

# Chapter 1

## Ancient Traditions

(Third and Early Second Millennium BCE)

*Run to me with your feet, race to me with your legs;  
for I have a word to tell you,  
a story to recount;  
The word of the tree and the charm of the stone,  
the whisper of the heavens to the earth,  
of the seas to the stars.  
I understand the lightning which the heavens do not know,  
the word which men do not know,  
and earth's masses cannot understand*

*Come, I will reveal it to you.*

*From Baal; the Canaanite Epic<sup>1</sup>*

The ancient middle-east contained groups of peoples who intermingled through warfare, trade and the nomadic way of life. They influenced each other's cultures and beliefs. This chapter explores the background to the ancient stories that were around when the biblical tradition started to crystallise. These stories go back to a time before the term Israel was coined – to the second and third millennia BCE<sup>2</sup>.

Stories form in a number of ways. They may form as memories of significant events; sometimes, perhaps often, the stories 'improve' on the events making them more dramatic or more entertaining than they originally were. Sometimes the stories may be explanations that make a failure acceptable. Sometimes they are told as a way of giving children a sense of their identity by saying "this is your family, your tribe, who in days gone by did this and this". Sometimes two stories will be conflated into one. Sometimes a story will be made up to explain an observation – why this place is called 'The Ruin', or that town called 'Little'. Motifs such as talking animals would be introduced into stories for dramatic effect or humour – or simply because story-tellers found that audiences liked them.

Possibly the most important way that stories are handed down occurs within the family – mother to daughter, grandparent to child. Children demand stories and demand the same stories told in the same way. Their needs ensure the development of fairly stable traditions which they in turn pass onto their offspring. The professional story-teller will also have a role to play – bringing new stories from more distant parts, perfecting the nuances of old favourites and adapting them to the preferences of their audiences: names, places and customs could be changed to give the stories a more local context. One might presume that professional story tellers could have been of either sex, although it should be noted that when Joab had need of a good story-teller it was a woman of Tekoa that he recruited – at least that is what we are told in the story.

The source of these ancient stories were the peoples living in the Fertile Crescent that ran from Mesopotamia, through the coastal Levant down both shores of the Red Sea and along the Nile valley. In the third millennium BCE, there were four main sub-racial groups<sup>3</sup> living in the area. These groups were the Hamites, living in Egypt, North Africa and Ethiopia; the Semites, today's Arabs and Jews, occupying most of the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia; the Caucasians who are today's Georgians and who were the ancient Hittites, Kassites, Elamites and possibly Sumerians; and the Indo-Europeans who comprised the Balts, Slavs, Teutons, Celts, Italians, Illyrians and Greeks. The first Hamitic and Semitic groups are thought to have developed 'in situ' from the post glacial inhabitants of

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<sup>1</sup> From the translation by M.D. Coogan in 'Stories from ancient Canaan' p 92

<sup>2</sup> BCE is short for 'Before the Common (or Current) Era'. It is a more universally acceptable designation of time than 'BC' – the Christian equivalent.

<sup>3</sup> A sub-racial group is distinguished by its average characteristics, its social behaviour and its language. The emphasis is on average characteristics. There would be too much overlap to securely distinguish individuals. Thus just as we could not with certainty tell whether an individual was Scandinavian or Mediterranean by physical appearances alone, we could nevertheless securely classify a planeload to its appropriate designation.

northern Africa and Arabia, but the Indo-Europeans expanded from an eastern European homeland to overrun the areas of the Caucasians.

Mesopotamia and Egypt relied upon the seasonal inundation that their respective river systems produced. These beneficial floods enabled Mesopotamia and Egypt to develop economic surpluses since the favourable conditions they created meant that not everyone needed to be occupied full-time in producing the basic requirements of life. These surpluses enabled men with the appropriate talents to organise the administrations and armies that are necessary for kingdoms to come into being. Wealth was amalgamated and art and literature flourished under the patronage of the rich.

### **Sumerian and Ancient Mesopotamian Ideas**

#### The Flood

Stories of cataclysmic floods that nearly wiped out the inhabitants of the earth are common throughout the ancient Middle East, and indeed throughout much of the ancient world. These stories may have been stimulated by real events so disastrous as to impact the thoughts of the descendants of the survivors for many generations. They represent attempts to understand how it might be that the gods once wished to initiate such widespread destruction.

50,000 years ago, the world was in the grip of an ice age, reindeer ran in Mediterranean lands, sea levels were 100m below those of today and the Black Sea was a landlocked fresh water lake linked to the Caspian. As the extended ice caps melted, so sea levels rose. Around 10,000 years ago, the sea level reached a point where it may have been higher than the level of the fresh water in the Black Sea. Eventually the two became connected via the Bosphorus. Some hold that connection was made as a result of a sudden catastrophic event, possibly an earthquake, which enabled the salt waters to pour into the Black Sea creating a massive flood in which “every living thing that moved upon the earth perished”<sup>4</sup>, including the original fresh water fish of the suddenly saline sea. To this day the Black Sea is devoid of life below 250 feet, perhaps still poisoned by the decomposed remains of this cataclysm.<sup>5</sup> Towns and villages on river banks would have been overwhelmed as rising sea levels caused rivers to break their banks and flood their deltas as happened in lower Mesopotamia. It is not the steady rise of the sea level that was disastrous, but the rare extreme storm which, on top of the rise in sea level, left the riparian populations unprepared. There is evidence that the boat was an invention of this period<sup>6</sup>. Fortunate for some.

The idea that there was a catastrophic flood is supported by the Mesopotamian King List, which divides time into two epochs – before and after the Flood. The former epoch was a legendary time in which the kings lived to extraordinary ages. After the Flood, life spans fell gradually to plausible levels. This is a pattern that would be repeated in the Bible

By the seventh millennium BCE, humankind had successfully adapted to the new post glacial environment, introducing the cultivation of wheat and barley, the domestication of goats, sheep, pig and cattle, the use of fired pottery and the development of polishing as a way of improving stone tools. The evolution of agriculture in Mesopotamia and in the Levant was accompanied by the creation of some of the oldest permanent settlements. Jericho was a walled hamlet covering 10 acres at this time: Babylon was occupied from the sixth millennium BCE.

In Mesopotamia, the wheel may have been invented by the Uruk-Sumerian civilisation as the fourth millennium turned into the third. In Egypt, around 2900 BCE, Menes, King of Upper Egypt and founder the first Egyptian dynasty, conquered the delta area and created a unified empire from the first cataract to the coast. The great pyramid building third and fourth dynasties followed from 2650 to 2450 BCE.

These empires needed to make records and thus created the motive for the development of writing. The first writing emerged from the Uruk-Sumerian people of the lower Mesopotamian valley around 3000 BCE. By the 28<sup>th</sup> century BCE, writing had developed in Egypt and by the 23<sup>rd</sup> century in the Indus valley as well. The peoples of the Coastal Levant appear to have been bypassed by this early development.

In the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, the city-states of Sumer dominated Mesopotamia. The achievements of Sumer included not only the first writing, but also the city-state itself, the basics of capitalism, the wheel, monumental architecture, the numbering system still universally used for time, a document based legal system and an educational system to support all of this<sup>7</sup>. The Sumerian

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 7:21

<sup>5</sup> McEvedy, C. (1967). *The Penguin Atlas of Ancient History*. London: Penguin Group. p18 note 2

<sup>6</sup> (McEvedy, 1967) p18 note 3

<sup>7</sup> See Samuel Kramer’s ‘History begins at Sumer’:1981

language appears to be unrelated to any other language extant then or since. But they had an extensive literature<sup>8</sup>.

Amongst the earliest written literature were several versions of the Flood story usually linked to a creation myth. The common theme was that the gods were disappointed by their creation of humankind and wished to destroy it and start again. They were dissuaded from this by the existence of a single good man, who was preserved in order to form the basis of a new and better world. One of the earliest such accounts is the Atrahasis (Mesopotamia, around 2500 BCE). Atrahasis<sup>9</sup> began: -

*When the gods instead of man  
did the work, bore the loads,  
the load on the gods was too great,  
the work too hard, the trouble too much.*

A group of the younger gods, on whom the work fell, went on strike and revolted against the senior gods:

*Every one of us gods has declared war!  
We have put a stop to digging.  
The load is too great: it is killing us!  
Our work too hard, the trouble too much!*

The senior gods, the Annunaki, met in counsel under Anu, the sky-god and leader of the senior group. Ellil, counsellor to the gods, advised making an example of one of the junior gods:

*Noble one, take a decree with you to the sky,  
Show your strength.  
While the Annunaki are sitting before you,  
Call up one god and have them cast him for destruction*

But one of the senior gods asked

*Why are we blaming them?  
Their work was too hard, their trouble too much.  
...  
Belet-ili the womb-goddess is present -  
Let her create a mortal man  
So that he may bear the yoke*

The ideas are combined, and a junior god 'who had intelligence', was executed in their presence and clay was mixed with the flesh and blood of the slaughtered god; then

*The Igigi, the great gods,  
Spat spittle on the clay.*

*Mami made her voice heard  
And spoke to the great gods,*

*'I have carried out perfectly  
the work that you ordered of me.  
You have slaughtered a god together with his intelligence.'*

*'I have relieved you of your hard work,  
I have imposed your load on man*

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<sup>8</sup> Knowledge of their literature and the extent of their influence on the ancient Near East comes from tablets uncovered at Ebla in the 1970's. These were both in Sumerian and a Semitic language: they date from the mid 3rd millennium BCE.

<sup>9</sup> The text that follows is a slight paraphrase based on the translation by Stephanie Dalley: Myths from Mesopotamia: Oxford World's Classics:1989 This particular version of Atrahasis comes from clay tablets dated around 1700 BCE

*I have undone the fetter and granted freedom'*

But it did not work out as the gods planned. Mankind spread across the world:

*...and the country became too wide, the people too numerous.  
The country was as noisy as a bellowing bull.  
The gods grew restless at the racket,*

They could not sleep at night. So, to reduce the population, and thus the noise, they introduced disease. Now Enki, a god friendly to mortals, recommended to the wise man Astrahasis that mankind should respond with an uprising against the gods

*Do not revere your gods,  
Do not pray to your goddesses*

This was effective for a while and the gods repented, disease left the land and the people resumed making the normal offerings to the gods. Until once more the people became numerous and made such a noise that the gods could not sleep. This time the gods chose drought as the population control device. Once more the people revolted; once more they ceased their normal devotions to the gods; once more the gods relented in return for the reinstatement of the usual offerings. When for the third time the population grew and became noisy; a combination of disease and famine was used but the conflict was resolved as before. But when the population became noisy yet again, it was decided to use a flood this time. But Enki tipped off his servant Astrahasis:

*Dismantle the house, build a boat!  
Reject possessions, and save living things.*

And Astrahasis built his boat and he put on board

*The birds that fly in the sky,  
Cattle of Shakkan<sup>10</sup>  
Wild animals of open country.*

The flood duly came and, though it was terrible, Astrahasis' boat, his family and the animals survived.

Versions of the flood story proliferate. A version that was incorporated into the Gilgamesh epic has a text that can be closely compared with the Noah story from Genesis<sup>11</sup>. Here is the section that deals with end of the flood:

Gilgamesh IX iii	Genesis 8:
<i>When the seventh day arrived,</i>	8. Noah waited for seven days and then he sent out the dove, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground;
<i>I put out and released a dove. The dove went; it came back, For no perching place was visible to it, and it turned round.</i>	9. But the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. ...
<i>I put out and released a swallow. The swallow went; it came back, For no perching place was visible to it, and it turned round.</i>	10. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark;
<i>I put out and released a raven. The raven went, and saw the waters receding. And it ate, preened, lifted its tail, and</i>	11. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the

<sup>10</sup> Shakkan was possibly the Mesopotamian god of cattle or flocks and foaling.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 7:1-9:17

<p>Gilgamesh IX iii <i>did not turn round.</i></p> <p><i>Then I put everything out to the four winds,</i></p> <p><i>and I made a sacrifice</i><sup>12</sup></p>	<p>Genesis 8: earth.</p> <p>17. And he sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.</p> <p>19. Every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird - everything that moves on the earth - left the ark by families....</p> <p>20. Then Noah built an altar to Yahweh, and took some of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar</p>
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In the Astrahasis version, the hero also made a burnt offering to the gods who ‘smelt the fragrance’ and were somewhat appeased, just as Noah’s god “smelt the soothing fragrance” and decided never again to “curse the ground” because of man. In Astrahasis the gods finally agree that the population shall not again be decimated by such drastic measures. Instead the growth of the population shall be limited by making some women infertile and by forbidding female temple devotees from having children.

In the story taken from the Gilgamesh epic, Utnapishtim, the boatman of the gods, is the hero. A fairly complete version of this epic was found on clay tablets in the library of Ashurbanipal (7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE), but sufficient early tablets of parts of the epic exist to authenticate its existence in written form as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. A cuneiform tablet has been found in Bronze Age Megiddo containing part of the story, demonstrating that copies of this Mesopotamian masterpiece existed in a city that, a few centuries later, would be part of Ancient Israel<sup>13</sup>.

The universality of this story can be gauged from the names used for the hero. Stephanie Dalley in her introduction to *Myths from Mesopotamia*, points out that

“Astrahasis means ‘Extra wise’. He is Utanapishtim or Utnapishtim in Gilgamesh, meaning ‘He found life’. Ziusudra is an approximate translation into Sumerian. The name used by Berossus in his Flood story is Xisuthros – a phonetic rendering of Ziusudra. Prometheus is a translation into Greek of ‘Extra wise’. An abbreviation of (Uta)-naish-(tim), namely Naish, may have been pronounced ‘Noah’ in Palestine (*Canaan*). Ulysses came from the Hittite Ullu(ya)s, a translation of Atrahasis’ epithet ‘far distant’, and Odysseus may come from the logogram for Utnapishtim - which is UD.ZI. Atrahasis becomes the Canaanite ‘Kothar-wahasis’ in Ugaritic texts and is abbreviated to Chousar by Philo of Byblos. Another abbreviation becomes ‘Al-Khidr or Al-Khadir in the Arabian Nights story of the attempt to gain the ring of Suleiman, travel to the fountain of life and drink the water of immortality. Al-Khidre is buried, so it is said, on the Golan Heights where a tributary of the Jordan springs forth from the rock.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus the ancients sought to explain how the gods might wish to destroy their first creation, but how enough was preserved to enable a new start to be made. The story was taken up by the ancient Israelites and substantially adapted to be suitable for a people with a monotheistic faith but, in the early Genesis stories, there remain mentions of both the ‘council of the gods’ and the institution of the ‘junior gods’. We read for example that: -

“In those days, when the sons of gods had intercourse with the daughters of men and got children by them, the Nephilim were on the earth.”<sup>15</sup>

#### The tree of life

Another theme that emerged from the early writings was the search for immortality and wisdom.

Gilgamesh was a Sumerian king, who probably ruled from Uruk (about 150 miles north-east of Basra) in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium BCE. The legends that have been created around this heroic figure

<sup>12</sup> Dalley, 1989 p 114

<sup>13</sup> Kee, Myers, Rogers & Saldarini. (1997). *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 48

<sup>14</sup> For all this, see Dalley, 1989. pp 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 6:4

include one which involved a search for immortality and contained lines that find an echo in some of the biblical wisdom sayings.

The epic described his adventures with the wild man Enkidu who, at the start of the story lived with the animals in a paradise of nature. Enkidu was civilised by a woman who had been sent to make him aware of his humanity. After making love to the woman, he found his relationship with the animals changed; they rejected him and he could no longer keep up with them: -

*Enkidu had to slacken his pace - it was not as before.  
But now he had wisdom, a broader understanding*

And the woman says to him:

*Thou art become wise, Enkidu, art become like a god!  
Why with the wild creature dost thou roam over the steppe?  
Come let me lead thee to ramparted Uruk<sup>16</sup>*

Thus the loss of paradise was combined with acquiring wisdom in a process associated with the experience of sex. In Genesis, the act of acquiring the knowledge of good and bad also involved the loss of an easy communion with nature – the loss of paradise – and was also accompanied by a new awareness of sexuality. In Genesis, it is Yahweh Elohim who comments “the human has become like one of us, knowing good and bad.”

Enkidu came to Uruk and fought Gilgamesh, probably over the king’s right to mate with the married women of his kingdom. After the fight, they became friends and went on an expedition against a monster who lived in a cedar forest. Gilgamesh philosophised

*Who, my friend, can scale heaven?  
Only the gods live forever under the sun.  
As for mankind, numbered are their days;  
Whatever they achieve is but the wind*

It is tempting to compare these lines with the opening of Ecclesiastes, written a couple of millennia later:

“What do people gain from all the labour  
at which they toil under the sun?  
A generation goes, a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever...

The wind blows to the south,  
it turns to the north;  
it whirls about continually,  
For ever returning to its circuits.”<sup>17</sup>

The friends succeed in their quest and afterwards, as Gilgamesh washes, the goddess Ishtar makes a pass at him, but he rejects her saying

*You are a brazier that goes out in the cold...  
A shoe which pinches the foot of its owner!*

*Which lover did you love forever?  
Which of your shepherds pleased you for all time?*

Ishtar was furious and went to her father, Anu, and asked him to release the 'Bull of Heaven' to smite Gilgamesh, which Anu did, though not before taking some precautions to protect the earth. Enkidu and Gilgamesh grappled with the Bull and prevailed. There was a great celebration in Uruk but the gods determined that in recompense for the slaying of the Bull, one of the friends must die, and

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<sup>16</sup> Pritchard, J. B. (1955). *Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET)*. Princetown: Princetown University Press. p 75. lines (iv) 28-34.

<sup>17</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:3-4 & 6

they settled on Enkidu. Enkidu died slowly reviewing the events of his life, at first cursing, then later blessing those things and those people that had brought him to this state. On seeing his friend die, Gilgamesh resolved to seek immortality. An ale-wife gave him this advice:

*The life you pursue you shall not find.  
When the gods created mankind,  
for mankind death they set aside death,  
retaining life in their own hands.*

*You, Gilgamesh, fill your belly,  
Make merry by day and by night.  
Make each day a feast of rejoicing,  
Dance and play day and night!  
Let your garments be sparkling fresh;  
Bathe in water.*

*Pay heed to the little one that holds your hand,  
Let thy spouse delight in your bosom!  
For this is the task of mankind!*

There is much here that will reappear in Ecclesiastes; especially the theme of “eat, drink and be merry”. Compare, for example the middle stanza quoted above with Ecclesiastes.<sup>18</sup>

*“Go, eat your bread with enjoyment,  
and drink your wine with a merry heart;  
for God long ago approved what you do.  
Let your garments always be white;”*

But Gilgamesh ignored this advice and searched out Utnapishtim, the boatman of the gods. Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh the story of the flood and explained that Enlil, in remorse for the rage by which he nearly destroyed the world, has granted Utnapishtim eternal life. As a leaving present, Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh a secret about a special plant.

*"This plant is like to the buckthorn ...  
Its thorns will prick your hands just as does a rose.  
But if your hands obtain the plant, you will find new life"*

No sooner had he heard this than Gilgamesh set off to recover the plant which was hidden under deep water. He tied stones to his feet to drag him down and when he found it:

*He took the plant, though it pricked his hands,  
He cut the heavy stones from his feet.  
And the sea cast him up on its shore.*

Whereupon he resolved to take the plant back to Uruk and have some others eat it. But later decides to eat it himself and thus “return to the state of my youth”.

*After twenty leagues they broke off a morsel  
Thirty leagues further on, they prepared for the night  
Gilgamesh saw a well whose water was cool,  
He went down into it to bathe in the water.  
But a serpent smelt the fragrance of the plant;  
It came up from the water and carried off the plant.  
Going back, it shed its skin.*

*Thereupon Gilgamesh sat down and wept.*

After some anguish, the story ends with Gilgamesh’s calm acceptance of his mortality.

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<sup>18</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:8-9

Some of these ideas, the tree that confers immortality, the eating of a plant to become like a god, and the intervention of the serpent may have provided motifs that later appear in Genesis.

#### Gods and the History of Cities

The Sumerians believed that each city belonged to its own god, and the king and the people regarded themselves as the servants of this god. In the centre of the city was the temple, the home of the city deity, sometimes with smaller temples around it to accommodate the god's spouse and children. The god of Uruk was 'Anu', whose name means 'Sky'. Although not very active in the mythology, Anu was regarded as the highest of the gods, capable of granting kingship to mortals - as is appropriate for the god of the dominant city. Inanna also had her temple at Uruk. She was the goddess of the storehouse, of thunderstorms, of war, and of the morning and evening stars. Compared to Anu, the 'Wind Lord' Enlil took a more assertive leadership role from his city of Nippur, the religious capital of Sumer, and a major regional centre. His spouse, Ninhursag, was regarded as the divine mother of the early Sumerian kings. Her son, Ninurta, was the god of victorious warfare and of plant and animal fertility. Many of the myths involved Enki, the god of wisdom, of cunning and of the watery deep. He was based in Eridu<sup>19</sup>. The stories 'Enki and the World Order' and 'Inanna and Enki' both deal with successful struggles by Uruk's Inanna to obtain more power.

After Uruk, the next city state to dominate Sumer was Ur, some 50 miles to the south. Ur's god was Nanna, the moon god. One of the Sumerian myths tells of Nanna's conception through the coupling of Nippur's Enlil with the initially-reluctant goddess Ninlil, whom he found bathing in a canal against her mother's advice. Enlil was temporarily banished from Nippur for this misdeed, but later reinstated as the god of fertility

Around 2300 BCE power in Sumer passed to the Akkadian Sargon the Great. The Akkadians were a Semitic people whose base was about 100 miles north of modern Baghdad. Sargon extended his empire to Northern Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia (modern Turkey). The Akkadian language became the official diplomatic language for the Near East for over 1000 years. Akkadia included towns such as Kish, Lagash, and Ur with populations of 10,000 or so, similar to small market towns in present day Europe. These provided the opportunity for technical specialisms to develop and with them the building of temples and palaces, and the creation of the associated art and literature. At the same time, in Egypt, towns such as Memphis and Heracleopolis were achieving a similar size and cultural output.

#### Birth myths of great leaders

Later stories about Sargon would include this poem, presumably based on an earlier tradition:

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*"Sargon the mighty king, king of Akkad, am I,  
My mother was a changeling; my father I knew not.  
The brothers of my father loved the hills.  
...  
My changeling mother conceived me, in secret she bore me.  
She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid.  
She cast me into the river which rose over me.  
The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water.  
...  
Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me.  
Akki, the drawer of water, appointed me as his gardener.  
While I was a gardener, Ishtar granted me her love  
And for four and ... years I exercised Kingship"<sup>20</sup>*

The middle verse contains the basic idea underlying the story of the birth of Moses in Exodus.<sup>21</sup>

#### **The Levant: Nomads take over (2300 – 2000 BCE)**

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<sup>19</sup> See Hoerth et al. *People of the Old Testament World* (1996) p. 28 for a discussion of Sumerian gods.

<sup>20</sup> The Legend of Sargon. ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 119. Ishtar is the Akkadian goddess that is identified with the Sumerian Inanna.

<sup>21</sup> Exodus 2:3

There is archaeological evidence of an Early Bronze Age settlements in the hill country of Northern Palestine (Canaan) and in the Southern Highlands around today's Jerusalem. This wave of settlement began in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE and came to an end around 2300. The southern hill country was relatively sparsely populated with some ongoing pastoralism. It had a single principal settlement at Khirbet et-Tell, thought to be the site, much later, of the biblical Ai, north-east of Jerusalem. It covered an area of around 25 acres, which represented about a fifth of the total settled land in the Southern Highlands. This settlement had substantial fortifications and an impressive temple. By contrast, the Northern hill country was more densely populated with a hierarchy of sizes of villages and towns and a plurality of sub-regional centres. Of these, the largest was at Tell el-Farah – thought to be biblical Tirzah – which would later become the first capital of the northern kingdom of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

From about 2300 BCE till 2000 BCE, urban civilisation more or less disappeared from the archaeological record of the Levant with cities either violently destroyed or abandoned as a result of a climatic deterioration that caused hardship throughout the Near East. Asiatic refugees were forced to enter Egypt in their search for survival (ca.2100 BCE).

An additional factor contributing to the loss of the towns may have been the incursion of an aggressive nomadic people. The struggle between ranchers (in this case the nomads) and farmers (in this case the Egyptians) has been told in many ages and many forms from 'Cain and Abel' to 'Oklahoma'.

This process reversed itself around 2000 BCE as climatic and political conditions made settlement attractive once more. Nomadic peoples often found it advantageous to trade with settled agricultural communities which can provide them with grain and fruits. The best time for the communities to come together is after the harvest when the flocks and herds can graze stubble and fertilise the fields. Three Sumerian tablets from Nippur dating from the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BCE celebrate this: -.

*To him who is a shepherd, the farmer approached  
The farmer Enkimdu approached  
...  
The shepherd Dumuzi in his plain starts a quarrel with him.  
(but the farmer responds)  
"I against thee, shepherd, against thee, shepherd, I against thee  
Why should I strive?  
Let thy sheep eat the grass of the riverbank,  
In my meadowland let thy sheep walk about,  
In the bright fields of Erech let them eat grain,  
Let thy kids and lambs drink the waters of my Unun Canal?"*<sup>23</sup>

There may be a certain tension here; but it is cooperation that wins in the end.

### **The Towers of Babylon (2100 BCE)**

Around 2100 BCE the city of Ur led a Sumerian renaissance. Under the leadership of its king Ur-Nammu, improvements were brought about in travel, irrigation, and in religion through the building or rebuilding of temples and Ziggurats.

It was common for kings to rebuild the temples of the land, usually on the site of the previous building. By Ur-Nammu's time, if not before, this had been formalised into the construction of a layered tower, with new developments built on top of the old until the latest temple to the god was placed at the summit. The Ziggurats that resulted grew towards the heavens and were common in the major cities of the area, including Babylon. The picture (from perisatours.com) is of a ruined Ziggurat in Susa in present day Iran.



<sup>22</sup> Finkelstein & Silberman, 2002, *The Bible Unearthed*. pp 153-155.

<sup>23</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 42

### **An Early Law code from Ur**

Ur-Nammu (2112-2095), the founder of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ur dynasty, produced what is perhaps the first law code. A contemporary wrote: -

*He standardised the one mina weight and standardised the stone weight of a shekel of silver in relation to the Mina.*

*At that time ...the orphan was not delivered up to the rich man; the widow was not delivered up to the mighty man; the man of one shekel was not delivered up to the man of one mina.*

...

*If a man, in the course of a scuffle, smashed the limb of another man with a club, he shall pay one mina of silver.*

*If someone severed the nose of another man, he must pay two thirds of a mina of silver.<sup>24</sup>*

In these laws financial damages are set in recompense for physical injury, a surprisingly modern concept. The idea that it was the king, through his law, who protected the widow, the orphan and the poor is a key feature of much of the law of the Ancient Near East. It will re-appear in Deuteronomy:

“Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice”<sup>25</sup>

### **A Sumerian story of Creation, Flood and Paradise lost**

It is probably during this time (early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium) that the Sumerian story 'The Deluge' was created. It began with a creation story: -

*After Anu, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursag had fashioned the black-headed people, vegetation luxuriated from the earth, and animals, four legged creatures of the plain, were artfully created.*

...

*After the exalted tiara and the throne of kingship had been lowered from heaven, He perfected the rights and the exalted divine ordinances, He founded the five cities in pure places, called their names, and allocated them as cult-centres.*

Something went wrong, (exactly what is obscured by the damaged text), but some of the gods decided to destroy mankind. There was an extended debate with some of the gods expressing compassion for mankind. In the end Ziusudra, the human king, was empowered to build a giant boat. But it was determined that: -

*... a flood will sweep over the cult-centres  
To destroy the seed of mankind*

...

*All the Wind-storms, exceedingly powerful, attacked as one  
At the same time as the Flood swept over the cult centres  
for seven days and seven nights,  
Then, after the Flood had swept over the land,  
and the huge boat had been tossed about by the Wind-storms on the great waters,  
Utu, who sheds light on heaven and earth, came forth.*

Utu is the sun-god, and with the burst of sunshine: -

*Ziusudra opened a window of the huge boat,  
The hero Utu brought his rays into the giant boat.  
Ziusudra, the king, prostrated himself before Utu,*

<sup>24</sup> Pritchard (1955), *ANET* p 523-525. The laws of Ur-Nammu.

<sup>25</sup> Deuteronomy 27:19

*And the king killed an ox and slaughtered a sheep*

The sacrifice was effective, for in the end, the gods Anu and Enlil uttered: -

*'breath of heaven', 'breath of earth', ...*

*Vegetation, coming up out of the earth, rose up...*

*Then they caused Zuisudra the king,*

*The preserver of vegetation and of the seed of mankind.*

*To dwell in the land of rule, in the land of Dilmun, the place where the sun rises<sup>26</sup>*

Another Sumerian story 'Enki and Ninhursag' talks of the land of Dilmun, which is pure, clean and bright and where 'the lion does not kill, nor the wolf snatch the lamb'. Later echoes of these images will be found in Isaiah where the prophet writes "The wolf shall live with the lamb, The leopard lie down with the kid"<sup>27</sup>

Into this paradise Ninhursag gives painless birth to a daughter by Enki, who in turn gives birth to a further daughter, also by Enki, and so on till Uttu the great-granddaughter is born. (This Uttu needs to be distinguished from the similarly named sun-god). But before Enki can continue his progressive incest, Ninhursag intervenes. He is required to bring cucumbers, apples and grapes. Enki provides water for the garden, and in gratitude he is provided with the fruit he requires. So Enki returns to Uttu, crying out to her

*I, the gardener, would give you cucumbers, apples and grapes as a 'so be it'.*

*Uttu with joyful heart opens the door of the house.*

*Enki to Uttu, the fair lady,*

*Gives the cucumbers...*

*Gives the apples...*

*Gives the grapes...*

*...*

*Enki took his joy of Uttu*

*He embraced her, lay in her lap*

But no new goddess is born of the union. Instead Ninhursag, Uttu's great grandmother uses Enki's seed to create eight plants. Enki finds the plants and asks

*'Of the plants, their fate ...*

*What pray is this? What pray is this?'*

He tastes and eats each one. Then he 'knew' the heart of each plant and determined its fate. Whereupon; -

*Ninhursag cursed Enki's name.*

*"Until he is dead I shall not look upon him with the 'eye of life'."*

She removes herself from the presence of the other gods who must now sit in the dust. Enki suffers pain in eight parts of his body. (And later in Genesis 3, woman will be given pain as her punishment for eating the apple) Thus sickness and possibly death – the absence of the 'eye of life' – enter a world that had not known them before. Paradise was lost.

But in this story, one of the gods persuades a fox to find Ninhursag and bring her back. When she comes back, she is stripped of her garments by the gods and sits by Enki. Eight times she asks him what part of his body pains him and eight times, when he answers, she says that she has created a new god for him. The last of these becomes the lord of Dilmun. Paradise regained?

### **Enuma Elish**

Marduk became an important Mesopotamian god in Nebuchadrezzar's reign. A story to celebrate and justify this may well have been put together at that time. The story used earlier material

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<sup>26</sup> Closely based on the translation in ANET p 42-44. (Pritchard, 1955)

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 11:6

and included within it an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth. It has attracted scholarly attention because of similarities with the Genesis creation story, notably its opening sentence and the sequence of creation. It began: -

*When on high the heavens had not been named, firm ground had not been called by name, naught but primordial Apsu and Tiamat, ..., their waters mingling as a single body.*<sup>28</sup>

Whilst Genesis would begin: -

“when the earth was unformed and unfilled and darkness covered the face of the deep and the breath of Elohim hovered over the face of the waters.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Mesopotamian story, the gods were formed within the watery chaos represented by Tiamat and Apsu. They emerged from the chaos and were named. The Genesis parallel is held to be the creation of light.

The most important of the Mesopotamian gods was Marduk. He fought and destroyed Tiamat and used her body to continue and complete the process of creation: -

*He split her like a shellfish in two parts;  
Half he set up and sealed it as sky*<sup>30</sup>

This half shell is paralleled in the Genesis story when God said “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters...”. And God called the dome ‘sky’. When Ezekiel, writing in Babylonia centuries later, chooses to compose a lamentation over Egypt, he used the image of the sea monster whose carcass will be split open to describe Egypt and described the Sun and Moon as being blotted out.<sup>31</sup>

Next Marduk posted guards to restrain the waters as, in Genesis, Elohim caused the waters to be gathered together into one place and thus enabled dry land to appear. Then Marduk “*constructed stations for the great gods, fixing their astral likenesses as constellations*” whilst in Genesis Elohim required there to be lights in the dome of the sky – the sun, moon and stars. The last act of creation in both stories was mankind. Marduk stated his intention: -

*“Blood I will mass and cause bones to be,  
I will establish a savage; ‘Man’ shall be his name.  
Truly I will create savage-man.  
He will be charged with the service of the gods,  
That they might be at ease!*<sup>32</sup>

Finally, in both stories, the creators rested after Man had been created. The parallels are not exact, but are generally held to be too close to be merely coincidence. It seems that the authors of Genesis accepted ideas about creation that were common in their time and region and reworked them into a form suitable for a monotheist religion. But residual fingerprints of the polytheistic origins seem to appear occasionally. Genesis 1:26 may be translated as “Then the gods (*elohim*) said,” Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” and later, God comments, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”<sup>33</sup> These plurals may be remnants of the ancient stories that the biblical authors drew upon. It is possible to argue that these passages reflect the use of the royal ‘we’ following on the use of Elohim (which has a plural ending) as the name of God. But this argument scarcely explains the phrase ‘one of us’, which clearly implies a group. Furthermore, in the very next sentences following these passages, whilst Elohim remains the name of God, the authors uses singular pronouns, saying for example “So Elohim created man in his own image”, thereby making the correction required for monotheism. These plural pronouns associated with Elohim occur only three times in the bible; these two times and again in the story of the tower of Babel – also an ancient story with polytheistic antecedents.

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<sup>28</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 60-61

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 1:2

<sup>30</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 67

<sup>31</sup> Ezekiel 32:2-8

<sup>32</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 68

<sup>33</sup> Genesis 3:22

## The Amorite Infiltration (ca 2000 BCE)

Ur-Nammu's grandson found he had to build defences against the incursions of the Amorites, a semi-nomadic tribe who came from the desert to the west of the Mesopotamian rivers. Only a generation or so later, however, the cities of Akkadia broke away one by one under pressure from Amorite immigrants. Ur finally fell to a raiding army from the East comprising Elamites and their allies.

During the first two centuries of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, the Amorite sheikhs took over the leadership of the old Sumerian and Akkadian cities, and founded new ones such as Aleppo in the Northwest and Larsa (sacred to the Sun) in the South. They adopted and maintained the previous Sumerian culture. The Amorites were a complex people some of whom were semi-nomadic, but others lived in agricultural villages and large urban centres. (The mingling of the Semitic Amorites with the Caucasian Sumerians may underlie the story in which a confusion of unrelated languages was sent to the peoples of the earth by a jealous divinity.) By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century most of the major cities in Mesopotamia and Syria - Byblos, Damascus, Aleppo, Masur, Mari, Assur, Babylon and Isin - were ruled by kings with Amorite names. The Sumerians had been absorbed. Some Amorites came to settle along the coastal Levant, where they became indistinguishable from the Canaanite population there.

Tablets found in Mari provide a detailed view of life and politics in a major Amorite city during the reign of Zimri-Lim, who lived around 1700 and was a contemporary of the Amorite Babylonian law-giver Hammurabi. The tablets reveal contacts with Hazor, the country of Canaan, Byblos, and most of the Ancient Near East outside Hamitic Egypt.

Of special interest are the references to a tribal grouping known as Benjaminites who were in more or less continual conflict with the kings of Mari. The Benjaminites were a rural agricultural group whose values clashed with those of the urban citizens of Mari. Their name probably derives from the fact that they were regarded as southerners "*Banu-Yamina*". These Benjaminite kings practiced seasonal migrations between the kingdom of Mari and the regions to the South, West and North, going along the course of the Euphrates and its tributaries. On occasion they reached the shores of the Mediterranean<sup>34</sup>. Later the biblical tribe of Benjamin would also be known for its warlike character. The author of the poem known as 'Jacob's Blessing' described Benjamin as a 'ravenous wolf'. There is a tradition that the tribe fought a bloody civil war – almost to the death of the last man - with the rest of the tribes of Israel during the time of the Judges<sup>35</sup>; it was a Benjamite that was the first king of Israel; it was Benjaminites who fought with David's men shortly after he had become King in Hebron; it was Shimei the Benjaminite who cursed David when he was in retreat from his son Absalom; and it was Sheba the Benjaminite who led the later rebellion.

Whatever conclusions might be drawn from cross referencing the Mari tablets with biblical stories, modern intensive archaeological surveys of the hill countries of northern and southern Palestine shows that there was period of settlement in both areas in the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000 – 1550 BCE). The record describes a population moving from a nomadic way of life to seasonal agriculture and thence to permanent villages and more complex highland economies involving inter-regional trade. This was one of three waves of settlement in the area, the first occurring in the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3500 – 2200 BCE) and the last in the Iron Age (commencing ca 1200). It is suggested that each of these waves of settlement represented a response to changing environmental opportunities – largely climatic, although political stability, or the lack of it, may also have had a bearing. In each of these waves of settlement, the northern hill country, with its gentle rolling hills and productive land, attracted a dense settlement pattern with a hierarchy of settlements of varying size. The southern highlands were more sparsely populated, mostly in small sites, some without much evidence of permanent buildings – just scatterings of broken pottery – suggesting that a significant element of this population remained semi-nomadic. In the settlement wave of 2000 BCE, the principal settlement in the southern highlands was Jerusalem, which was heavily fortified just as Ai had been in the Early Bronze Age. Hebron was also fortified. In the northern hills, the principal settlement was at Tell Balatah, thought to be biblical Shechem, where evidence has been found of significant fortifications and a substantial temple.

Aspects of Amorite theology were absorbed into the regional culture. Canaanite mythology retained the Amorite idea that conflict amongst the gods was an explanation of conflict amongst men and the cause of natural disasters such as drought and flood. Of longer term importance was the idea of salvation bestowed by faith in a god. That this was an Amorite belief is evidenced by the number of their children whom they named using the formula '*god'sname-saves*'. The ideas implicit in the concepts of the 'righteous man' and the 'faithful people' was also an Amorite inheritance. The Amorite

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<sup>34</sup> Mari Texts; Jean-Marie Durand; Anchor Bible Dictionary

<sup>35</sup> Judges 19-21

words *sedeq* meaning 'righteous' and *hesed* meaning 'mercy' or 'loving-kindness' passed into classical Hebrew, and thus to us via the biblical theologians.

### **The First Babylonian Empire (1830 – 1530 BCE)**

Amorite success in Mesopotamia reached its peak with the kingship of Hammurabi, based in Babylon. A settlement had existed in Babylon since at least the time of Sargon the Great, but by the time of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE) the town had grown into a modest regional power, with influence over 10 to 15 kings of other city-states. In the introduction to his law code, Hammurabi states that the gods Anu and Enlil named the city when they established Marduk, the god of Babylon, as pre-eminent over humankind.<sup>36</sup> Marduk is the hero of the Babylonian creation epic. Hammurabi initially extended Babylon's influence by the skilful use of diplomacy, then, in the thirtieth year of his long reign, he embarked on a series of military campaigns that enabled him to unite and control the whole of Mesopotamia (excluding the western states of Qatna and Aleppo).

Much of Hammurabi's law code was concerned with trade, the management of slaves, sexual behaviour, marriage and divorce, but it also deals with physical injury: -

*If a lord has destroyed the eye of another lord, they shall destroy his eye,  
If he has broken another lord's bone, they shall break his bone.  
If he has destroyed the eye of a commoner or broken the bone of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver<sup>37</sup>*

Whilst maintaining Ur-Nammu's system of recompense, and the same prices for commoners, he clearly felt that this was not a sufficient deterrent for nobles and introduced the concept of 'an eye for an eye'

The author of Genesis may have been aware of Hammurabi's code. In which case, law 170 might have been relevant to the story of the conflict between Abram's wife Sarai and her slave girl Hagar. When Isaac was born to Sarai, Hagar already had a son by Abram, and law 170 states: -

*When a master's first wife bore him children and his female slave bore him children, and if the father during his lifetime said "My children!" to the children that the slave bore him, thus having counted them with the children of his first wife, then after the father has gone to his fate, the children of the first wife and the children of the slave shall share equally in the goods of the paternal estate, with the first-born, the son of the first wife, receiving a preferential share.*

Something that Sarai would not have wanted.

Hammurabi died around 1750 BCE. Within a decade, the empire he had constructed started to crumble under pressure from a new force, the Caucasian Kassites. The Babylonian dynasty continued in a diminished form for another 150 years.

Following the climatic disaster and depopulation of much of the Near East in the last part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, the coastal Levant had started to recover from about 2000 BCE onwards. The people who then populated the coastal Levant east and south of the Galilee and the Jordan valley were a semitic group, who have been given the name the Canaanites by scholars – although whether they represented an indigenous recovery or immigration is not known. There is a town in western Arabia called 'l kn 'n meaning 'of Canaan', so perhaps some of them came from there. In any case the dialects spoken then in what is now Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and western Arabia were quite similar – whether they are called Canaanite or Hebrew. These people came under the dominance of Egypt's spectacular Middle Kingdom.

At some time, the Amorite expansion which had come to dominate Mesopotamia also came to the hill country surrounding the Jordan. Archaeological evidence shows Canaanite and Amorite groups living side by side in the Levant around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium<sup>38</sup>: indeed, some would argue

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<sup>36</sup> Bill T Arnold in *Peoples of the Old Testament* (Hoerth, Mattingly & Yamauchi (editors), 1996) p 44.

<sup>37</sup> Laws 196 to 198 of the code of Hammurabi. ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 163-164, 166-177. The date of this myth is uncertain. One school of thought puts it after the Kassite invasion of Babylonia

<sup>38</sup> Keith N Schoville in *Peoples* (1996) p 166 This view is supported by the archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon in her book 'Amorites and Canaanites'

that it is impossible to differentiate between them<sup>39</sup>. Egyptian texts from Late Bronze Age (1550 - 1200) mention several groups of inhabitants of Canaan including Apiru<sup>40</sup>, Canaanites, Hurrians<sup>41</sup>, Israelites<sup>42</sup> and Shasu<sup>43</sup>. Whilst the biblical chronology would suggest a period between 1800 and 1550 as being the time of Abram, the archaeology fails to provide the kind of background the stories require. 1800 to 1550 was a time when there were a good many settlements in the Palestinian hill country as well as some not insubstantial coastal towns, in contrast to the biblical description of a substantially empty land. The period from 1550 to 1200 BCE is one with relatively few settlements but with a substantial nomadic population known to the Egyptians as 'Shasu' – perhaps the ancestors of today's Bedouin. However, this period is too late to fit with the normal understanding of the rest of Israel's history. It would seem there is no perfect fit. It may be that the chronology is right, but the assumption of a setting in the Palestinian hill country is incorrect.

### **Hurrian Laws and Traditions (ca 1500 BCE)**

The Hurrians were a Mesopotamian people of some significance in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, reaching the fullest extent of their power in the second half of that period. They appear to have had influence in Mitanni, Syria, Anatolia and Canaan. At Nuzi, a town on the Tigris about two hundred miles north of Babylon on the way to Nineveh, a large find of tablets has been uncovered dating from around 1500 BCE. Some of these provide insights into the laws and customs of these people - laws and customs which are reflected in the stories of the patriarchs.

It appears to have been Hurrian law for property to pass only within the family. To get around this restriction, wealthy Hurrians adopted those to whom they wished to offer a gift. One interesting tablet concerns Nashwi, whose daughter Nuhuya had married Wullu. Nashwi makes a number of arrangements that are witnessed and certified by the local judiciary. The document states that Nashwi has adopted his daughter's husband, Wullu, and continues:

*As long as Nashwi is alive, Wullu shall provide food and clothing;  
When Nashwi dies, Wullu shall become an heir -  
If Nashwi has a son of his own, he shall divide the estate equally with Wullu, but the son of  
Nashwi shall take the household gods.  
However, if Nashwi does not have a son of his own, then Wullu shall take the household gods.  
Furthermore Nashwi has given his daughter Nuhuya in marriage to Wullu  
If Wullu takes another wife, he shall forfeit the lands and buildings of Nashwi.*

The adoption makes Wullu a 'son' of Nashwi and therefore a 'brother' to Nuhuya who at the same time is also his wife. Does this custom indicate why, in the bible story, Abram is able to say that his wife Sarai is his sister, and Isaac to say the same about Rebecca? The household gods seem to go to the principle heir: is this why Rebecca was so keen to keep them with her when she leaves her family home with Isaac?

Another text illuminates the problem of the barren wife. Here Shuriha-ilu has adopted Shennima who has married his daughter Kelim-ninu. The agreement then stipulates

*If Kelim-ninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife;  
But if Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall acquire a woman of the land of Lullu as  
wife for Shennima, and Kelim-ninu may not send any offspring away.  
Any sons that may be born to Shennima from the womb of Kelim-ninu shall be given all the  
lands and buildings of every sort.  
However, if she does not bear a son, then the daughter of Kelim-ninu shall take one portion of  
the property.<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid* p 167

<sup>40</sup> Amarna letter 271 from ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 486. Some scholars are inclined to interpret Apiru as 'Hebrew', but without much justification, other than the sound of the words.

<sup>41</sup> Merenptah's victory hymn: ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 378

<sup>42</sup> Merenptah's stella

<sup>43</sup> Egyptian border post report: ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p. 259 The Shasu are usually thought to be Bedouin

<sup>44</sup> These two texts can be found in ANET (Pritchard, 1955) pp 219-220

Thus it appears to be the custom that a barren wife would provide a fertile surrogate for her husband – as Sarai provided her maid Hagar to Abram, and both Rachel and Leah provided their maids to Jacob. But note that the barren wife was not permitted to send the children of the surrogate away. But that did not prevent Sarai from abusing her maid to the point that Hagar chose to run away. When that failed she had to persuade Abram to send Hagar and Ishmail away. In the case of Kelim-ninu’s marriage, the contract went on to record that ‘*Yalampa is given as a handmaid to Kelim-ninu*’ just as Rachel and Leah received gifts of handmaids on the occasion of their marriages.

Other customs attested in the Nuzi tablets include the ability of the father to determine which of his sons should inherit the main portion (it need not be the eldest) and the importance of the deathbed blessing – factors that influence the story of Jacob and Esau.

Hurrian custom also required that the girl involved should be consulted about a proposed marriage – as Rebekah was – and had the power to reject it. These laws appear to have spread out over the wide area of the Ancient Near East – reflecting the widespread influence of Hurrian culture. The Hittites, however, expressly disapproved of these laws; there is nothing comparable in Akkadian tradition and aspects of them are clearly contrary to the laws of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel and Judah.<sup>45</sup>

The marriage arrangements in the patriarchal stories all take place in or near Haran which was a Hurrian area in the middle of the second millennium BCE, although Aramean at the time when the stories were probably written down. Abraham ‘set out from’ Haran and later his servant, instructed to go back to his birthplace, goes to ‘the city of Nahor in Aram-Naharaim’ to find Rebekah as a wife for Isaac. The ‘city of Nahor’ is identified with Haran in various biblical texts<sup>46</sup>. It is also where Laban lived and where his daughters married Jacob. Haran lies just inside modern Turkey, almost 300 miles east of the Gulf of Iskenderun. It might have been a significant caravan centre with trade routes west to the Mediterranean coast, south through the Levant to Egypt, north-westward to Hittite Anatolia, westward to the upper Tigris and thence to the Caucasian Kassites and Elamites, and south-westward to Ur in Lower Mesopotamia. Its name carries the connotation of ‘road’ or ‘route’ in Sumerian.<sup>47</sup>

The names of the patriarch’s most ancient family may have their origins in the myths surrounding the worship of the moon god ‘Sin’ for which Haran was one of two principal cult centres – the other being Ur. In Genesis, Haran the person is defined as being the father of the women Milcah and Iscah – a most unusual definition as it implies the superior importance of the women. This becomes understandable when it is recognised that Milcah was a goddess of the city. Milcah (Babylonian ‘Malkatu’ meaning ‘Queen’) was one of the titles of the goddess Istar, closely linked to the moon god, to which the city of Haran was dedicated. Sarai (Babylonian ‘Sarratu’ meaning ‘Princess’) may have been a daughter of Sin or Iscah<sup>48</sup>. Ancient commentators, including Augustine and Josephus, identified Sarai with Iscah<sup>49</sup>. A more modern explanation of the reference to Iscah is that the name is a misunderstanding caused by the similarity of the cuneiform marks for ‘is’ and ‘mil’; if this is true then Iscah is simply an erroneous duplicate for Milcah, and the two are the same goddess. Laban (Babylonian ‘Labana’ meaning ‘the white one’) was a poetic way of referring to the moon or the moon god. As far as is known, Abram was not a name by which any Mesopotamian god was called – although the name Abu-rama meaning ‘exalted father’ is known from early Babylonian contracts<sup>50</sup>. A liaison between the ‘exalted father’ Abu-rama and the junior goddess Sarai is a plausible element in a foundation myth.

It is not surprising that the names transmitted into the Hebrew legends of the Patriarchal family are the more familiar, poetic names by which these gods were known rather than their formal names within the Babylonian Pantheon. The disconnection that results perhaps enabled elements of the original myth to be preserved into the proto-Israelite inheritance. The biblical confusion over the birthplace of Abram (Ur or Haran) becomes more understandable in the context of the connection with the moon-god myth, as the god’s mortal ‘children’ would be the inhabitants of both Haran and Ur.

Whilst the main content of the early myth is now lost, a trace may remain in the story of Abram’s rescue of Lot from the clutches of four kings. Abram is able to do this with only 318 men, ‘*born in his house*’. Some commentators note that 318 could be the number of nights in the year that the

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<sup>45</sup> Martha Morrison; Nuzi (ABD) Also Speiser (1962). ‘Genesis’; AB; pp 91-93

<sup>46</sup> Genesis 27:43 and 29:4. link Haran to the City of Nahor. Abraham’s search for a bride for Isaac establishes Haran as his birthplace. The alternative idea that Abraham came from ‘Ur of the Chaldees’ is a result of attempts to merge texts with separate traditions.

<sup>47</sup> De Vries (1997); Cities of the Biblical World. p 23

<sup>48</sup> Herman Gunkel (1920) Genesis (third edition); pp 162 and 157 (in translation by Mark E Bridges). Also Victor P Hamilton (1990); New International Commentary; The Book of Genesis 1-17; p 363

<sup>49</sup> Augustine; City of God; 16.13. and Josephus; Antiquities:1.6.5.

<sup>50</sup> A.H Sayce (2004); Higher Criticism and the Verdict of the Monuments; pp 159-160

moon provides effective light. Were these nights the ‘*trained men*’ born in the house of the moon god? The story involving the four kings, now the content of Genesis chapter 14, has probably retained more of its ancient origin than the other stories based on the Abram tradition. Its foreign origin is also more apparent; it refers to Abram as ‘the Hebrew’, a description that the Israelites never applied to themselves, although they did record foreigners as using the term. The syntax of the language is poor Hebrew, but reasonable Akkadian, which suggests a translation. The names of the four kings and their countries spanned the ancient world from Elam in southern Mesopotamia via Mari and Babylon to pre-Hittite Anatolia. Modern studies of ancient writings confirm that the form of the names are consistent with the countries ascribed to them in the first half of the second millennium; but nothing else is known of these ‘kings’. It is hardly likely that a Judean author, writing eight hundred years later would have been able to synthesise such plausible names, so a degree of genuine antiquity can be assigned to the story.

In the story, the kings initially defeated four races of Giants – the Rephaim, the Zuzin (probably the Zamzummim of Ammon), the Emini and the Horites<sup>51</sup>. The Rephaim were defeated at Astoreth Karnaim – Astoreth of the Two Horns – probably a shrine of the goddess Astarte, who can be depicted with two horns. They attacked five local kings in the area around Siddim, the southern part of the Dead Sea – now flooded. The local kings there have names such as Bera (meaning ‘evil’) and Birshah (‘injustice’) – plausible nicknames appropriately matched to the reputation of Sodom and Gomorrah. The four kings of the coalition, Amraphel of Shinar (in Mesopotamia), Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam and Tidal (a popular Hittite name) all have plausible historical backgrounds from around the time of Hammurabi. The coalition defeated the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and returned north, taking booty with them. Lot was living in the area of the defeated kings and so they also took Lot and his property. Having chased these four kings as far as Dan, Abram rescued Lot and returned south where he was met by the defeated king of Sodom and by Melchizedek in the neighbourhood of Salem (possibly Jeru-Salem): -

*Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was priest of El-Elyon. He blessed him saying:*

*“Blessed be Abram by El-Elyon,  
Creator of Heaven and Earth,  
And praised be El-Elyon  
Who has delivered your foes to you”.*

*And he gave him a portion of food.*

*The King of Sodom said, “Give me the people, but you may keep the property.”*

*But Abram replied to the King of Sodom. “I have sworn to El-Elyon, Creator of Heaven and Earth, that not so much as a thread or a sandal strap would I take of anything that belongs to you.”<sup>52</sup>*

El and Elyon, are attested separately in Ugaritic and Phoenician, but together in Aramaic. Elsewhere in the Hebrew bible, El is used as a short or singular form of Elohim, and Elyon occurs either separately or as an adjective associated with other divine names; but it does not occur anywhere else as El-Elyon – save just once in psalm 78. In the Septuagint and Syriac Versions, which have been followed here, there was no mention of Yahweh. It does occur in the Masoretic text, but was probably introduced there when the story was incorporated by an editor of the Judean and Israelite texts – possibly when they were combined. If the Septuagint’s source was original, then this was a story in which both Melchizedek and Abram respected the same Aramean divinity.

After the priest-king had blessed Abram, the usual translation says that ‘Abram gave him a tenth of the everything’. There are, however, some problems with this translation. In particular the Hebrew text does not even mention Abram! Then there is the apparently inconsequential switch to the defeated king of Sodom, who says “Give me the people and you take the goods”. The difficulties can be resolved if it is recognised that the phrase *m’sr mkl* (a tenth of everything) can also be interpreted as an idiomatic expression for food – literally “portions of food”<sup>53</sup>. Then it becomes clear that the King of

<sup>51</sup> The first three can be identified with the biblical giants from Canaan (Gen 15:20), Ammon (Deuteronomy 2:11) and Moab (Deuteronomy 2:10).

<sup>52</sup> Genesis 14:17-23

<sup>53</sup> The Hebrew ‘*m’sr mkl*’ is normally read as ‘*m’sr m-kl*’ meaning a ‘portion of everything’. Since in some situations *m’sr* can mean a ‘tenth portion’, translators have been able to justify ‘and he gave him a tenth of everything’. By forcing Abram into the ‘he’ we get the usual translation ‘and Abram gave him a tenth of everything’. But *mkl* could also be vocalised as *makal* meaning food, so the simplest

Sodom's intervention is perfectly reasonable when we infer, as the text allows, that Abram had not only rescued Lot and his property, but also the people of the kingdom of Sodom and their property<sup>54</sup>. The king then was expressing his gratitude for their rescue, and indicating to Abram that he could keep the goods as booty – as would be normal. Abram the warrior generously forgoes the reward for himself, but accepts on behalf of his men – as any good commander would.

The content of Genesis 14 is inconsistent with the rest of the Abram/Abraham cycle in style and content. Abram here is a heroic warrior, roaming over vast territory, winning impossible battles and refusing the tiniest payment. In the rest of the cycle he is a peaceful domestic man, but not averse to receiving gifts from foreign rulers - even for the most dubious of services. The content and the language thus suggest an Akkadian text from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. If so, this provides evidence for the foreign recognition of Abram prior to the formation of the Israelite stories.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Canaanite Inheritance (1500 – 1200 BCE)**

The boundaries of the region called “the land of Canaan” undoubtedly changed over time<sup>56</sup>. Later Canaanites are associated with the area known as Phoenicia. The evidence from 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE coinage and from the Greek usage indicates that that ‘the land of Canaan’ had separated out from ‘the land of Israel’. By that time Canaan referred to the land of coastal cities of the northern Levant – Tyre, Sidon, and Laodicia. But in the middle of the second millennium, the Amorites who had infiltrated into the Southern Levant around half a millennium earlier had mixed with whatever local population existed there so thoroughly that it is unrealistic to distinguish between them. The Amorites/Canaanites were widely spread across the region.

Extra-biblical evidence concerning the early Canaanites comes from the area that was later to be called Phoenicia. Recent excavations at Ugarit (on the Levantine coast about 30 miles south of the Orontes river) are the main source of this information. It provides an insight into the early Canaanite religion, literature and culture with which Israelite religion and culture competed for so long. Much of this material comes from tablets inscribed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE, although the stories they tell were composed earlier.

The common Canaanite/Amorite culture included a belief in the ancient stories of strife among the gods. Their songs described this struggle:

*You [El] rule the raging of the sea;  
When its waves rise, you still them.  
You crushed Rahab like a carcass,  
You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.*<sup>57</sup>

The 'Father of the gods' was El<sup>58</sup>. El's name is also simply the word for 'god'. In the literature, he is often described as “the kind, the compassionate”, the same designation as is invariably used of *Allah* in the Koran. El was the creator of all; he lived in a tent near the mountain from which flowed the two rivers that watered the world. Like the Sumerian Anu, he had the power to give children to the childless. In a similar way the aged Abram received the gift of a child from the god he knew as ‘El Shaddai’. Like Anu, El often remained in the background. The more assertive god, the equivalent of the Sumerian Enlil, was Baal. ‘Baal’ is a Canaanite word simply meaning “Husband” or “Lord”, so this more like a title than a name. He is sometimes known as the storm god. He was the god of fertility and

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reading of *m'sr mkl* is ‘a portion of food’. In this case the context allows ‘and he gave him a portion of food’ and there is no need to force an ungrammatical change of subject. For further details see ‘The Bible came from Arabia’, chapter 12. A great deal has been built on this verse, including the tradition of believers tithing a tenth of their income to the church. This may well be a worthwhile practise, but if this verse is looked to for providing scriptural authority for it, then such authority may be based on the shifting foundations of translation.

<sup>54</sup> This is presumably why the King of Sodom had come to Salem to meet Abram – and perhaps why the neutral King of Salem under whose auspices the meeting was taking place, had organised the blessing ceremony.

<sup>55</sup> See Speiser (1962); Genesis; AB; p 101 ff and Gunkel: Genesis p 278 ff

<sup>56</sup> P. C. Schmitz in his article on Canaan in ABD (Freedman, David Noel. Ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York, Doubleday) 1997,1992)

<sup>57</sup> Ps 89:9; but is Rahab a reference to the god of ‘watery chaos’?

<sup>58</sup> See 'Stories from Ancient Canaan' (Coogan, 1978) p.12 onwards for a good description of the Canaanite gods.

was the patron god of Ugarit. Baal's wife and sister (a combination that suggests Egyptian or Hurrian influence) was Anat, also known as a source of fertility. She was a successful opponent of the forces of chaos, but had a fierce temper and was often depicted with a necklace of human heads and a belt of human hands. El's spouse was Asherah, the mother of the gods. Asherah poles, set up in the places where she was worshiped were common throughout Israel and Canaan till at least the destruction of Judah at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The craftsman of the gods, Kothar-wa-Hasis<sup>59</sup>, was thought to live in foreign lands such as Egypt or Crete. Baal's opponent was 'Mot' meaning 'Death', the representative of sterility and drought. Death's domain was the desert and his underworld home was known as "Swamp", "Muck" or "Phlegm".

Canaanite religion seems to have focused on the annual agricultural cycle. As the dry season approached, Death triumphed and destroyed Baal but, with the coming of the autumn storms, Baal came back to life and restored fertility to the land. The major festival was the Autumn New Year festival, but there were probably other festivals at the time of the harvests.

It was a temple-based religion. Early Levantine temples (between 3000 and 2000 BCE) were single rooms, but this was elaborated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium to include a special portico over the entrance. Later temples (ca 1200 onwards) included a 'holy of holies' behind the main room.

Outside the cities, sacred platforms '*bamah*', usually translated as 'high places', were revered. It would seem that a '*bamah*' is better understood simply as a mound or oval platform. They occurred not only in the countryside, but also in towns, in valleys, and by city gates. Oval platforms have been uncovered at Megiddo, near Haifa, at Hazor and near Malhah, south-east of Jerusalem. They date from the middle of the third millennium BCE to the 7<sup>th</sup> century. '*Bamah*' were in use in Canaan before the Amorite incursion and continued to be built until the very end of Israel and Judah. Thus Canaan gave to Israel not only the form of her temple, but also the physical places at which much popular religion was conducted.

There were twelve priestly families at Ugarit. The temple staff included a high priest, his priests and other consecrated persons such as temple prostitutes, singers, vestment makers and sceptre bearers.<sup>60</sup> The king was believed to have a special relationship with the gods; his health was regarded as important for the health of the land; he probably had a major part in the re-enactment of the Baal cycle that took place at the New Year festival. There was an elaborate list of appropriate sacrifices. A distinction was made between burnt offerings (which were entirely consumed by the gods) and shared offerings (where a part was eaten by the supplicant). Offerings included oxen, sheep, grain, wine, oil and other produce. There is evidence that in certain circumstances children were offered in sacrifice. This practice continued under a number of Judean kings despite its condemnation by the prophets. It was present in Canaanite Phoenicia and continued in Carthage, their western settlement.

It was a Canaanite who, around 1700 BCE, invented alphabetic writing. Canaanite artists drew inspiration from Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, Crete and Mesopotamia. They worked in gold, silver and ivory; became familiar with techniques such as engraving, filigree, and inlay. There is some evidence that their metallurgists developed moulds capable of giving standardised mass-produced artefacts. Their potters developed techniques for the production of thin ceramics. They were well known throughout the region as merchants.

Canaanite names for the divinity were carried across into the Hebrew bible. As already noted the Canaanite '*El*' is both the general word for 'god' and the specific name of 'the father God' – the head of the family of Canaanite gods. The word itself and many of the images associated with '*El*' were absorbed by Israel. The bible also uses the title '*Elyon*' meaning the 'exalted one' but usually translated as 'the Most High'. The combination *El Elyon*, the 'most exalted father god', is used in the ancient story involving Abram's meeting with Melchizedek (Genesis 14). An Aramaic treaty was guaranteed by '*El who is Elyon*'.<sup>61</sup> *El* is often given other designations such as *El Shaddai* (conventionally translated as 'Almighty God')<sup>62</sup> or *El Olam* ('*El*, the eternal' or 'Everlasting God')<sup>63</sup>. When used on its own, *El* probably refers to the highest god in the Canaanite pantheon. Philo of Byblos included an '*Elium*' called the 'most high' amongst the gods of Phoenicia; there he was described as the 'father of heaven and earth'. The same description was applied to *El* in writings found in Palmyra and in a Hittite translation of a Canaanite myth. Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest-king of Jerusalem referred to above, was known as a priest of *El Elyon*, who was described as the 'creator of heaven and

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<sup>59</sup> Possibly cognate with Noah, see comments on the Flood story above.

<sup>60</sup> Keith N Scoville in 'Peoples' (Hoerth, Mattingly & Yamauchi (editors), 1996) p 175

<sup>61</sup> Roland de Vaux discusses the Canaanite background to the god associated with the ancient shrines of the patriarchs in 'Ancient Israel; its life and institutions', (De Vaux, 1973) p 310.

<sup>62</sup> Exodus 6.2-3 'I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *El Shaddai*'

<sup>63</sup> Genesis 21:33

earth'<sup>64</sup> The Canaanites had an ancient story that had some resonances with Abram's story. Dan'el, like Abram, lacks an heir. As for Abram, so for Dan'el, El intervenes and enables his wife to conceive in her old age<sup>65</sup>. Baal, the Lord, the son of El pleads Dan'el's case

*"Dan'el, the Healer's man, is unhappy;  
The Hero, the man of the god of Harman, sighs;  
He has no son, but his brothers do;  
Not an heir, like his cousins.*

*Yet he has made an offering for the gods to eat,  
An offering for the holy ones to drink.  
So my father, El the bull, won't you bless him?  
Creator of all, won't you show him your favour?*

After listing a number of persuasive reasons why Dan'el needs a son, Baal concludes by saying that a son would be useful: -

*To hold his hand when he is drunk,  
Support him when he is full of wine;  
To eat his offering in the temple of Baal,  
His portion in the temple of El;  
To patch his roof when it leaks,  
And wash his clothes when they are dirty"*

So El is moved to help:

*"Let the passion of Dan'el, the Healer's man, revive,  
the desire of the Hero, the man of the god of Harman.  
Let him go up to his bed ...*

*When he kisses his wife she'll become pregnant;  
When he embraces her she'll conceive;  
...  
And there shall be a son in his house,  
An heir inside his palace"<sup>66</sup>*

Centuries later, Ezekiel will quote Dan'el as being one of three just men – the others being Noah and Job – whose presence in a faithless city would not cause that city to be spared. Each man was responsible for his own sin; no-one could expect to be saved because they lived in the same city as a righteous man.<sup>67</sup>

The son born to Dan'el was thus born naturally but as a result of divine intervention. The idea that such persons became extraordinary people will be an important element of many biblical stories of which Isaac and Samuel and but two examples. The hero that was born to Dan'el was known as 'Aquat'. The main part of the poem deals with Aquat's struggles with Anat and its consequences, a parallel to Gilgamesh's struggle with Ishtar. Aquat is killed, and, as a result the crops fail. His sister seeks to avenge his death, and does this by dressing in her finest clothes, making herself up with the finest cosmetics and penetrating the camp of the murderer whom she seduces into getting drunk. The story has considerable similarities with the much later Book of Judith. Sadly, the text dealing with the final part of Aquat's story is missing. It probably involved the success of the sister's mission and the

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<sup>64</sup> Genesis 14:18-20

<sup>65</sup> Oxford History of the Biblical World (Coogan, Michael D. (ed), 1998) p 70

<sup>66</sup> Stories from Ancient Canaan (Coogan, 1978) p 32-33, and ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 150. The text was dictated by the chief priest Attanu-Purlianni, to the scribe Ilimilku, at the direction and under the sponsorship of Niqmaddu, king of Ugarit who, it must be presumed, was seeking to preserve in his library the ancient tales of Canaan. The text used here follows Coogan's translation, retaining Coogan's spelling of the name of the Healer's man rather than the biblical 'Daniel'. The alternative word for hell 'Dust' has been used instead of Coogan's choice of 'Slime'. Ezekiel, half a millennium later, will refer to Dan'el – and it is probable that it is to these old Canaanite stories that he is referring.

<sup>67</sup> Ezekiel 14:14

return of fertility to the crops. The great Baal epic also involved the rescue of the hero by his sister, with the result that fertility returned to the crops.

Not only the name, but also some of the images associated with the most powerful gods in the Canaanite pantheon were adopted into the Israelite religion and reappear in some of the psalms.

### **In and out of Egypt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE**

When times were hard, it was always possible to go down to Egypt for awhile, especially when Egypt was weak and fragmented. And many Asiatics did go down; for however tough the general situation, the regularly flooding Nile gave a chance that things could be that little bit better on its banks. Semitic people were present in Egypt for much of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BCE. The 'Instructions to Merikare', at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium talks of Asiatic infiltration. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (19<sup>th</sup> century) there is an 'Officer for the Asiatics'. A 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty list of 79 household slaves includes 48 foreign names, mainly semitic<sup>68</sup>. Three quarters of these slaves were women<sup>69</sup>. Asiatics were widely



used as slaves and not just by the upper classes. The word 'amw', asiatic, was often used to mean 'slave'. Slaves were used in the turquoise mines in Sinai. The photograph was taken near the entrance to such a mine. It shows a wall carving of a cowering Semitic being beaten – a warning of what might happen to them should they rebel against their Egyptian overseers. Nevertheless rebellions did happen is evidenced by a 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (13<sup>th</sup> century) papyrus describing a

failed attempt to capture two runaway slaves.

Thutmose III, 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, used a group of Syrians as cloth makers, keeping them together for that purpose. Other groups were retained together as smiths, shipwrights or military units. Another 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty report is from a compassionate frontier official stating that he had admitted a group of Shasu 'lest they perish'. Some Asiatics rose to high positions as chief draughtsmen, scribes, butlers, even superintendents of the king's construction. There was a semitic chief physician, and a royal herald. One, Aper-El, was vizier to Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Another, Bay, a high official of Syrian extraction in the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, effectively ruled Egypt during a period of dynastic struggle which ended with the rule of Queen Tawosret. Midianites, Syrians, Amorites and others are pictured as traders; indeed to 'speak Syrian' meant to bargain. In these images some of the people are shown as having a distinctive garb. They tended to wear 'coats of many colours'.

During the period of the Egyptian Empire (14<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the sons of the town bosses of Asiatic/Semitic towns were retained in the Egyptian court as guarantors of the loyalty of their parents. Whilst resident in Egypt they were given a sound Egyptian education, so that, when the time came for them to take up their inheritances, they would be well adjusted to the Egyptian way.

But Semites did not just come as slaves, artisans, merchants, hostages and refugees, they also came as conquerors. Manetho, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Egyptian historian writes: -

"In the reign of Tutimaos a blast of god smote us, from what cause I do not know. Unexpectedly, from the regions of the East, invaders of an obscure race marched in confidence of victory against our land. By main force they seized it easily, without striking a blow; and, having overpowered the rulers, they then burned our cities ruthlessly, raised to the

<sup>68</sup> Oxford History (Coogan, Michael D. (ed), 1998) p98

<sup>69</sup> A Test of Time (Rohl, 1996) p 277

ground the temples of the gods, and treated all the natives with cruel hostility, massacring some and leading into slavery the wives and children of others....

[the conqueror] found a city very favourably situated on the Babustite branch of the Nile and called Avaris after an ancient religious tradition. He rebuilt this place..."

Archaeological evidence shows these invaders to have been Canaanites. The main centre of immigrant semitic settlement from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium onwards was the delta area around Avaris. It was therefore a natural base for a semitic dynasty. These were the Hyksos, the mis-named 'shepherd kings'. They ruled Egypt as far south as Hermopolis from around 1700 to 1540 BCE.<sup>70</sup>, when they were thrown out by the energetic Pharaoh Ahmose I whose dynasty established an empire that stretched as far north as present-day Lebanon – an empire that would last till the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Climatic variations had significant impacts on the economies and histories of the peoples of the Nile. Both excessive floods and droughts could cause problems; excessive floods because there would be insufficient time after the flood to prepare next year's crop and excessive drought because there would be insufficient water to irrigate all the fields. The 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Pharaoh Amenemhat III (early 18<sup>th</sup> century) had particular problems with excessive flooding. Records were kept on exceptional floods by marking the rock face in the South at Semna with the heights in exceptional years. Exceptional floods - more than 16m above normal - occurred in 32 out of 60 years starting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign. They came in clusters of 6 or 7 bad years followed by some normal years. Cycles of lean and fat harvests would probably have occurred as a result. This Pharaoh, also known as King Moeris, improved the Nile flood catchment system and constructed the massive 'Labyrinth' beside his pyramid at Hawara<sup>71</sup>. The 'Labyrinth' would have been a suitable facility for a regional store-house for grain. By the end of his son's reign, the power of the Nomarchs (regional barons) had been broken and power centralised, possibly as a result of the central economic control established to deal with the cycles of lean and fat years.

The seven lean years that troubled the dreams of the Pharaoh in the biblical Joseph story<sup>72</sup> thus have a basis in Egyptian history. They wrote about it, as the following example indicates. It comes from an inscription dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, but the text seems to have been copied from a much earlier composition, possibly 28<sup>th</sup> Century BCE.

*'... I was in distress on the great throne, and those who are in the palace were in hearty affliction from a very great evil, since the Nile had not come for a space of seven years. Grain was scant, fruits were dried up, and everything that was eaten was short. Every man robbed his companion. They moved without going ahead. The infants were wailing; the youths were waiting; the hearts of the old men were in sorrow, their legs bent, crouching on the ground, their arms folded. ...*

*... As I slept in life and satisfaction, I discovered the god standing over against me.*

*... His words were:*

*"...The Nile will pour forth for thee, without a year of cessation or laxness for any land. Plants will grow, bowing down under the fruit. ... The starvation year will have gone, and peoples borrowing from the granaries will have departed. Egypt will come into the fields, the banks will sparkle, and contentment will be in their hearts..."<sup>73</sup>*

Another Joseph theme is that of sexual harassment.<sup>74</sup> An Egyptian story that dealt with this theme is known as the Tale of Two Brothers. The available version is dated to about 1225 BCE; but it probably has a mythological origin as the names of the two brothers are the names of Egyptian gods. It was a popular story, much used for teaching the skill of writing. In this story the younger brother (Bata, in the Joseph role) served the elder (Anubis, in the Potiphar role):

*"... his younger brother was tending his cattle, and he left off to go to his house every evening, loaded with all kinds of plants of the field, with milk, with wood and with every good thing of the fields, and he laid them in front of his elder brother, who was sitting with his wife.*

*...*

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<sup>70</sup> Though there are others who would argue for a later period. David Rohl's hypothesis is that they ruled from around 1450 to 1225 BCE

<sup>71</sup> A Test of Time (Rohl, 1996) p 343

<sup>72</sup> Genesis 41:1-36

<sup>73</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 31

<sup>74</sup> Genesis 39:1-23

*Now, many days after this, they were in the fields and ran short of seed. Then he sent his younger brother, saying: "Go and fetch us seed from the village...."*

He met the elder brother's wife, doing her hair, and picked up five sacks of seed. But she stopped him and said:

*"There is great strength in you! I see your energy every day!" And she wanted to know him as one knows a man. And she stood up and took hold of him: "Come, let us spend an hour sleeping together! This will be good for you; I shall make fine clothes for you!" Then the lad became like a leopard with great rage at the suggestion she had made, and she was very, very frightened."*

And he departed for the fields, but she 'took fat and grease, and she became like one who had been criminally beaten.' When the elder brother returns, the wife alleges that she was forced to sleep with the younger who then beat her to enforce her silence.

"Now, if you let him live, I'll kill myself! Look, when he comes, don't let him speak, for, if I accuse him of this wicked suggestion, he will be ready to do it tomorrow again."

The elder brother sets out to kill the younger, who escapes behind a crocodile infested waterway. They talk and the younger brother convinces the elder of the truth "but, look, it is twisted into something else for you". Nevertheless, the younger brother exiles himself to the Valley of the Cedar and is eventually accepted by the Pharaoh as crown prince. After many complications, the elder brother follows him, and there is judged with his wife by the younger.

"And his elder brother was brought to him and he made him crown prince in his entire land. And he spent thirty years as King of Egypt. And he departed from life, and his elder brother stood in his place on the day of his death."<sup>75</sup>

Thus all the ingredients of the Joseph story are in existence. Slave-traders going into Egypt, stories of sexual harassment, lean and fat years, and Semitic immigrants reaching positions of great power. The story of Joseph may have some basis in reality, perhaps as a compound story in which several real events are joined into one account, or perhaps as the real history of a single individual. The existence of the early palace recently excavated in the Semitic quarter of Avaris illustrates the potential rewards achievable by a successful Semitic administrator.<sup>76</sup> However the Joseph story arose, it would be much treasured as an oral tradition by the immigrant Semitic community.<sup>77</sup> The Koran relates the Joseph story in a manner that generally similar to the biblical story – though Joseph is put in charge of the granaries, rather than being appointed Vizier.

There are also records of disasters not dissimilar to the 'plagues' associated with Moses' attempts to persuade Pharaoh to let his people go. The Admonitions of Ipu-Wer took the form of a scarcely disguised rebuke to a ruler for permitting the state of the nation to fall into decline. The admonitions were used as a writing exercise for scribes in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties, the time of the oldest extant manuscript, but its origin is thought to have been earlier since the language is Middle Egyptian. The author writes that: -

*...the river is blood. If one drinks of it, one rejects it as human and thirsts for water...  
...grain has perished on every side. The storehouse is bare...  
...cattle are left to stray; there is none to gather them in...  
...the children of nobles are dashed against the wall,  
the once-prayed-for child is laid out upon the ground...*

There are hints that the disaster had a volcanic origin; perhaps reflecting the after-effect of the catastrophic eruption of Thera on Santorini around 1625 in which 36 cubic kms of debris was thrown into the atmosphere – darkening the world for a season and strewing ash over the country. Thus: -

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<sup>75</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) pp 23-25

<sup>76</sup> A Test of Time (Rohl, 1996) p 358

<sup>77</sup> The Koran also contains the Joseph story in a manner very similar to the biblical story – though Joseph is put in charge of the granaries, rather than being appointed Vizier.

*...dirt is throughout the land...  
...the doors, columns and floor boards are burnt up...  
...the desert is spread throughout the land...<sup>78</sup>*

In another text, which takes the form of a description of a prophecy made by the priest Nefer-Rohu to a Pharaoh of the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the priest called to mind what was to happen in the East

*...when the Asiatics would move about with their strong arms, would disturb the hearts of those who are at the harvest, and would take away the spans of cattle ploughing.*

*This land is so damaged that there is no one who is concerned with it, no one that speaks, no eye that weeps. How is this Land?*

*The sun disc is covered over. It will not shine so that people may see. No-one can live when clouds cover over the sun... Foes have arisen in the East, and Asiatics have come down into Egypt.... No protector will listen...Men will enter into the fortresses... This land is passed-by-and-sick...Men will make arrows of metal, beg for the bread of blood and laugh with the laughter of sickness...*

*Ra separates himself from mankind. If he shines forth it is but an hour. No-one knows when midday falls."<sup>79</sup>*

This text was used as a writing exercise in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the dynasty that drove out the Asiatic Hyksos. It describes a time in the distant past when Asiatics were prophesied to over-run the land and when order would be restored by a Nubian king called Ameni (Ahmen-emhet I, the founder of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty ca 1940 BCE). One can understand why the tale could be popular since the actions of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty Pharaoh paralleled the liberating campaign of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty Ahmose.

Egypt also offers a popular giant-killing myth in the 'David and Goliath' mould<sup>80</sup>. This story was set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but there are many manuscript copies from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE testifying to its popularity. It is a story about love of country. Most Egyptians wanted to end their days in their homeland. Si-Nuhe was an official whose service kept him abroad for much of his life. His Pharaoh calls him home, but his return is not straightforward and he does great service for several kingdoms until he was challenged by a mighty man of Retenu. Retenu was an Egyptian term for Canaan:

*"He was a hero without his peer, and had repelled all. He said that he would fight me; he intended to despoil me, and he planned to plunder my cattle...*

*During the night I strung my bow and shot my arrows, I gave free play to my dagger, and polished my weapons. When day broke, the Retenu came. ...He came to me as I was waiting, for I had placed myself near him. Every heart burned for me; women and men groaned. Every heart was sick for me. They said: "Is there another strong man who could fight against him?" Then he took his shield, his battle-axe, and his armful of javelins. Now after I had let his weapons issue forth, I made his arrows pass by me uselessly, one close to another. He charged me, and I shot him, my arrow sticking in his neck.*

*He cried and fell on his nose. I felled him with his own battle-axe and raised my cry of victory over his back, while every Asiatic roared."<sup>81</sup>*

### **A possible Arabian Influence**

Earlier in this chapter we noted that there is substantial evidence that the Abram stories had a Hurrian origin and reflected a Hurrian culture. This is based on the fact that the description of the Patriarch's behaviour is consistent with what is now known about Hurrian customs and legal practices.

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<sup>78</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) pp 441-443. 'The Admonitions of Ipu-Wer' Translated by John A. Wilson.; the first group of quotations come from sections 2:10, 6:3, 9:2, 4:10 and the second group from 2:5, 2:10,3:1.

<sup>79</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) pp 444-445.

<sup>80</sup> I Samuel 17:38:50

<sup>81</sup> ANET (Pritchard, 1955) p 20

But the origin of the Abram stories may not come from Mesopotamia at all. Professor Kemal Salibi<sup>82</sup> was writing a history of Arabia when he was struck by clusters of biblical place names in South-western Arabia – that area of land bordering the Red Sea north of Yemen. ‘Ur’ he suggests refers to a place with the modern Arabic of *wry* which can be found in the neighbourhood of *hryn*, which could be articulated as Haran, and not far from *shkm*, biblical Shechem, which is perhaps present day *kshm* - switching the order of a couple of letters being a fairly common linguistic development. These places are in Wadi Adam which drains the mountainous area around Taif towards the coast at Lith (see map below).



Place names often ‘stick’ over very long periods of time, but the way they are pronounced and spelt can change. ‘Worcester’ was ‘Vigornia Castra’ in roman times. If Latin and English had been written using only the consonants, then the city would have seen the spelling of its name change from the Roman *vgrncstr* to the modern *wrcstr*. Certain letter changes are common whilst others almost never happen. The change from the biblical *shkm*, perhaps pronounced *Shechem*, to modern Arabic *ksm*, pronounced *kashmah*, is not as unlikely as it may at first seem.

From Shechem, the bible has Abram move towards Bethel, perhaps present day *btl*, camping in a place where biblical Ai (present day arabic *h-’y*) was to his East and Bethel to his west. Those scholars who choose to site Bethel in Palestine, and these are the overwhelming majority, choose to locate it at today’s *baytin*, but there is little evidence for the evolution from *bethel* to *baytin*. The nearby town of *et-tell* is supposed to be the ancient *Ai* largely because *h-’y* means ‘the ruin’ and there is a ruin nearby. Salibi argued that his proposed locations fit the etymology better.

In many biblical texts it is stated that Abram was an Aramean. The land of Aram is generally taken to be present day inland Syria. This creates some chronological problems since the Syrian Arameans did not emerge into the pages of history till around the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and yet the Legend of Abram describes a period several hundred years earlier. There is however an Aram, Hebrew *rm*, in western Arabia. This is the area around Wadi Adam/Wadi Waram - also near Taif in the southern Hijaz. Towns in the bible with ‘aram’ in their name can be traced to this region. Thus *dpm rm* (usually translated as Padan-aram<sup>83</sup>) and *rm nhrym* are possibly present day *dfn*, *Dafinah*, and *nhryn*, Naharin, both in the *rm* area. The Genesis stories indicate that Padam and Naharim are close to one another if not the same place.<sup>84</sup> These chapters both deal with the home-town of Rebecca, Isaacs wife<sup>85</sup>. The biblical *dmsq* (usually translated as Damascus) is also associated with Aram giving credence to the Syrian location; but *dmsq* could also be the modern *d-msk* (Dha Misk) in the southern Hijaz.

The strength of Salibi’s argument is not that he has identified a single biblical place name in western Arabia, but that he has identified virtually all of them in the area now called Asir and its surroundings. Furthermore, their geographical relationships fit with the biblical statements made about them. This has not been done for any other area in the Near East. In attempts to site the Abram story in

<sup>82</sup> Kemal Salibi was professor of history at the American University in Beirut when he wrote “The Bible came from Arabia” published by Jonathan Cape in 1985

<sup>83</sup> Genesis 28:2

<sup>84</sup> See Genesis 24 and 28.

<sup>85</sup> These two chapters contain different sources for this story; Genesis 24 comes from the J source, see chapter 8 below, and Genesis 28 is the P source, see chapter 9 below.

Palestine, many places cannot be located at all and the proposed locations of others have the wrong geographical relationships to each other.<sup>86</sup>

If Salibi's arguments are accepted, then a number of interesting consequences emerge. Abram and his wife Sarah travelled to a place called *msrym* which is usually translated as 'Egypt', though occasionally as Mizraim<sup>87</sup>. However, it could also be Misramah (*msrm*) a town in present day Asir. There Abram and Sarai got involved with *pr'h*, normally translated as Pharaoh. Scholars have long been disappointed that the Pharaoh is not named; but Salibri suggests that this may be because *pr'h* is a place-name – a name that is preserved in 28 places in western Arabia; places such as *Farah*, transliterated *pr'h* and Al Firah in the *msrm* (Misramah) region. The *Al* prefix, and the proliferation of related place names, suggests that *pr'h* was the name of a local god, and it was in the 'house' of this god, perhaps the temple at Misramah, that Sarai was made to stay. Eventually Abram settled in woodland around Mamre (*mmr'* perhaps today's Namirah – *nmr'*) near to Hebron (*hbrwn*, perhaps today's Khirban, *hrdn*). The area around Namirah in the hinterland of Qunfudhah is wooded and nearby is the village of Maqfalah, perhaps biblical Machpelah, where Abram purchased a burial site for his family.

Ur may well be the present day '*wr*', and this is in the region of *mqsd*. Transpose the *m* to the end of the word and recognise that the modern Arabic *q* would have been a *k* in Hebrew and the word that emerges is *ksdm* – precisely the word found associated with '*wr* in the Hebrew bible which is usually translated as "of the Chaldees". Thus the Arabian '*wr* lies on the Wadi Adam, the river that drains the valley running down from Taif to Lith in northern Asir

Salibi suggested that at some time emigrants from Asir moved to the Levant and gave the names of their old towns to their new settlements; just as emigrants from Worcester to America gave the name Worcester to their settlement in Massachusetts. Names that can be transliterated as Tyre, Sidon, Lebanon, Canaan, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Carmel, and others occur in both Arabia and Palestine. Support for the hypothesis that Jerusalem was not originally a Hebrew town comes from the way the name is spelt. The name means something like "the teaching of peace" and the peace part is usually written *shalaim*, which is not a correct Hebrew spelling. In five instances this is corrected to be an acceptable *shalayim* thereby complying with the rule that all Hebrew syllables should begin with a consonant, but in all the other 638 cases it is spelt in a way that indicates it is a word borrowed from another language<sup>88</sup>.

There is evidence that settlers from SW Arabia did settle in Jerusalem since graffiti with writing in the Southern Arabian script have been found there, though these probably originate from the Assyrian period.<sup>89</sup> Further evidence for a migration from Arabia to the Levant comes from Herodotus. Writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, he said:

"This nation, according to their own account, dwelt anciently upon the Red Sea, but crossing thence they fixed themselves on the sea coast of Syria which they still inhabit."<sup>90</sup>

Abram becomes Abraham in Genesis 17 and as such he meets with Abimelech of the Philistines in Genesis 21. This appears to conventional scholarship as an anachronism since the Philistines are generally taken to be a 'sea people' who settled the area of the southern coastal Levant around 1200 BCE. But these early 'Philistines' may simply be people who lived in the Arabian town of *plst* (plural *plstym*) which is in the area of the tribe of *mlk*, whose leader could have had the title Abimelech – 'father of the melech'.

Additional support for the hypothesis that some of the early biblical stories have their origin in SW Arabia comes from the facts that:

- Moses father in law comes from Midian, and this is generally agreed to be in western Arabia, albeit north of Asir.

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<sup>86</sup> For example, the conventional Palestinian locations of Gerar, Sidon, Gaza, Kadesh and Shur do not fit the descriptions in Genesis 20 and 10. Gerar cannot both be between Sidon and Gaza (Gen 10:19) and between Kadesh and Shur (Gen 20:1). But this is the case if the latter four towns are located according to their modern equivalents in western Arabia. See Salibri chapter 4.

<sup>87</sup> Genesis 10 and its copy in Chronicles 1

<sup>88</sup> P.H.Kelly (1992): Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar: p. 19. The transliteration used here is basic and understandable, albeit not scholarly.

<sup>89</sup> The Israelites (Isserlin, 1998) p.186

<sup>90</sup> Herodotus 7:89 quoted by Salibi (1985); p 11

- The Koran, which contains many parallel stories concerning Abram, is held to have been dictated to the Prophet Mohamed in western Arabia just to the north of Asir. In Surah 14 Abraham prays that this place [Mecca] should be a secure land.
- There was a Jewish community in western Arabia right up to very recent times.

There is no written material that enables the origin of the Abram legends to be ascertained with certainty. It may be that they are a conflation of more than one tradition.

### **Summary**

The stories of the ancient near east would have been exchanged by migrant groups, by traders, by soldiers and by slaves sold away from home. Parents throughout the region would have been able to tell their children of how man was created from the soil and the blood of a god, of how capricious these old gods were, how easily annoyed by the noise of mankind, but how they would gather around the sweet smell of a burnt offering like flies around a honey pot. They would tell stories of a time long past, before the great flood, when men lived to incredible ages, when men did not need to sweat all day and the lion lay down with the lamb, and there was no pain. They would tell of how this paradise was lost through eating special plants. They would tell the story of the great flood. They would tell of the great cities they had known where men built huge towers that seemed to reach to the heavens and of the confusion of many strange and difficult languages that would be heard in the streets. They would tell of how a great leader started life floating down river in a basket.

In Canaan they could have recalled stories of a time in Egypt when one of their own had ruled that land, of the alternation of seven years of plenty with seven years of famine, of a time when darkness fell over the land, when the Nile ran with blood, when the crops all failed, when the cattle were left to wander in the field and the longed-for children died. They might have heard a story of jealousy and sexual betrayal in which an initial injustice was eventually righted when the betrayed hero came in the end to rule Egypt. And they could have heard a story of an ordinary man who killed a giant in single combat and removed his head with the giant's own weapon.

From their forbears in Canaan, they learnt of stories in which the gods made women fertile again long past child-bearing age. From them, too, they could have acquired the rituals of sacrifice, the distinction between the burnt and shared offerings and the design of temples. They also acquired the 'high places' and the Asherah poles that were to trouble their prophets down the ages.