building from its foundations, so its roof fell down on them from above them, and the chastisement came to them from whence they did not perceive.* People’s tongues were confounded into seventy-three languages due to the terror of the day. Until then there had been only one language, identified as the primordial Syriac (*suryāni*). There is an echo of Genesis 11:5-8 in this explanation, which al-Qurṭubī narrates on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca.111/730) and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 149/767). The latter states that when Nimrūd built a great fire to cast into it the Prophet Ibrāhīm (*q.v.*), upon him peace, who emerged from it unscathed, the people rushed to inform Nimrūd—but their tongues were confounded, they did not understand each other, and they spoke in seventy different tongues (Muqātil, *sub* Q 21:69).

Muslim geographers have left many accounts of Bābil. At the time of Ibn Ḥawqal (d. ca.379/990), it was a small village, “the most ancient in the eponymously named region, strewn with the ruins of great edifices, being the locale of the seat of the kings of Canaan.” Ibn Ḥawqal further mentions two mounds, one of which was said to have been left behind from the fire Nimrūd kindled for Ibrāhīm, upon him peace (Ibn Ḥawqal, *Masālik*, p. 70). Likewise, al-Bīrūnī (362-440/973-1048) and Abū al-Fidā’ (d. 732/1331) both believed Bābil to be the site of Nimrūd’s fire (al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār al-bāqīya*, p. 87-88; Abū al-Fidā’, *Taqwīm al-buldān*, p. 299, 303). In his summary of the various legends and historical accounts of the city, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1228) cites the aforementioned opinion of commentators that the city was built by Nūḥ, upon him peace, after the Flood. He also recounts the Persian lore that Bābil, located between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris in the region of the same name, famous for its wine (see INTOXICANTS) and magic (*q.v.*), was built by al-Ḍaḥḥāk, the legendary king famed to have lived a thousand years (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* 1:197). He adds that the city prospered until it was destroyed by Alexander the Great (Yāqūt, *Buldān*, *sub* Bābil). Excavations