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THE STUDY OF GENESIS I – XI

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The first eleven chapters of Genesis, down to the first part of verse 27 in chapter xi, form the section which can be conveniently distinguished from what follows. In chapter xi verse 26 Abram is introduced, and here begins the story of the patriarchs.

The excavation, between the wars, of such sites as Mari (1933-39), Alalakh (1936-39), and Nuzi (1925-31), has thrown considerable light on the time of Abraham and the patriarchs, and the post-war excavations are constantly adding to the picture. Cuneiform tablets from Mari and Alalakh, dating from the eighteenth century B.C., give a picture of the situation in the area stretching from Mesopotamia to the Syrian coast which agrees well with the patriarchal narratives, and tablets of the fifteenth century from Nuzi illuminate many of the local customs of the period. The time of Abraham is therefore now seen to fall within the first half of the second millennium B.C., though opinions vary as to any more precise dating. (This material is well surveyed in R. de Vaux, *Revue Biblique*, liii (1946) 321-48, lv (1948) 321-47, lvi (1949) 5-36; and H. H. Rowley, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xxxii (1949) 44-79. De Vaux would place Abraham provisionally in the nineteenth century, but Rowley favours the sixteenth.)

For the first eleven chapters a different picture prevails. The people and events seem more remote, and archaeology has in the nature of the case yielded less which can have a definite bearing.

The main features of these early chapters have been the subject of much speculation. The Garden of Eden is placed in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, and Adam, if he is not a mythical character, is associated with the beginnings of civilization in Mesopotamia. The flood of Noah is taken as the folk memory of a serious inundation in Mesopotamia. The Tower of Babel is equated with *E-TEMEN-AN-KI*, the ziqqurat, or temple tower of Babylon. These are some of the most commonly held views, but many others have been put forward from time to time, and the majority centre on the area of Mesopotamia.

Great progress has been made in the field of prehistoric and early-historic archaeology in the last fifty years, and it is now a matter of common acceptance among prehistorians that the flint tools, found in large numbers from Pleistocene deposits, are the work of 'man'. If the great antiquity of 'man' implicit in this view is accepted, it is clearly in conflict with one which would place the first man of the Bible account in Mesopotamia at the beginning of civilization.

Perhaps in recognition of this consideration, many scholars have sought to interpret these early chapters of Genesis in terms of myth, or parable, seeing in them not circumstantial accounts, but poetic media for the transmission of divine truth.

There are thus many questions which must be resolved in the study of these early chapters. First of all the nature of the narratives must be determined; are they to be taken as poetic or historical? It is clear that no conclusion based solely on the apparent degree of likelihood of their historical nature will have any validity here, so they must be examined in the light of Scripture itself, the general literary usage of the Old Testament, and the view taken of them in the New Testament. A very important element here is a clear understanding of the Hebrew text, so that the issue will not be obscured by reading into the accounts elements which do not exist.

Whether historically or poetically, Genesis i-xi covers the period from the creation of man to the time of Abraham in the second millennium B.C. The period of archaeology relevant to this will therefore be that from the earliest appearance of man down to the second millennium B.C. Five main branches of study come into play here, geology, palaeobotany, palaeontology, archaeology, and epigraphy. Geology, palaeobotany and palaeontology provide a relative

time scale for the Pleistocene ice age, and the ' post-glacial ' period, the plant and animal remains supplying a key to climatic change. In the framework established by these disciplines, are placed the discoveries of physical anthropology, that branch of palaeontology which deals with fossil remains of ' man ', archaeology, which deals with the surviving works of man's hand, and epigraphy, that branch of archaeology which in its widest sense deals with written records, and their contents. A primary question which must be decided in connection with the prehistoric period is whether or not the ' man ' of prehistorians is to be identified with ' man ' in the Biblical sense.

The material which probably has the greatest direct relevance to these chapters is the epigraphic, and as written records can preserve matters much earlier than their actual writing down, the inscriptions need not be limited in this context to those dating from the early period. In fact the well-known 'creation' and 'flood' tablets are mainly preserved to us in late recensions. The principal material of this nature is found in the Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform records of Mesopotamia, and to a lesser extent in the hieroglyphic and hieratic literature of Egypt. The relevant Akkadian inscriptions have been very adequately dealt with recently by the late Dr. Alexander Heidel of Chicago (*The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1949); *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1951).), but a large amount of Sumerian literature has recently been published, particularly by Professor S. N. Kramer of Philadelphia, and as it contains elements, such as a flood story, which clearly lie behind some of the Akkadian versions, it is necessary to examine it in the present connection.

Thus the examination of Genesis i-xi involves a careful study of the Hebrew text, a decision as to its intention, historical or poetic, a survey of the results of archaeology from the appearance of man to the second millennium B.C.; an examination of the Sumerian and Akkadian legends relevant to Genesis; and finally a synthesis of this material, consistent with a high view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

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