

# Mesopotamian Motifs in the Early Chapters of Genesis

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Biblical history proper begins with the call to Abraham to leave his native country and set out for a destination that is to become the Promised Land. The event is recorded in Genesis 12. All that precedes, i.e. Gen. 1-11, is thus in a sense extra-biblical and, in more ways than one, prehistoric as well. Small wonder, therefore, that these introductory chapters of Genesis bear the collective title of "Primeval History" in the scientific literature on the subject.

As a broadly conceived setting for the Bible as a whole, Primeval History proves to be not only pre-Israelite in subject matter but in large part also non-Israelite in origin. In other words, the content of Gen. 1-11 was not invented by the writer or writers in question; neither was it rooted in older local traditions. Instead, the basic detail turns out to stem ultimately from the outside, and more particularly from a single major source, the cultural domain of Mesopotamia. The purpose of this paper is to review very briefly some of the ties that link the Primeval History of Genesis to the cultural traditions of Mesopotamia, and to comment on the meaning of these inter-connections.

The Mesopotamian background of much of the detail in the early chapters of Genesis is attested in several ways. For one thing, there is the direct evidence from geographical data. Thus the rivers of Eden include the Tigris and the Euphrates (Gen. 2:14); the realm of Nimrod comprises the lands of Shinar (i.e. Sumer) and Ashur, and such leading centers as Babylon, Erech, and Accad in the south, and Nineveh and Calah in the north (Gen. 10:10-12); and the story of the Tower of Babel, in the land of Shinar, carries a double indication of its locale. For another thing, the story of Eden contains such Hebrew borrowings from the Sumerian as the term *'ēd* "(underground) flow" (Gen. 2:6), and the name Eden itself. And for still another—and most significant of all—much of the substantive content of Primeval History bears the

unmistakable imprint of Mesopotamia. A quick glance at a few of the details should be sufficient to illustrate the nature and extent of this relationship.

The account of Creation in Gen. 1-2:4a gives, as has long been recognized, the same order of events as is found in the Babylonian Genesis, or *Enūma elish*. In both sources the successive stages are listed as primeval chaos, light, sky, dry land, and astral bodies; and each account culminates in the creation of man. What is more, the correspondence between the respective statements extends even to the syntax of the opening verses: "When . . . — at which time . . . — then . . ." The same scheme, incidentally, is followed in the second Biblical account of Creation (Gen. 2:4b-7).

The narrative about the Garden of Eden constitutes an unforgettable evocation of the childhood of mankind. As such, it is an achievement of obvious originality. This does not imply, however, that the physical background was drawn largely from imagination, as has often been alleged. We know now that all four rivers of Eden (Gen. 2:10-14) were described as converging in a specific region of Southern Mesopotamia, the area near the head of the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the land of Cush, which is cited in that connection, was not Ethiopia but a different and unrelated country, namely, the land of the Kassites (the *Kossaioi* of the classical authorities), a people who ruled Babylonia during a large part of the second millennium B.C. What is more, as has been pointed out by S. N. Kramer, Sumerian literature located in the same general area a fabled Utopia, a land that knew neither sickness nor death. It was there, too, that the Babylonian hero of the Flood settled after having been admitted to the company of the immortals. And finally, that very region abounds to this very day in reedy marsh and shallow lagoon, and is the retreat of a distinctive group known as Marsh Arabs, a people whose dwellings have not departed at all from the architectural types displayed on reliefs and cylinder seals of five thousand years ago.

The Biblical account of the Flood (Gen. 6:4-8:22) shows very close connections with certain cuneiform sources, as has been evident since 1872. Its most intimate tie is with Tablet XI of the Akkadian Epic of Gilgamesh. In both instances there is a Flood hero who has been singled out for deliverance from the impending universal catastrophe. Each is told to construct an ark according to minute technical specifications. There follow related descriptions of the universal cataclysm, the annihilation of all life

outside the ark, and the eventual grounding of the strange vessel on top of a tall mountain. Both Noah and his Babylonian counterpart (Utnapishtim) release a series of birds at suitable intervals to test the subsidence of the waters; each account includes a dove and a raven. Lastly, when dry land has reappeared in the now desolate world, each principal gives expression to his boundless relief by means of a sacrifice of humble thanksgiving.

Significantly enough, a Middle Akkadian fragment of the Gilgamesh epic was recently found by an Israeli shepherd on an excavation dump at Megiddo. This shows that at least some ancient Palestinians—there was as yet no historic Israel—could read the work in cuneiform.

All that needs to be said here about the proverbial Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-12) is that we now have, in all likelihood, the historical prototype of that ever intriguing figure: Tukulti-Ninurta I, an Assyrian king of the thirteenth century B.C., who held sway over both Assyria and Babylonia, much like the Biblical hero. He was widely celebrated for his exploits in peace and war, inspired his followers to fierce loyalty, and was himself the hero of a long epic poem. The full technical evidence on the subject has been given elsewhere.

There could never be, of course, any question about the locale of the narrative concerning the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). But the link with Mesopotamia goes farther in this case than the geographic background alone. It was long believed that this particular account owed its origin to the impressive appearance of the temple tower of Babylon. That ziggurat, however, as Herodotus describes it, was the proud achievement of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar, in the seventh/sixth centuries B.C., several centuries after the date of the Biblical narrative in question. The actual starting point of our story was not monumental but literary. We need look for it no farther than the account of the building of Babylon's main temple and its tower, as given in *Enūma elish* VI 60-62. The name of the sacred precinct was Esagila, which is Sumerian for "structure with upraised head." The Babylonian poem makes a word play on this name when it states that "they raised its (i.e. Esagila's) head toward Apsû (in this context a synonym for the sky)." The same passage, moreover, stresses the ceremonial preparation of the bricks that were to be used in the construction of Esagila. The corresponding Biblical text says, "Come, let us mold bricks and burn them hard . . . Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its head in the sky." If the Biblical writer had actually had the text of the Babylonian Genesis before

him, he could hardly have come much closer to the Akkadian original.

Finally, there are the familiar genealogies of the patriarchs before the Flood, with life-spans of abnormal lengths, as recorded in Gen. 5. For this motif, too, there is a well established Mesopotamian tradition. The standard Sumerian King List goes back likewise to antediluvian times, except that it deals with dynasties instead of patriarchal generations. It also features lives of enormous length; indeed, the Mesopotamian entries boast thousands and tens of thousands of years as compared with mere centuries in the Primeval History of Genesis. The Sumerian list established a precedent for tracing national history back to over-all world conditions before the Flood. This practice was taken over by Akkadian and Hurrian writers, and it appears to have influenced Biblical tradition as well. For there would seem to be no valid reason otherwise for prefacing the Bible, which tells the story of a single society, with a section that starts out with the origin of the world.

How is such manifold dependence of Primeval History on Mesopotamian prototypes to be evaluated? One attempted answer can be found in the tenets of a school of Biblical criticism which sprang up at the beginning of the century under the leadership of the distinguished German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch. In a series of lectures under the title of "Babel and Bible," Delitzsch called attention to the Babylonian material in the early chapters of Genesis and went on to conclude that the Bible was guilty of unmitigated plagiarism. The pertinent material has increased considerably in the meantime. Yet, paradoxically enough, the full evidence that is now available has served to refute rather than confirm the claims of the pan-Babylonian school, by demonstrating that those claims were based on half-truths.

The ties between early Biblical and Mesopotamian traditions are actually much closer and more numerous than Delitzsch and his followers could possibly have known some sixty years ago. But that whole school failed to take into account two facts that were fully apparent from the start. First, if the patriarchs really came from Mesopotamia, as the Bible itself repeatedly asserts, they could not but be familiar with the cultural traditions of their original homeland. The very presence of imported material in Genesis would thus be proof of its authentic derivation rather than of unacknowledged borrowing. And second, the Bible nowhere seeks to conceal the Mesopotamian character of the traditions in question.

(Continued on Page 43)


## EDITORIAL

(Continued from Page 3)

But there are limitations—mostly geographical—on what can be accomplished by such methods of making museums more effective aids to education. Small beginnings have been made in the area of bringing their benefits to people who cannot now visit museums in person. For many years, the University Museum has sponsored a weekly television program "What In The World" which brings to viewers in their own homes an opportunity to see a few of the objects in the Museum's collections. Other small collections from its storerooms have been made available on a loan basis to institutions in the Delaware Valley area. Visiting lecturers from the Museum staff, armed with color slides, have appeared in convalescent homes and before groups of senior citizens to bring a glimpse of the collections to those who because of age or infirmity cannot visit the Museum in person.

But these are small contributions compared with the enormous possibilities. The next great advance for museums, I am convinced, will be to take a substantial part of their collections out of the galleries and make them available to a vastly larger number of persons living at much greater distances.

Fortunately, this is a problem in which the Pennsylvania General Assembly, on its own initiative, has taken an interest. This past summer, a Task Force of the Assembly, composed of six State Senators and six members of the House of Representatives, has been studying the possibilities of accomplishing just that. The legislators believe that the people of the whole state should profit from what has become a world-famous institution located in Philadelphia. One suggestion being considered is that extensive exhibitions of objects from the past should be circulated throughout the schools and museums of the state. Another, more novel, suggestion is that the University Museum equip several mobile museums to travel throughout the more rural areas. Both of these suggestions are exciting and seem to offer tremendous opportunities—but they are costly.

The Museum's excavations and research during the past seventy-five years have been financed by private funds, and we expect that they will continue to be so financed. But the responsibility of making available to schools and other public institutions of the state the great resources of the Museum which are waiting to be tapped for educational purposes is a public one. We welcome the interest of the legislators and pledge the cooperation of the Museum staff in helping them to accomplish their aims. 

## MESOPOTAMIAN MOTIFS

(Continued from Page 19)

On the contrary, it calls attention to it time and again: in the story of Eden, the brief account about Nimrod, the episode of the Tower of Babel. Only if such importations were lacking, would there be reason for doubts and suspicion.

There is a further aspect to this problem, moreover, which outranks all others in significance. Abraham's migration from Mesopotamia, which marks the real start of Biblical history and the Biblical process as a whole, was due to spiritual considerations. This is clearly indicated in Gen. 12, confirmed in so many words in Josh. 24:2, and borne out by subsequent Biblical developments. The departure, in short, was in protest against the religious solution that had been arrived at in Mesopotamia. Unavoidably, the migrants brought with them a great deal of cultural baggage from the land of their birth, including much of the detail that is now found in the early chapters of Genesis. But that patrimony was not left intact; it was transformed in conformance with the new quest and ideals.

Thus the opening account of Creation in Genesis differs from its Babylonian analogue by its overriding emphasis on an omnipotent Creator—a concept missing from, indeed alien to, Mesopotamian polytheism. The narrative about the Garden of Eden incorporates various imported data about the Sumerian Paradise. But it contributes also a new notion of individual responsibility, which transposed the older cycle into the higher scale of Paradise lost. The story of the Flood, for all its intimate ties with Mesopotamian versions of the subject, differs from them nevertheless in giving that universal catastrophe a moral motivation in the form of a report about the Fallen Angels (Gen. 6:1-4); no such motivation is present in the cuneiform prototypes. Lastly, the tale about the Tower of Babel, although parts of it read almost like a direct transcript from *Enūma elish*, is used not in contravention of Babylonian copyright, but for the express purpose of rebuking the acknowledged authors for their presumptuous ideas about competing with Heaven.

Hence the numerous Mesopotamia motifs in Primeval History—motifs of which the foregoing review is but a sampling—may be said to add up to the following: They are an authentic reflex of some of the contributions that Mesopotamian civilization imparted to the gradually emerging Biblical society. At the same time, however, these motifs serve to remind us that the patriarchs left Mesopotamia in quest of a more valid way of life as symbolized by the Promised Land. 