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### **The Most Ancient World**

The antiquity of civilisation on our planet has always been a source of fascination to ancients and moderns alike. One thinks of the little girl visiting a major museum with her parents, pausing (like most children) before the inevitable Egyptian mummy, and asking, ‘Is he older than Granny?’ Or, away back in antiquity itself, the reader of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh is invited to admire the ancient walls of the hero’s city of Uruk: ‘the wall of girdled Uruk he built..., climb upon the wall of Uruk, walk about on it, inspect the foundation-terrace, examine the brickwork—see, is it not of burnt brick, and did not the ancient Seven Sages lay its foundations?’

#### **Time-Perspectives in Depth**

Primeval antiquity going back into ‘the night of time’ is one of the themes that formed part of the cultural heritage treasured in the ancient Near East both inside and outside the Old Testament. In the opening chapters of Genesis (1-11), we see the Old Testament’s principal vista of early antiquity, drawn in broad outline, before the focus changes sharply to centre upon Abraham and his family. In contrast to 1-11, the narratives from Genesis 12 onwards deal in varying detail with individuals, a family and a clan, and no longer with events of cosmic dimension or in terms of long series of generations. The picture that Genesis 1-11 presents to us has three episodes—creation, flood, origins of Abraham—linked

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by the thread of two long genealogies (Genesis 5 and 11). As we shall see later, other peoples of the biblical world also formulated traditions about early antiquity in similar fashion, using lists, genealogies, and accounts of primeval events such as creation, a flood, and earliest leaders. So in Mesopotamia among the Sumerians, and (in a different way) in Egypt, where the dynasty of the gods (with a destruction of mankind under Re) preceded the demi-gods and historic kings. But just as modern historical study fills out a history based on kings and queens of England and Scotland from 1066 to Queen Victoria (with episodes like the Black Death, Act of Union, etc.), so with the striking but necessarily circumscribed traditions in Genesis 1-11, early Sumer and Akkad, or ancient Egypt. Fresh dimensions are added to these traditions from the results of two lines of exploration—archaeological excavations, and the study of the body of ancient literary and religious written compositions.

#### **Ten to Two Thousand Years BC**

Barely fifty years ago, ancient Near Eastern (and world) history began about 3500/3000 BC (on today’s dating) with the emergence of writing, and the prehistory that preceded it was of the vaguest practically everywhere except in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Following pioneer work in the thirties, widespread excavation throughout the Near East and intensive study in

the last twenty-five years has transformed the whole picture. The newer methods of dating remains (Carbon-14, bristlecone pine ring-counts, etc.) have helped to provide a still-flexible outline of broad dates for well before 3000 BC.

Thus, before the earliest practicable date for an Abraham (about 2000 BC or so), there extends back through time an immense perspective of ancient cultures and civilisation for over 80 centuries back to about 10,000 BC or more. Of this long period, only the last 12 centuries (3200-2000 BC)—a little more than the 3rd millennium—stand increasingly in the full light of history because of the invention and use of writing. But the previous sixty eight centuries pulsate also with life and colour.

### **1. Foundations of Culture, c.10,000-6000 BC**

Before the tenth millennium BC, we know only of hunters, fishers, collectors of edible fruits and roots, of people living in caves and in temporary shelters—the so-called Palaeolithic ('Old Stone') and Mesolithic ('Middle Stone') Ages, but from roughly 9000 BC onwards, we find the first real settlements in the Near East, as peo-

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ple gradually became keepers of goats, sheep or cattle, and learned to cultivate grain-crops. From this Neolithic ('New Stone') phase, a series of ancient towns has come to light in Palestine, Syria, Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Oldest Jericho became in time a walled township ten acres in extent, with massive watchtowers and round houses, for a population of perhaps 2000 people. The sheer mass of the stone-built defences, the economy based partly on local cultivation of irrigated ground and partly on trade, and the general material layout and quality of life—all suggest a well-organised community under effective leadership able to muster the common resources for major undertakings—and fearing jealous foes against whom defence was thought needful. Still later, when the old was long gone, a new population built a new town of rectangular houses with fine plastered floors (and using reed mats).<sup>1</sup> But pottery was one convenience that had not yet come into use in Palestine. In Syria, along the middle Euphrates, comparable townships arose at sites such as those known today as Mureybet and Tell Abu Hureyra, the latter being almost a city.

Far north in Anatolia, remarkable towns grew up at this early epoch (7th millennium if not earlier), at Hacilar (old settlement) and especially Catal Huyuk—a town-site of 32 acres, thrice as large as Jericho. Life here was enlivened with some of the world's earliest pottery. However, the only entry/exit of the houses was up and down ladders through a roof-hatch, hence no doubt some nasty falls, probably reflected in broken bones in the skeletons of former inhabitants. The excavator notes also a good number of head-wounds that may well have resulted from family and neighbours' quarrels, with people living so closely together—sad testimony to human nature in all ages! And possibly life was both stimulated and shadowed by sinister-seeming religious cults. A series of shrines bore paintings that included vulture-figures pecking at headless human bodies, and had clay-plastered bulls' heads, before which were laid baskets containing human skulls (prior to later burial?).

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<sup>1</sup> The two phases of this early Jericho are usually termed 'Pre-Pottery Neolithic A and B' in archaeological works.

Westward in Cyprus, the oldest settlements at Khirokitia had a paved street, and ‘upstairs-downstairs’ beehive-domed houses. Eastward, in Mesopotamia, arose villages in the Zagros foothills (as at Jarmo) and townships in the steppes and central plains (like Umm Dabaghiyah). Thus, across a vast area, from central Europe and over the entire Near East into Iran and beyond the Caucasus, there grew up a vast swathe of local cultures based on agriculture and animal husbandry, sometimes partly at least on trade, building villages and towns of mud-brick, worshipping deities that personified natural forces (e.g., reproduction), and using a con-

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siderable array of tools and furnishings, sometimes of a quality of finish or aesthetic appeal that still commands our admiration today.

## **2. The Flowering of Pre-literate High Cultures, c. 6000-3200 BC**

From about 6000 BC onwards, the use of pottery steadily became universal in the ancient Near East, in a great variety of styles, forms and decoration, in different regions and cultures, and with the passage of time. Thus it becomes the archaeologist’s handiest material indicator to follow the spread of cultural influence and to trace sequences of cultures down through time. From at least 6000 BC onwards, copper came into use for tools alongside stone. It first was used as native metal, hammered cold, but smelting and casting techniques made possible a wide range of uses. Conventionally, archaeologists sometimes speaks of this as the Chalcolithic Age (‘Copper/Stone’ Age). With the full use of copper and other metals, c. 3200 BC onwards, the rather misleading term ‘Early Bronze Age’ is customary, despite the lack of bronze at that early epoch.

In Palestine, the Chalcolithic age (c. 4000-3200 BC) is most famed for its technical achievements and religious art. Across the Jordan at Ghassul, several buildings had coloured frescoes on their plastered walls, perhaps illustrating local mythology: an eight-pointed star, strange bird-like figures, as well as geometric patterns and a group of human figures. To a temple at En-Gedi may have belonged such a ritual treasure as that found at Nahal Mishmar with its remarkable copper sceptres and processional (?) standards.<sup>2</sup> Technologically astonishing was the great desert township at Jawa in Transjordan, totally dependent upon an elaborate water-conservation system of dam, channels and pools.<sup>3</sup>

In Syria, sites that are famous in later periods, like Byblos and Ugarit (Ras Shamra), show the impact of the Halaf and Ubaid cultures of Mesopotamia. The whole period c. 5000 to 3200 BC witnessed the emerging brilliance of Mesopotamian culture, whose influence radiated out to Syria and southern Anatolia, as marked by the successive spread of pottery styles, be it the brilliant painted vessels of Halaf or Ubaid, or the plainer wares of the Uruk period. Throughout Mesopotamia we see the rise of cities centred upon impressive temples displaying the most spectacular architecture, from Eridu and Uruk (biblical Erech) in the ‘deep South’ to Gawra in the far north. The Sumerians may already have been the leading element in the population. Direct Mesopotamian influence already reached far west, to the westernmost bend of the Euphrates in Syria where a huge, purely Mesopotamian fortress a thousand

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<sup>2</sup> On religion in Chalcolithic Palestine, cf. C. Elliott, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 109 (1977), pp. 3-25.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the reports by S. W. Helms in *Levant* 7 (1975), 8 (1976), and 9 (1977).

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metres long was built (c. 3300 BC) at Habuba el-Kabira—perhaps by order of some precursor of that archetypal Sumerian adventurer Gilgamesh! However, rival city-states rather than far-flung empires were already probably the rule in Mesopotamia. Finally, the use of pictures on pads of clay to keep accounts began the history of writing—and likewise the era of written history. In Egypt, a distinct agricultural civilisation arose in Valley and Delta; arrival of the concept of writing stimulated the invention of the hieroglyphs just before a southern king conquered also the north to found the first dynasty of the pharaonic monarchy about 3200 BC.

### **3. *The Brilliant Third Millennium, c. 3200-2000 BC***

Such, then, in the very barest, simplest outline, runs the story of the rise of civilisation for some sixty eight centuries or so, down to a point (the start of written history) still well over a thousand years before Abraham. During this final thousand years and more before 2000 BC, the civilisations of Egypt and Sumer reached their first peak of maturity and brilliant achievement.

In Egypt, the Old Kingdom or ‘Pyramid Age’ witnessed splendid stone architecture: temples of the gods, vast pyramids as tombs of the kings, these being surrounded by veritable streets and cities of tomb-chapels of the principal officials of the realm. The growing number of inscriptions attests a complex administration under the pharaoh and his vizier. Superb craftsmanship appears in the fine arts, jewellery, sculpture and painting. Writing skills extended beyond administration to other, more literary spheres. Narrative is represented by biographical inscriptions of officials in their tomb-chapels. Spells, hymns, and a variety of long and elaborate rituals make up much of the so-called ‘Pyramid Texts’ that were inscribed within the later pyramids of the period. A series of wisdom-writings (related in form and matter to Proverbs) probably originated at this time, although preserved to us in later copies so far.

In Mesopotamia, the Sumerian city-states lacked the political unity of Egypt, but rivalled her in all the arts, in sophisticated administration, and in pioneering the beginnings of literature. Besides word-lists and sign-lists, we have—again—wisdom-books and hymns, as well as brief royal inscriptions. During about 2400-2200 BC, the Semitic-speaking dynasty of Sargon of Akkad established an empire that controlled all of Mesopotamia and disputed the rule of the Middle Euphrates region with the great North-Syrian kingdom of Ebla. Collapse of the Akkad empire led to foreign (Gutian) domination, until the Sumerian Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100-2000 BC) reunited Mesopotamia in the last flowering of Sumerian political power. Under the rule of both Akkad and Ur,

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all the arts, crafts and skills flourished, and much new literature was composed. It is mainly the hymnology that has so far survived to us from this, plus some royal inscriptions. After the fall of Ur, Mesopotamia split up into a series of rival city-states (Old-Babylonian period), with Semitic dynasties, increasingly of West-Semitic-speaking stock, called by the Babylonians ‘Amurrites’ (Amorites) or ‘Westerners’. In this period of ferment, a vast amount of the most varied Sumerian literature was cultivated in the scribal schools, and Akkadian (Babylonian, rather than its sister Assyrian) gave birth to a vigorous literature in narrative

(epic, legend), wisdom, hymnody and so on. A common culture was shared by Sumerians, Babylonians and Western Semites in Mesopotamia.

In the Levant—Anatolia, Syria, Palestine—city-states were the rule politically, with semi-nomadic pastoralists moving about in the fringe areas of the sedentary, agriculture-based mini-states. Mesopotamian cultural influence was felt in North Syria. This appears at Ebla, great rival of Akkad, whose vast archives used Sumerian script and language, besides going on to use cuneiform to write the local West-Semitic language. Those archives, too, include religious, narrative and wisdom literature. Unlike most of her neighbours, Ebla became a ‘great power’, able to challenge the Mesopotamian kings, during about 2404-2250 BC. Neither the Anatolian princedoms in the far north (among whom the Hittites were beginning to appear) nor the petty Palestinian city-states could match Ebla politically, but all had their own regional high culture materially.

#### **4. The Perspective of Eighty Centuries**

These major civilisations, even when focused on urban centres, were still directly based upon agriculture and animal husbandry—upon the farmer and the pastoralist. In Palestine, Syria, and certainly Upper Mesopotamia, the cultivator and the herdsman were the two interdependent parts of the food-producing economy. In Syria and Mesopotamia, the cities were centres of political powers—of royal dynasties—but their satellite villages were the real centres of food-production. There lived the farmers, and around them (between winter and summer pastures) moved the herdsmen of sheep and cattle. This background is reflected in ancient texts, such as the Sumerian ‘debates’ between farmer and shepherd in friendly rivalry.<sup>4</sup> It needs to be remembered as the real economic and social background when reading the patriarchal and other narratives in the Old Testament. The patriarchs, for example, moved from Ur to Haran to Palestine, going from one pastoral/agricultural setting to

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another. In the first two cases, from territory dependent on the cities of Ur and Har(r)an, in the third phase interacting with the local Palestinian city-states and communities.

What else from this vast epoch before 2000 BC is of significance for the beginnings of the biblical story? First, the sheer length of time—the many generations, century upon century. By 2000 BC, the civilised world was already ancient. Throughout the ancient Near East, cultures and civilisations rose and fell not once but many times over. Little wonder, then, that before Abraham the narratives in Genesis 1-11 look back through genealogies on repetitive patterns to ‘in the beginning’.

Secondly, there was never a cultural vacuum in the ancient biblical East. Pastoralists and farmers lived in close contact, and both had intimate dealings with the central powers of their time and place, where and whenever that might be. The famous Mari archives of the early 2nd millennium BC merely illustrate at length conditions that were true there and widely elsewhere not only in the early 2nd millennium BC but also long centuries before and after. Those interconnections in everyday life, at local level and on several planes—governmental, personal, and so on—made it impossible for any ordinary pastoral group or farming

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<sup>4</sup> So, ‘Dumuzi and Enkimdu’ (Kramer, in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1950/69, pp. 41-42), and the ‘Dispute of Cattle and Grain’ (cf. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 1963, pp. 220-222).

community to live a life in isolation, hermetically sealed off from all influences and contacts with the immediate world around them. All were heirs to the 'precipitate' of what had gone before, and through continual contacts came to share in varying degrees in the cultural movements of their own places and times.

Back in the nineteenth century AD, Old Testament scholars (working themselves in a virtual vacuum) simply could not believe in figures like the patriarchs who seemed—to them—to belong in the night of prehistoric time. Or in a Moses who suddenly produced a series of institutions (laws, rituals, the tabernacle, etc.) as if from nowhere. For these and other reasons, such figures had to be devalued and treated as imaginary reflections from later times, say from c. 900 BC onwards. But this total lack of perspective-in-depth is now visibly and totally false. The night of prehistoric time faded not in 900 BC but nearer 9000 BC, culturally speaking. Thus someone in the position of a Moses did not have to pluck laws or a covenant out of thin air—such were formulated within the terms of the long and highly-developed modes of life already existing at the time; in the 13th century BC, that was eighty-seven centuries after those earliest experimental settlements at Jericho or elsewhere. As intimated above, even an Abraham in or after 2000 BC came also late in time, in a teeming, busy world with over eighty centuries of varied cultural experience behind it.

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Thus, whether one lived as a pastoralist with regularly-moving flocks, as a farmer based on village and field, or in the city in their midst, one never lived in total isolation at any period during the full-blown cultures of the ancient Near East.

## **Back to the Beginnings**

While archaeology by excavation of sites shows us the rich complexity of human life across innumerable generations, archaeology by the study of ancient literary texts brings us very much closer to the profile of remote antiquity offered in Genesis 1-11: creation of the world and of mankind, alienation of mankind from deity, flood, and renewal.

This series of topics, and in this sequence, finds its counterpart in early Mesopotamia, in a variety of literary works written by the Sumerians and Babylonians. Just over a century ago, George Smith aroused great excitement when he announced and published his Chaldean Account of Genesis (1876) and 'Chaldean account of the Deluge' (1872/73).<sup>5</sup> Thus began the modern recovery of two great Babylonian epics: *Enuma Elish* (completed by c. 1000 BC), recounting the triumph and creative work of Marduk god of Babylon, and the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 17th century BC and later), whose hero Gilgamesh was told of the flood by its sole survivor. Both texts are available today, substantially complete, in modern translations.<sup>6</sup>

### **1. The Creation**

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<sup>5</sup> The former is a book (1876), the latter, a lecture (Dec. 2nd, 1872; in *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 2 (1873), pp. 213-234).

<sup>6</sup> A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd ed., 1951 (& repr.); A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, 2nd ed., 1949 (& repr.); E. A. Speiser, in Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 60-99, and A. K. Grayson, in 3rd ed., pp. 501-507.

In the early days, Old Testament scholars seized upon even trivial comparisons between Enuma Elish and Genesis 1-2. Thus, the Hebrew word *tehom*, 'the deep', was derived from *Ti'amat*, the goddess personifying the salt sea waters. However, this kind of support is much too fragile to sustain the theory of Hebrew dependence upon the Babylonian epic, a fact long since recognised. *Tehom/Ti'amat* are Common Semitic. Thus, *thm* occurs not only in Ugaritic in the 14th/13th centuries BC, but also now as *ti'amatum* in the archives of Ebla a thousand years earlier still<sup>7</sup>; in both cases, simply as a common noun, 'deep', 'ocean abyss'.

Even the theme of creation itself appears differently in Enuma Elish and in Genesis 1-2. In the latter, it is the sole theme of any importance. In Enuma Elish, the great theme is the supremacy won by Marduk, and creation (if more than an after-thought) is but one feature of his activity. Otherwise the two texts share little else but the 'banalities' of creation: the order of heaven and earth before plants, creatures and mankind is essential, to have somewhere to

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put these latter! Plants, too, may be expected to be given before animals that eat them, and so forth. Light appears before named sources (e.g. sun, moon) in both accounts,<sup>8</sup> but otherwise the points of comparison turn out to be divergent or just commonplaces. Moreover, Enuma Elish itself is not the Babylonian account of creation, but merely a subsidiary offshoot of that tradition.<sup>9</sup> Other accounts exist in brief form. Hence, it is not surprising that Assyriological scholarship has by now largely rejected the old idea that Genesis 1-2 had any close relation at all with Enuma Elish. Such is essentially the verdict of Heidel, Kinnier-Wilson, Lambert, and Millard, for example.<sup>10</sup> Writers on the Old Testament who suggest the contrary are out-of-date.

The other principal Babylonian fragments concerned with creation are mainly of still later date (12th to 6th centuries BC in present copies), and diverge even more from what we find in Genesis. These include a bilingual (Sumerian/Babylonian) creation of man (c. 1200/800 BC) to be bondservant of the gods,<sup>11</sup> a fragment from Nineveh (7th century BC) mentioning the creation of two 'servants' (of the gods?),<sup>12</sup> another bilingual piece with Marduk as creator (6th century BC or earlier),<sup>13</sup> a brief prologue to an incantation against toothache (same date-range),<sup>14</sup> and finally a 'theogony' giving the generations of the gods (7th century BC~ probably composed earlier).<sup>15</sup> None of these bears any but the slightest resemblance to the account in Genesis 1-2.

## 2. The Flood

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pettinato, *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (1976), p. 50, corresponding to Sumerian *a-ab*, 'waters'.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, pp. 101 f., 129 f., and his whole discussion, pp. 82-140.

<sup>9</sup> So, W.G. Lambert, *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965), p. 291.

<sup>10</sup> Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, pp. 82-140; J. V. Kinnier-Wilson, in D. W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents of Old Testament Times*, 1958, p. 14 ('no connections of any kind'); Lambert, *Journ. Theol. Studies* 16 (1965), pp. 287-300, esp. pp. 289, 291, 293-9; A. R. Millard, *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967), pp. 3-4, 7, 16-18.

<sup>11</sup> Translation, Heidel, *Babyl. Genesis*, pp. 68-71 (not in Pritchard).

<sup>12</sup> In Heidel, *op. cit.*, p. 64 (not in Pritchard).

<sup>13</sup> In Heidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-63 (not in Pritchard).

<sup>14</sup> In Heidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73; Speiser in Pritchard, *Anc. Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 100-1.

<sup>15</sup> W. G. Lambert & P. Walcott, *Kadmos* 4 (1965), pp. 64-72; Pritchard, *op. cit.*, 3rd ed./*Supplement*, p. 517 f./81 f.

Also long known is the Babylonian story of a great flood sent by the gods to wipe out a noisy and troublesome mankind, before which one god secretly warned his favourite to build a boat to save himself and his family from the impending deluge. From his vessel when marooned on Mt Nisir amid the watery wastes, the hero sent forth a dove, swallow and raven before being sure that the waters were receding. Once on *terra firma*, he then offered a sacrifice round which ‘the gods gathered like flies’, subsequently bestowing immortality upon him.

This is the story told by Ut-napishtim (in the Epic of Gilgamesh) to Gilgamesh, an ancient king of south-Babylonian Uruk in quest of immortality. The flood-story, thus, is only a secondary feature in this epic—and in fact only occurs (to date) in the 7th-century copies. Parallels between this Babylonian account, and Noah’s flood in Genesis 6-8 are obvious to the eye. Thus, almost a century ago, it became commonplace to assume that the biblical account was simply copied or adapted from the Gilgamesh one, and that both in any case were purely folkloristic fiction. The only contrary

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evidence seemed to be Woolley’s controversial claim to have found traces of the legendary flood in a layer of silt at Ur.

However, this too-simple picture and the old assumptions have alike been overtaken by fuller information. Thus, a variety of flood deposits have been found at Mesopotamian sites other than Ur, usually of different dates from both the Ur deposit and each other. That at Ur is impressive in thickness, but may have been relatively ‘local’ even so. Combined with further literary evidence (see below), this increased archaeological information has been subjected to lively discussion. Some archaeologists have attempted in fact to identify and date the flood of Mesopotamian tradition (with which Noah’s may be associated), considering that a real if distant event is in question, not solely a fiction.<sup>16</sup>

The inscriptional material is now much richer than just Gilgamesh. The oldest mention is probably that in the Sumerian King List, possibly in the first line of its original edition (c. 2000 BC): ‘after the flood had swept over, when kingship was lowered from heaven...’, followed by the list of kings after the flood.<sup>17</sup> In its ‘second edition’, the List was prefaced by a forty-line account of kings before the flood, giving the full sequence: pre-flood kings, flood, kings after the flood.

Then, by the 17th century BC at latest, there was composed the Semitic Old-Babylonian Epic of Atrakhasis, which originally included the fullest Babylonian account of the flood.<sup>18</sup> To about 1600 BC is dated the Sumerian flood-story, covering the same ground at one-quarter of the length (about 300 lines instead of 1245 lines).<sup>19</sup> A Babylonian tablet about the flood and mentioning Atrakhasis was found at ancient Ugarit on the Syrian coast, dated to the period c. 1400-1200 BC.<sup>20</sup> Finally, there is the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh with which we began.

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<sup>16</sup> See (e.g.) M. E. L. Mallowan, *Iraq* 26 (1964), pp. 62-82; R. Raikes, *Iraq* 28 (1966), pp. 52-63; W. W. Hallo in Hallo & Simpson, *The Ancient Near East, A History*, 1971, pp. 28 ff., 35 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the remarks of Lambert & Millard, *Atrahasis*, pp. 16, 25 (with refs.). A ‘king list’ of the city of Lagash (c. 1700 BC) also began with the flood, cf. E. Sollberger, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (1967), pp. 279 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Fully edited by W. G. Lambert & A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasis, The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, 1969.

<sup>19</sup> See M. Civil in Lambert & Millard, pp. 138 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Lambert & Millard, *Atrahasis*, pp. 131-133.

Most of this epic is attested by copies of the early 2nd millennium BC, but for Tablet XI (the flood) only 7th-century copies are known as yet. Thus, ancient Mesopotamia has passed on to us not one, but several, floodaccounts, of which one was studied as far away as Ugarit on the Syrian coast.<sup>21</sup>

What may we learn from all this? First, we have a multiplicity of accounts from Mesopotamia, with some variety in their treatment of the flood theme. None is absolutely identical with any other, still less with the account in Genesis 6-8. As any reader of both the Mesopotamian and Genesis narratives can verify personally, there is a clear outline in common and much difference in detail. The common framework includes: 1. Divine decision to send a punishing flood; 2. One chosen man told to save self, family and creatures by building a boat; 3. A great flood destroys the rest of the people; 4. The boat grounds on a mountain; 5. Birds are sent

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forth to determine availability of habitable land; 6. The hero sacrifices to deity; 7. Renewal of mankind upon earth.

The differences in detail are many, but include the following:

1. Cause: The Mesopotamian gods tire of the noisiness (not the sins) of mankind, and arbitrarily decide to sweep all mankind away (just or unjust); but in Genesis, God sees the corruption and universal wickedness of mankind, hence decides to punish this.
2. The Mesopotamian assembly of gods is at pains to conceal their flood plan entirely from mankind—this is not evident in Genesis at all.
3. The saving of the hero is entirely by trickery, by the deceit of one god behind his colleagues' backs in the Mesopotamian epics, against the orders of the entire divine assembly. In Genesis, God from the first tells Noah plainly, without subterfuge, that judgement comes and he alone has been judged faithful and so must build a boat.
4. The size and type of craft differ entirely in the various versions. That in Gilgamesh has the proportions of a vast cube, perhaps even of a great floating ziggurat (temple-tower); that in Genesis has far more the proportions of a real craft—and less vast than Berossus's one.
5. The duration of the flood differs in the Mesopotamian and biblical accounts. Thus, Atrakhasis has seven days and seven nights of storm and tempest, as does the Sumerian version; Gilgamesh has six (or seven) days and nights, with subsidence of the waters beginning on the seventh day; none of the Mesopotamian narratives give any idea of how long the flood-waters took to subside thereafter. In contrast, Genesis has an entirely consistent,<sup>22</sup> more detailed time-scale. After seven days' warning, the storm and floods rage

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<sup>21</sup> Press reports of creation and flood stories among the literary tablets found at Ebla (c. 2350 BC) have not yet been officially confirmed; any such would be of the greatest interest. At the end of Mesopotamian history, one should also remember the summary of the flood by Berossus (given in Lambert & Millard, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-137).

<sup>22</sup> Contradictions have often been alleged, by attributing various numbers in the narrative to different 'documents'; the contradictions (like the 'documents') are purely imaginary and have been repeatedly exposed as such; cf. (e.g.) Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, pp. 245-8.

for 40 days, then the waters stay for 150 days before beginning to sink, and further intervals follow, until the earth was dry a year and ten days after the cataclysm began (Gen. 7:11; 8:14).

6. The inhabitants of the boat include (besides animals, the hero and his family) also a pilot and craftsman, etc., in the Mesopotamian versions; in Genesis we find (besides animals)<sup>23</sup> only Noah and his immediate family.

7. The details of sending out birds differ entirely, as between Gilgamesh, Berossus, and Genesis 8:7 ff.; this is lost in Atrakhasis (if ever present).

8. The Mesopotamian hero leaves the boat of his own accord, and then offers a sacrifice to win the acceptance of the gods. By contrast, Noah stays in the boat until God summons him forth, and then presents what is virtually a sacrifice of thanksgiving (he

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being already accepted personally) following which divine blessing is expressed without regret (contrast Enlil's initial anger over man's survival).

9. Replenishment of the land or earth is partly through renewed divine activity in Mesopotamia (cf. in Atrakhasis), but simply and naturally through the survivors themselves (Noah and family) in Genesis.

Thus, it is fair to say that the Mesopotamians—Sumerians, Babylonians and Western Semites—had a flood-tradition in common, which existed and was transmitted in several versions. To talk of borrowing the Hebrew from the Babylonian (or Sumerian) or vice-versa seems excluded. Parallel traditions about some ancient event in common Mesopotamian memory would be a simpler and more satisfying answer. The Genesis account is in no way more 'evolved' than its neighbours, and often reads more simply. In terms of length, for example, its 60 verses (Gen. 6:9-8:22) might be roughly equal to 120 lines of Sumerian or Akkadian text. In contrast, the relevant parts of Atrakhasis (in Tablets II and III) were originally at least some 370 lines long, and that in Gilgamesh XI some 200 lines long; only the relatively brief Sumerian account was 120 lines long or originally a little more. In other words, Genesis 6-8 was probably the simplest and shortest of all the ancient versions, possibly originating as early as they, and was certainly not a secondary elaboration of them.

Secondly, the Sumerians and Babylonians of c. 2000/1800 BC believed so firmly in the former historical occurrence of such a flood—in a land plagued by floods until modern times—that they inserted it into the Sumerian King List, and not merely in their epic tales. In the second and final form of that list, the flood was a bench-mark between kings before, and kings after, the flood.<sup>24</sup> Thus, as already noted above, it is not surprising to find authorities in

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<sup>23</sup> The 'difference' between Gen. 6:19, 20 and 7:2, 3 is sometimes imagined to indicate multiple sources. In 6:19-20, 'pairs' is general (and one cannot have a plural of a Hebrew dual), while the command in 7:2-3 is more specific—pairs only of unclean, and seven pairs of clean, species. Cf. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient & OT*, 1966, p. 120 and references; W. J. Martin, in J. H. Skilton *et al.* (eds.), *The Law and the Prophets*, 1974, pp. 92 f.

<sup>24</sup> Owing to the peculiar nature of the Sumerian King List (discontinuous dynasties; large regnal figures), one cannot, of course, use it to calculate the date of the flood.

Mesopotamian archaeology and history such as Mallowan or Hallo seriously essaying to date the flood of tradition. Pure fiction hardly seems likely, as a solution.

Thirdly, an agnostic note. It is, of course, impossible to dogmatize on the extent of the flood of Mesopotamian or biblical tradition. In the latter case, the word *'eres* covers in usage so broad a field from 'land' (limited location) to 'earth' (the known world) that it is unwise to opt for any extreme solution. Again, it is a sheer waste of time looking for remains of the ark on modern Mt Ararat, because the biblical text does not locate it there—it clearly says 'the mountains (plural) of Ararat' in Gen. 8:4, which name covers a whole vast region. The ultimate reality behind the narrative does not rest on wild-goose-chases of that kind.

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### 3. *Primeval Proto-history*

However, the background importance of the Mesopotamian traditions of creation and flood is not restricted to these topics just in isolation. Of equal interest is their part in the overall tradition about the 'most ancient past' in both Genesis and Mesopotamia. In Genesis 1-11, we find the sequence of creation (1-2), man's alienation from God (3-4), linked by a ten-generation genealogy (5) to the flood and renewal (6-9). With the spread of mankind (10-11:9), a further nine-generation genealogy from Noah's son Shem to Abram's father Terah (Gen. 11:10-25) provides the link with the 'founding father' Abraham.

A similar outline (creation linked to flood, linked to later times) appears also in the early Mesopotamian works, as a literary whole. The oldest, the Sumerian King List, presupposes creation, beginning with 'When kingship was lowered from heaven', and continues with a line of eight (or ten) kings<sup>25</sup>, until 'the flood swept over (all)'. Then kingship was again lowered from heaven, and the long line of royal dynasties continues down into well-known historical times, to c. 2000/1800 BC. But from c. 1700 BC at latest, it is the narrative Atrakhasis Epic which presents the closest analogy.<sup>26</sup> In a world already created, the gods fashion mankind to take over life's drudgery (cleaning canals, preparing food, etc.). Mankind becomes so numerous that Enlil the chief god decides to decimate them by plague, drought and famine—alienation had set in. Each time, the god Enki reveals to his favourite, Atrakhasis, a way to escape these blights. Likewise, when Enlil and the gods send the flood, Enki counsels Atrakhasis to build a boat. Afterwards, Enlil is reconciled to the survival of mankind, and arrangements are made for their continuance; the whole is comprised within an epic originally 1,245 lines long. Much shorter (about 300 lines) was the Sumerian 'flood story' (c. 1600BC), on a badly-damaged tablet. This shows the same basic outline as Atrakhasis: [created world], creation of mankind and five cities, [alienation], the pious hero told to save himself by boat, in the flood, and re-establishment of human life (the hero, immortalized). We may tabulate as follows:

<b>Sumerian King-L</b>	<b>Atrakhasis</b>	<b>Sumerian Flood</b>	<b>Genesis 1-11</b>
A: ( <i>Creation &amp;</i> ) <i>kingship</i>	( <i>Creation &amp;</i> ) <i>mankind</i>	[ <i>Creation &amp;</i> ] <i>mankind</i>	<i>Creation, incl.</i> <i>mankind</i>
<i>list:</i>	<i>narrative:</i>	<i>narrative:</i>	<i>narrative:</i>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. J. J. Finkelstein, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 17 (1963), p. 46, Table II.

<sup>26</sup> For summary and evaluation, cf. A. R. Millard, *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967), pp. 4 ff., besides Lambert & Millard, *Atrakhasis*, pp. 8 ff.

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	alienation	alienation	<i>alienation,</i>
(8/10 names)			<i>genealogy.</i>
B: Flood	Flood	Flood	<i>Flood</i>
new start,	new start,	new start,	<i>new start,</i>

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<b>(Sumerian King-L)</b>	<b>(Atrakhasis)</b>	<b>(Sumerian Flood)</b>	<b>(Genesis 1-11)</b>
<i>kingship</i>	<i>mankind</i>	<i>mankind</i>	<i>mankind</i>
<i>list:</i>	...	...	<i>genealogy.</i>
<i>Historic</i>	<i>(Epic,</i>	<i>(Epic,</i>	<i>Abram's clan</i>
<i>Dynasties</i>	<i>c.17th ct.)</i>	<i>c.17th ct.)</i>	<i>(c.2000/1700)</i>
<i>(c.2000/1800)</i>			

This table illustrates the comparisons and contrasts between the three traditions (King List, Mesopotamian epics, Genesis (W. Semitic) account). In effect, we find the common theme of protohistory (creation, crisis, continuance, of man) treated in several ways. In Sumerian, in both king list and narrative; in Akkadian, in narrative; and in West Semitic, in narratives linked by genealogies. Each component in the population of early 2nd-millennium Mesopotamia (Sumerians, Babylonians, Western Semites) contributed its formulation of inherited traditions, and it seems most probable that the West-Semitic version took shape in Mesopotamia<sup>27</sup> before being taken westward to Canaan by such as the early Hebrews like Terah and Abram.<sup>28</sup>

The King List and Genesis genealogies show instructive similarities and contrasts. Thus, before and after the flood, the Sumerian King List uses slightly different formulae to introduce and terminate successive dynasties. Likewise, there are differences in formula between the genealogies of Gen. 5 and 11 before and after the flood. It is interesting to recall that the pre-flood section of the King List was originally a distinct composition, prefaced to the List in its '2nd edition'; in Genesis, chapter 5 belongs to 'the document of the succession of Adam', while the genealogy in 11:10 ff. belongs to the 'succession of Shem'—the phrase 'these are the generations (or, succession) of X' is a well-known marker of successive sections in the present book of Genesis, almost like a series of tablets.<sup>29</sup> Again, both in the King List and in Genesis, one finds 'notes' included on some of the people listed. These indicate, not some kind of multiple authorship, but the compiler's wish to transmit traditions he valued, or which characterised the person named.

These affinities agree well with the thesis of a common literary heritage, formulated in each case in Mesopotamia in the early 2nd millennium BC. A West-Semitic tradition of such age can be no novelty now, in the light of still earlier West-Semitic writings at Ebla, c. 2300 BC. One may further notice the number of generations and kings, respectively, in Genesis 5 and the pre-flood section of the Sumerian King List, ten in the former and eight or ten in the latter.

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<sup>27</sup> Note Mallowan's remarks on the Mesopotamian (not Palestinian) features of the flood phenomena (*Iraq* 26 (1964), p. 64).

<sup>28</sup> And much earlier by others to Ebla; if press reports of a flood-story there are confirmed later. Other literature was certainly so transmitted.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the interesting treatment of the headings (or colophons?) by P. J. Wiseman (ed. D. J. Wiseman), *Clues to Creation in Genesis*, 1977, pp. 34 ff., revised from P. J. Wiseman, *New Discoveries In Babylonia about Genesis*, 1936, pp. 45 ff.

In either case, the eight or ten names represent a long time-lapse rather than literally that number.<sup>30</sup> The same applies to the

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nine generations after the flood (Gen. 11) and to the Sumerian post-flood dynasties, known to be incomplete. Some set in sequence were actually contemporary, while others (independently known) are not listed.<sup>31</sup> Proper caution in interpretation is called for in Genesis 5 and 11, where there is no guarantee that the phrase 'A begot B' always meant that A was literal father of B. Such a phrase can indicate simply that 'A begot (the lineage descending to) B', with the given names as representatives of a far longer series. Other biblical passages bear out such usage. Inside Genesis itself, 'the children that Zilpah bore to Jacob' (Gen. 46:18) actually include great-grandsons. The datum 'Joram begot Uzziah' (Matthew 1:8) summarises the fuller lineage whereby Joram actually fathered Ahaziah, father of Joash, father of Amaziah, father of Uzziah (cf. 2 Kings 8:25; 11:2; 14:1, 21), precisely as suggested may apply to Genesis 5 and 11.

Even so, where does that leave characters like Methuselah with 969 years to his credit (Gen. 5:27), or early Sumerian rulers whose reigns in the List range from a few hundred years back to some with 28,000 years or more? First impulse is to dismiss the lot; archaeological data, however, counsel patience and caution, not impulse.

Thus, for decades, no-one took the Sumerian King List at all seriously.<sup>32</sup> Then came Jacobsen's masterly edition of that list, plus Kramer's editions of the Sumerian Gilgamesh cycle of stories, and recovery of the Tummal Chronicle in which Gilgamesh appears amongst historical rulers of early Ur. Cuneiform historians came round to the view that early figures like Gilgamesh might have been real people after all, even if embellished by later legend.<sup>33</sup>

Proof positive came in 1959, when Edzard published an original inscription belonging to the reign of (En)mebaragisi<sup>34</sup>, an early king of the city of Kish, and identified a second fragment of that reign.<sup>35</sup>

This worthy was clearly an historical ruler, yet the Sumerian King List credits him with a reign of 900 years—a close rival to Methuselah! From this situation, one fact emerges with crystal clarity. Incredibly high numbers of years (whether reigns or lifespans) attached to a name in later documents do not prove that the person concerned was unhistorical. Whatever the origins of such numbers (which need study), this point on historicity has been clear to Sumerologists and Assyriologists for decades.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in Genesis too, the high numbers remain unaccountable at present, but likewise they constitute in themselves no adequate

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<sup>30</sup> Within later biblical tradition, this usage is securely attested down to New Testament times; cf. the three series of 14 generations (Matt. 1:1-17), standing for a much longer series as the Old Testament books make clear.

<sup>31</sup> Such as all the dynasties of Lagash, hence perhaps that city's 'anti-establishment, king-list (Sollberger, *Journ. Cuneiform Stud.* 21 (1967), pp. 279 ff.).

<sup>32</sup> See Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, 1939, pp. 2-4 (following on early over-optimism).

<sup>33</sup> Thus, so careful and critical a scholar as the late Adam Falkenstein considered Gilgamesh not only to have been a real ruler, but to have been the contemporary (if not the builder) of Early-Dynastic II structures at Uruk (in *Realexikon der Assyriologie*, III/5 (1968), p. 359).

<sup>34</sup> The Sumerian title *en*, 'lord', was prefixed to the king's name in later times.

<sup>35</sup> In *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 53/NF. 19 (1959), pp. 9-26.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. remarks by Jacobsen, *Sumerian King List*, p. 153, n. 40, and p. 166 f. with n. 3 (citing also Sidney Smith).

reason for rejecting the possible historicity of Abraham's remote ancestors. Methuselah and his kin may have been as real once as Enmebaragisi and Gilgamesh. Eber for example (Gen. 11:15-17) has

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been compared with Ebrum, king of Ebla (c. 2300 BC); the name is most likely identical (but for an archaic ending), but the individuals almost certainly were not.

While fruitful comparisons are thus possible between early Genesis and such documents as the Sumerian King List, yet both remain entirely independent documents with numerous basic differences which preclude any direct relationship beyond a common basic concept of protohistory. The Sumerian List is a list of unrelated, often non-successive, royal dynasties; early Genesis enshrines the linear genealogy of entirely private individuals.

At this point, we turn from the Sumerians and Akkadians (Babylonians) again to the third component in early Mesopotamia—the Western Semites, known to the Sumerians as Martu and to the Babylonians as Amurrites ('Amorites'), both terms meaning simply 'Westerners'. It has long been known that such people formed part of the population no later than the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2113-2006 BC), with whose fall the way was open for West Semitic or 'Amorite' leaders to establish themselves as local kings in several cities of Babylonia, founding new dynasties ruling rival city-states. To such a dynasty belonged the famous Hammurabi of Babylon. Of this king and his elder contemporary and rival, Shamshi-Adad I, King of Assyria, we possess remarkable and interlocking genealogies that reach back not less than 26 or 27 generations before these two kings—well over twice the number of named generations in Genesis 5 and 11 put together. The Babylonian document was composed for Hammurabi's great-grandson, to honour the latter's ancestors with funerary offerings to their memory.<sup>37</sup> The Assyrian document was incorporated into the later Assyrian King List, within which it appears in special sections,<sup>38</sup> and was linked to the first 17 kings of Assyria<sup>39</sup> 'who lived in tents'. The earliest sections have been regarded as artificial, and several names as merely corrupt or invented—e.g., Tudiya, who begins the Assyrian King List. However, this very same Tudiya is now known to be strictly historical, and to have lived c. 2350 BC when he made a treaty with the King of Ebla (see Chapter 3). Thus, with Hammurabi and Shamshi-Adad, we have a genealogical tradition parallel in form and concept with that in Gen. 11 and known to be historical at least at its beginning.

#### **4. Date of the Primeval Traditions**

One fact stands out especially clearly on dating. Nearly all of our principal sources and examples come from the early 2nd millennium BC (c. 2000-1600 BC). This is true of the Sumerian King List, the Sumerian 'flood story', the Epic of Atrakhasis, and

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<sup>37</sup> Published by J. J. Finkelstein, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 20 (1966), pp. 95-118.

<sup>38</sup> Published by I. J. Gelb, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13 (1954), pp. 222 ff.; also Oppenheim in Pritchard, *Anc. N. E. Texts*, 3rd ed., 1969, p. 564, or *Supplement*, p. 128.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. also A. Malamat, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968), Speiser Memorial Volume, pp. 163-173, with Table, p. 172.

the major part of Gilgamesh. It was an especially fruitful period for literature in Mesopotamia. Older Sumerian literature was being recorded in final written form, Semitic Babylonian literature was at the best of its creative brilliance,<sup>40</sup> and the Western Semites proudly retained record of their family traditions (cf. previous paragraph). Positively, one can conceive of no more fitting epoch for the original composition in literary form of most of the traditions now found in Genesis 1-11. Negatively, it is worth noticing the changed conditions, different interests, and even unsuitability, of later periods of ancient history. Thus, the creation-stories in Mesopotamia from c. 1100 BC onwards diverge from what we find in Genesis. And the grouped themes of creation, flood, primeval history, ceased to inspire new writers and new works. Alone, in the 7th century BC, the 'Dynastic Chronicle' retained the form of the Sumerian King List, adding-in some account of the flood, and continuing the long list of Babylonian dynasties to nearer its own time.<sup>41</sup> During the 1st millennium BC, other king-lists in Assyria and Babylonia never normally bothered to go back to either the flood or the creation. Generally, the 1st-millennium scribes were content to recopy and conserve the earlier works created in the 2nd millennium BC. Concerning the possible relation of early Genesis to Mesopotamian tradition, a leading cuneiform scholar long ago pointed out that.<sup>42</sup> 'The [Babylonian] exile and the later part of the [Hebrew] monarchy are out of the question... That the matters spoken of were included in Genesis is proof that they were long established among the Hebrews'.<sup>43</sup> In short, the idea that the Hebrews in captivity in Nebuchadrezzar's Babylon (6th century BC) first 'borrowed' the content of early Genesis at that late date is a non-starter. By the time of the Babylonian exile and after, the forms of history-writing had changed. In a *real* post-exilic book like Chronicles, the whole of primeval antiquity down to Abraham's grandson Jacob/Israel is covered in just one initial chapter (1 Chron. 1:1-52), almost entirely of genealogies, in which neither the creation nor the flood are even mentioned, let alone any other 'primeval' details. The focus of interest of its author (c. 400 BC) lay in much later periods of biblical history. Thus, whenever it reached its present form within the entire book of Genesis, the unit Gen. 1-11 best finds its literary origins in the early 2nd millennium BC.

## 5. Conclusions

The earliest narratives in Genesis appear to be neither late concoctions nor mere bowdlerizations of Mesopotamian legend. They and their nearest Mesopotamian relatives almost certainly offer

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lines of parallel and largely independent witness to ancient traditions held in common by the Sumerian, Akkadian and West-Semitic population-elements in Mesopotamia from very early epochs down to the early 2nd millennium BC, when those ancient traditions were celebrated in a series of literary works, in Sumerian (King List; flood), Akkadian (the epics), and West

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<sup>40</sup> For Sumerian, cf. remarks and table by W. W. Hallo in S. J. Lieberman (ed.), *Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen*, 1976, pp. 197 ff., 200; for Babylonian, cf. table before p. 1, in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 1960.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Chronicle 18 in A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, (*Texts from Cuneiform Sources*, V), 1975, pp. 40 ff., 139 f.

<sup>42</sup> Lambert, *Journ. Theol. Studies* 16 (1965), p. 299.

<sup>43</sup> Lambert proceeds to suggest that even the period of the judges is far 'too late', and favours the Amarna period (14th century BC). However, Hebrew contact with Mesopotamia (during the Egyptian sojourn) was not likely to be very close then, and the factors considered here point more realistically to the early 2nd millennium BC.

Semitic (first version of Gen. 1-11; Ebla??). These peoples firmly believed in divine creation, and in divine punishment expressed in a particular flood as a distant historical event, distinct from the ordinary, habitual inundations known in Mesopotamia. It is possible to prove the historicity of some early figures (Enmebaragisi; Tudiya), and to postulate it purely rationally for others (e.g., Gilgamesh), regardless of ‘problem elements’ such as long reigns or lifespans. The optimum date for the literary compositions in view (early second millennium BC) agrees well with that general date for the Hebrew patriarchs—Terah and Abram—shown as going westward from Mesopotamia. They could well have carried such traditions westward with them, hence their impress in the later book of Genesis. They would not have been precocious in so doing. The finds at Ebla of three to five centuries earlier show that Mesopotamian lore (including much literary and scholarly lore) had already travelled west long since. The finds of cuneiform fragments in Middle Bronze Age Hazor in Canaan proper (as well as of a Gilgamesh fragment in mid-2nd-millennium Megiddo) further illustrate the westward movement of such written traditions, and their relatively early currency among Semites in the ‘westlands’ of the Levant at such a date.

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