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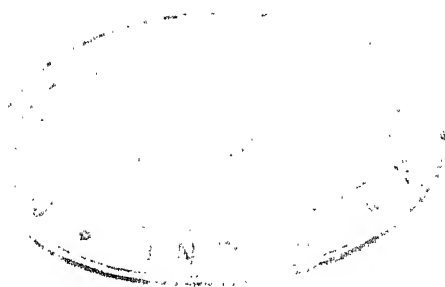
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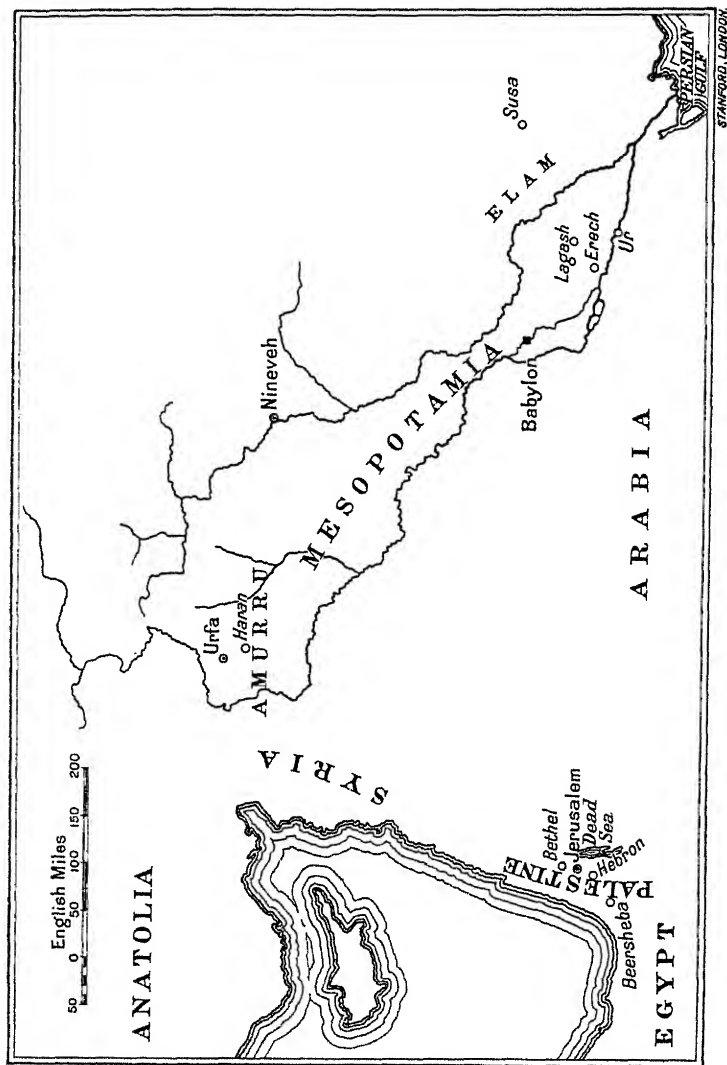
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUMERIAN ART  
UR OF THE CHALDEES



A\*



# ABRAHAM

RECENT DISCOVERIES  
AND  
HEBREW ORIGINS

by

SIR LEONARD WOOLLEY  
D.LITT.

33909



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To  
RUDYARD KIPLING

*Dear Kipling,*

*We discussed this book together while it was in the making. Now it is done, and I dedicate it in gratitude and affection to you to whom archaeologists and historians owe so much.*

*Yours ever,  
Leonard Woolley.*

*December, 1935.*

*Presented to the  
British Museum  
Library  
by Leonard Woolley*



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## *Introduction*

### ABRAHAM AND UR

**T**his book is an attempt to deal with an old problem by means of new material derived from Mesopotamian archaeology, and I ought to make clear at the outset the character of that material and the manner in which it may be brought to bear on the problem.

The results of excavation serve to illustrate and expand the literary records of the past far more often than they meet them on definite statements of fact, and that is pre-eminently the case here. The scene of the Old Testament story of Abraham is Palestine, the excavations of which I was in charge were at Ur; the two are far apart, and at Ur no concrete memorial of Abraham was brought to light. That was only to be expected. We have, it is true, found thousands of inscribed tablets, and the greater number of them date from about the time of Abraham, but we have excavated the merest fraction of the city's area and

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within that area the tablets which survive are not the hundreth part of what were written there during the quarter of a century or so that Abraham may have passed at Ur.<sup>1</sup> The chances that there should have been tablets bearing the name of Abraham, that any one of them should have been preserved and finally that this one should have happened to be within the limits of our narrow field were indeed infinitesimal.

But if these Mesopotamian excavations have produced no record whatsoever of Abraham, have they, it might be asked, any bearing on his history? Is there any justification for speaking of Ur in a book which professes to deal with Abraham?

The only thing we have to go upon is the categorical statement several times repeated in the Old Testament, that Abraham came from Ur. If we can be sure first, that the statement is trustworthy, and secondly, that by Ur is meant the city excavated by us in southern Mesopotamia, then there is a definite

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<sup>1</sup> This is not due to the effects of time only. Tablets of no permanent value were broken and the clay of them kneaded for re-use just as old papers are pulped at the present day. It is the preservation and not the disappearance of tablets that is accidental.

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link between the two, and it remains to be seen whether that connection is worth following up.

Year after year in the course of our work in the field there came to our notice isolated facts or features which seemed to have some bearing on the Old Testament record. But so long as they were isolated it was not easy to assess their value. They were often minor features, sometimes almost intangible, and the evidence for them was scattered through a dozen reports; sometimes their meaning was not recognised at the moment of discovery, and they needed to be digested at leisure; I was urged by various people to collect them, at least in so far as they might concern the Abraham story, and to see how far they did illustrate or expand the Biblical account. The result was more to the point than I had anticipated. But before any far-reaching conclusions can be drawn we must be sure of our ground. We have on the one side certain historical data obtained by archæological methods, and on the other certain information obtained from ancient literary sources, and it is proposed to correlate the two. The two must therefore be tested in the same scientific spirit. The archæological facts are beyond dispute, and it is only our conclu-

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sions deduced from them that need to be checked; the Old Testament records speak of Abraham with assurance, but can they be trusted? Was there ever really such a person as Abraham, and if he existed, can we know anything about him? The question does not mean that the attitude of the historian towards the Old Testament is one of disbelief—on the contrary, it is the most valuable document at his disposal—but that he has to keep an open mind before he can balance its statement against new discoveries. Most of all is it important for him to know on what authority the statements are based. He cannot treat them as inspired utterances which must necessarily be true; they are human, and as such are liable to errors due either to bias or to ignorance. The value of any history depends on two things pre-eminently, the sources of which the writer availed himself and the manner in which he used those sources. Before the books of the Old Testament can be given their due historical weight they have to be critically examined in those two respects.

Biblical criticism, or “Higher Criticism”, as it has been called, is a specialised science lying wholly outside the province of archæology; the archæologist can

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only take over the findings of the critics. Fortunately here there is no need to follow implicitly the opinions of any one scholar, for in spite of differences of view on points of detail the critics are so completely in agreement on the main issues that the layman can accept their broad results with confidence. I would state briefly what they are.

Where the subject is Abraham the only part of the Old Testament involved is the Pentateuch, the five "Books of Moses". The Pentateuch is a composite work which took its present form some time after the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, at what precise date is not known. The then editors or redactors were not original authors. Indeed, their one aim was to avoid originality. Their object was to set in order and combine in one the sacred writings of their race; their method was to quote those writings, so far as possible, *verbatim*, taking from each what was peculiar to it and, where they covered the same ground, dovetailing the different versions together with the minimum of new material. In their present form, therefore, books such as Genesis and Exodus are late; their sources are older.

Thanks to the pious conservatism of the editors or

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“redactors”, as they are often termed, those sources can to a very large extent be unravelled and identified; the different documents can be distinguished by differences of language, of sentiment and, in so far as they refer to historical institutions, of date. Three of them, which supply the bulk of the redactors’ matter, concern us here.

*The Priests’ Code*, commonly referred to as P, is a legalistic and ritualistic work composed either in the later part of the Jewish exile in Babylonia during the sixth century B.C. or soon after the return of the Jews from Babylon (*circa* 535 B.C.).

*The Jahvistic Version*, commonly referred to as J, is a simple narrative, dealing with the traditions of the Hebrew race from the point of view not of the priest, but of the lay follower of Jehovah; it has therefore been called a “prophetical” narrative, this being the point of view of the Old Testament prophets. It is distinguished by the fact that it refers to God always as *Jahweh*, “Jehovah”, translated “the Lord” in the English Bible.

*The Elohist version*, commonly referred to as E, is very like J, though rather more objective and less orthodox; it is distinguished by the consistent use for

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“God” of the (plural) form *Elohim*, translated “God” in the English Bible.

As regards date, it is agreed that J and E belong to the early period of the monarchy (the Kingdom of Israel was established *circa* 937 B.C.), and it is often held that the two versions had already been combined into one as early as 750 B.C.; certainly as separate works they are not later than the first part of the eighth century. They were not committed to writing until after the foundation of the Davidic kingdom (*circa* 1000 B.C.) and they embody what had before that been an oral tradition, although they do quote from a few sources, for the most part collections of national songs, such as the Book of Jasher<sup>1</sup>, which had in all likelihood already been written down.<sup>2</sup>

Such are the generally accepted conclusions of Biblical criticism. I have employed them here without question, and they are an indispensable instrument for establishing the authority of the Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Sam. i, 18.

<sup>2</sup> For the character of the various documents see Professor S. R. Driver's *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*; there is an excellent account also in the first volume of Sir James Frazer's *Folklore in the Old Testament*.

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narrative. To those who are unacquainted with these methods and results my first chapter may seem laboured and uninteresting, but it is none the less necessary, for critics have doubted the existence of Abraham, and only when the historical basis of the Abraham narrative has been proved, or at least shewn to be probable, can we begin to supplement it. The Old Testament describes various incidents of Abraham's later life when he was a wanderer in Palestine, but, though it states that he came originally from Ur, says nothing at all about his experiences there; it therefore starts in the middle and tells us only half the story. If the conditions at Ur had been the same as those of the Palestinian highlands the silence of the Old Testament regarding the former would not have greatly mattered, for Abraham's youth and age would in that case have formed a consistent whole and we could have judged him as a true son of the desert. But if, on the contrary, the conditions were very different, then he becomes a much more complex character, only to be assessed by a knowledge of the influences that bore upon his youth, and what we have learnt about Ur is not beside the point. It was therefore essential to my thesis, having shewn that

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the site of our excavations was indeed the early home of the patriarch, to draw a picture of the place as it was in his day, even though he does not himself figure directly in it. The description is based on the evidence of what has actually been found during twelve years of work in the field, and, with the sole exception of the names given to the streets, there is nothing in it that is not derived from archæological sources, ruins of buildings, objects and inscriptions; the evidence will be found in the annual reports of the Joint Expedition published in the *Antiquaries Journal* and, in fuller detail, in the fourth and fifth volumes of the official series, *Ur Excavations*.

Certainly nothing could be less like the traditional scene of the wanderings of Abraham than this great city of Ur, with its commercial interests and its elaborate social organisation, and it would be difficult to avoid the belief that his later life must have been influenced by a youth passed in such surroundings. But that belief must be put to the test. In the account of Abraham's life as we possess it, can we point to actions or ideas which are only explicable in the light of the new knowledge which we have acquired about Ur? And if such contacts exist, are they enough

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to prove that Sumerian civilisation played an important part in moulding the character of the Hebrew patriarch? Even in the partial narrative of Genesis the required evidence does reveal itself; Ur does throw light upon the Hebrew tradition—incidentally confirming thereby its reliability—and compels us to revise our views. Abraham now emerges a very different person from the Arab sheikh of the Old Testament, and beneath the Bedouin cloak it is possible to see the civilised offspring of a great city; instead of being an unexplained phenomenon, the begetter of a nation but himself without roots in the past, he takes his place in the rational process of evolution, and in estimating his character and his achievement we must make due allowance for his debt to Ur.

## *Chapter I*

### ABRAHAM: THE AUTHORITY OF THE TRADITION

**I**t is difficult to overrate the importance of Abraham. He is the founder and begetter of the Hebrew race which through good and ill report has played an incalculable part in the development of modern society. Three of the great religions of to-day, the Jewish, the Christian and the Moslem, look upon him as one of the chief prophets and witnesses to man's faith, the only one to be called the "Friend of God".<sup>1</sup> To most his name has been familiar from childhood, but he is much more than a name; amongst the shadowy characters of early history he stands out as an individual, a living personality whom we can know and with whom we can sympathise for all that he moves in a strange and distant world. For with the appearance of Abraham the character of the Old Testament

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Chron. xx, 7; James ii, 23.

## THE AUTHORITY OF THE TRADITION

narrative sensibly changes. Beginning with mythology, the legends of the Creation and the Flood, going on with long genealogies which are a crystallisation of what was believed to be the record of early man and of the origins of nations, in which is interposed the story of the Tower of Babel that accounts for the differences of national speech, the book of Genesis suddenly becomes personal and historical. Now individual actors appear and take definite form, and incidents in their careers are related with circumstantial detail and with that natural sequence which should mark real events. We get at once the impression that the writer is dealing with times nearer to his own, concerning which he is, as might be expected, better informed; he writes with authority, and what he wrote has by most people for many centuries been accepted as literally and indisputably true.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the old uncritical acceptance of the Biblical narrative was seriously challenged, and then the results of critical study seemed to be purely destructive. Scholars were able to prove that the five books of the Pentateuch, so far from being due to the inspired authorship of

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Moses himself (a claim never put forward in the Old Testament), were in their present form late compilations, written by scribes after the Jewish exile in Babylonia, that is, very many centuries after the events narrated in them were supposed to have occurred. And it was assumed that for these late writers no early written sources could have been available. Nomad sheikhs such as were the patriarchs, guerilla fighters like Joshua and Caleb, the down-trodden peasantry of Palestine under the Judges, all were too ignorant and too cut off from the centres of civilisation in Egypt and Babylonia to have committed to writing anything of their tribal laws and annals. The scribes who composed the books were religious propagandists who tried to commend their views by attributing them to the remote past of the nation, but they could not really have had any knowledge of the doings of Abraham or the legislation of Moses. At best they depended on oral tradition, and a record passed from mouth to mouth during such long ages could not be taken as authentic; at every stage it was liable to embellishment and alteration, and there was nothing to shew that originally it had even pretended to be a record

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of fact; rather, comparison with the legends of other countries brought to light parallels which tended to shew that all alike sprang from man's imagination. Such were the arguments alleged, and there arose towards the close of the nineteenth century an extreme school of critics which was ready to deny the historical foundation of practically everything related in the earlier books of the Old Testament: Abraham became for them merely the eponymous hero of his race, a mixed creature of mythology, poetry and folk-lore, given human shape and name with the idea of assuring the essential unity of a nation.

To-day the whole position has been changed. While it is still true that Palestine has produced curiously little in the way of early inscriptions, archaeological discoveries made during the last half century have proved that there was no period in Hebrew history for which contemporary written authority of one kind or another could not possibly have existed.

The first light upon this subject was thrown by the famous letters found at Tell el Amarna in Egypt. Early in the fourteenth century B.C. the governors of Syrian and Palestinian towns such as Lachish and Jerusalem, themselves not Egyptians but natives of

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the country, in some cases semi-autonomous rulers, were corresponding with the Egyptian Foreign Office in that cuneiform writing which the long domination of Babylonia had made the diplomatic script of the Near East. At Mishrifeh near Homs, in the temple of the Mesopotamian goddess Nin-Gal, there have been found just such business records as are common in Mesopotamia itself; they date from the twentieth century before Christ and shew that in about the time of Abraham cuneiform writing was regularly employed by the business communities of southern Syria; and one can fairly say that what was true of southern Syria would have been true of Palestine also. At Ras Shamra, on the north Syrian coast, there have recently been unearthed documents of a very surprising kind; these are clay tablets bearing inscriptions in cuneiform, but the signs represent not syllables, as in Babylonian, but letters of the alphabet, and the language is a form of Aramaic closely related to Hebrew: they date from the fourteenth century before Christ. Consequently we see that by the time of the Exodus people living in Syria and speaking a tongue akin to that of the Israelites were so accustomed to the idea of writing that they had modified

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the old-established script of Sumer and Babylon to suit the peculiarities of their own language. At Byblus, on the central Syrian coast, there has been found the coffin of Ahiiram, who was king of the city in the twelfth century B.C.; on it is a long inscription in the Semitic language of the Phoenicians and in well-developed Phoenician characters; this proves that Phoenician writing goes back several centuries earlier than any evidence previously extant had shewn to be probable, and that Semitic was a written language in the period of the Israelite judges. At Byblus there have been found letters also which carry the Phoenician script yet further back in time; and that writing was not confined to the seaboard is proved by Mr. Starkey's discovery at Lachish of inscriptions in archaic Canaanite characters which he would date to the early thirteenth and Professor Langdon to the fifteenth century B.C.<sup>1</sup>; these last appear to be akin to the so-called Serabit inscriptions found in the Sinaitic desert, which are in a script held to be alphabetic and going back to about 2000 B.C. Here we are dealing with a foreign, though kindred, language and

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Times* of October 5, 1935.

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a foreign alphabet; the Hebrews may have borrowed such, but at a fairly early period they had a system of their own. When we find, as at Samaria,<sup>1</sup> clay vessels of the time of the early kings endorsed with notes of their contents or capacity written in Hebrew characters, we can be sure that the script employed for such commonplace domestic purposes must have been generally understood. In view of such discoveries as these, the sparse material from Palestine itself takes on a new importance. The single cuneiform tablet found at Tell Hesy, the two tablets from Tell Mesilim, the five from Megiddo, are valuable as proving not that written documents were rare on Palestinian sites but that they existed. Unbaked clay tablets are perishable things, and if the accidents of survival have preserved but few, that, in view of the nature of the sites, is as much as we have any right to expect: but all analogies from sites where conditions are more favourable shew that when tablets were used at all they were used freely; and it is perfectly fair to argue from the isolated examples quoted

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<sup>1</sup> See Reisner, Fisher and Lyon, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria*. 1929.

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above to a tolerably wide diffusion of cuneiform documents in Palestine.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally and rightly these discoveries were hailed with enthusiasm by Biblical critics of the more conservative school, for they appeared to destroy altogether one of the most cogent arguments of the extremists on the other side. Even if it were conceded that the books of the Pentateuch took their present form after the Babylonian captivity, as late as the sixth or even the fifth century before Christ, yet there was now nothing to prevent the assumption that the writers at that date had at their disposal documents in many cases contemporary with the events which they described; and the further assumption would hold good that the authors of the documents incorporated in the post-Exilic version of the Old Testament had in their turn made use of still older written records.

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<sup>1</sup> The same cannot be assumed of hieroglyphic writing. It is true that Egyptian stelae have been found at Bethshan and Megiddo, but these were trophies set up by conquering Pharaohs at a time when Egyptian armies had swept over Palestine and Egyptian control was assured by the presence of Egyptian garrisons in the key cities; there is no reason to suppose that their inscriptions were intel-

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The theory of contemporary documents is logically sound, but it can be pressed much too far. On the one hand it is perfectly true that the writers of the books of Kings and Chronicles could rely for many of the details of their history on literary sources. Some of these they actually quote by name, "the history of Shemaiah the prophet", "the history of Iddo the seer", "the Book of Jehu the son of Hanani", "the Story of the Book of the Kings"; it is clear that the annals of the kings had been put into writing already, and there were monuments also, such as the inscription of Hezekiah's time concerning the work on the Siloam tunnel,<sup>1</sup> whereby the records could be substantiated. But on the other hand to suppose that the story of Abraham in the form in which we have it in the Old Testament could have been written in his own time or for many centuries after his own time, is to betray a complete ignorance of what men anciently wrote. Before the theory of contemporary written sources is extended to apply to such a narrative as that, we ought to form an idea as to the character of the written material which could have existed

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ligible to the native peoples or that amongst the Hebrews hieroglyphic writing was ever current.

<sup>1</sup> Discovered in 1880 and now in Constantinople.

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at that date and have been utilised by the later historian: the attempt to do so will at least safeguard us from exaggerating the value of the sources and the antiquity of what can properly be called a literary tradition.

Of the very many thousands of inscribed clay tablets recovered from the ruined cities of Mesopotamia the vast majority are private records of business transactions, sales, contracts, receipts, and so forth, or letters; a fair number are religious, or rather, ritual in character, hymns, omens and charms: such purely literary documents as the Flood and Creation legends are extremely rare. Apart from the tablets proper there are a few copies of law codes written on stone or clay, and there are the cones and cylinders and tablets of stone or metal used for the dedication of buildings and bearing the names of kings; there are similar inscriptions on stone door-sockets and on bricks, and there are dedication-texts on statues and stelae and on objects offered to the gods. From this somewhat unpromising material a certain amount of history can be gleaned. Tablets often bear dates, and in the date-formulae each year of the king's reign is named after the principal event of the year; thus "Year

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when the Amurru (Amorites), a horde like a storm, which of old knew not a city, made submission to Ibi-Sin king of Ur", "Year when Abi-sare smote the host of Isin" (ninth year of Abi-sare), or, less interestingly, for Abi-sare's tenth year; "Year when Abi-sare appointed by omens the priest of Shamash". Very occasionally a royal dedication may assume narrative form, describing the king's motives and acts—this is the case with some of the foundation-texts of Gudea, governor of Lagash (*circa* 2400 B.C.); and we have fragments of one real historical poem, the epic of Sargon of Akkad, dealing with his invasion of Anatolia. But nowhere is there any attempt at consecutive history. The "King-List" is the unique effort of the national annalist, and it is no more than a string of names and dates.

Nor is the case very different in Egypt; it is true that there are there plenty of monumental inscriptions on tombs and temples, as well as the innumerable religious texts, but there is virtually nothing in the way of continuous history.<sup>1</sup> The consequence is that

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<sup>1</sup> There may have been more historical sketches such as the Carnarvon Papyri give us, but even those deal only with isolated scenes.

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the modern historian of ancient Egypt, and still more the modern historian of Sumer or Babylon, has to piece together his account from isolated details found in sources few if any of which could themselves be termed historical writings. Only by disregarding all analogies from Mesopotamia and Egypt could we assume that the authors of the J and E documents incorporated in the early books of the Old Testament had at their disposal the works of any predecessors in the same field, works, that is, deliberately compiled as histories of the Hebrew people.

That is not equivalent to saying that they had no written documents to help them; but the analogy of Mesopotamia does shew us how limited that help was likely to be. If we would know to what extent the life-story of a man like Abraham could possibly be based on contemporary records, we must ask ourselves, knowing what kind of thing men did then commit to writing, what could he conceivably have written that would have served as a foundation for any incident in the story as we have it?

He founded no temples, and had therefore no need of the inscribed dedication-cones that record the piety of Sumerian kings. He was not a king, and could

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not therefore call the years of his reign after the exploits that he performed in each. He did not, in his later years at least, make offerings to the gods on which he would inscribe the god's name and his own prayers for a long life. At Ur he may have done so,<sup>1</sup> and at Ur he may have written, or had written for him, a whole mass of such business tablets as the citizens of Ur have left to us, notes of sales, contracts, IOU's, perhaps his marriage-contract with Sarai, tablets none of which have ever been found and which have nothing to do with the Old Testament narrative. But after Ur, what then? When he purchased the Machpelah estate it must, one feels, have been "made sure unto Abraham for a possession"<sup>2</sup> by the exchange of tablets duly signed by Ephron himself and witnessed by the elders of the children of Heth. Probably when Abraham sent his servant to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac he gave to him<sup>3</sup> some written credentials to prove the identity of his master, even if it were only a tablet with the impression of

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<sup>1</sup> The later Jews attributed to Abraham the invention of writing!

<sup>2</sup> Gen. xxiii, 17, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. xxiv.

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his seal. Possibly Abraham may have put down in writing for the benefit of his household so much of the familiar laws of Sumer—familiar to him, but liable to be forgotten by his descendants—as he thought applicable to their nomad life. But only the first of these is even implied in the text that we possess, only in the case of the Machpelah sale could it be argued that the recorded story might have been evoked by the existence of an ancient document such as a title-deed, and even there the picturesque incidents would be due to oral tradition. For the rest of the Abraham biography as we have it, it can be affirmed not only that it is of a class of literature which was never written at anything like his date, but that it has precisely the character of the popular *unwritten* literature of the Near East; the dramatic style, the long speeches and the dialogues, the metrical form in which it is cast, these are all typical of the *contes populaires* which only a much later age writes down. In spite of the fact that writing was known and was common in the twentieth century B.C., we are driven to admit that as regards the purely narrative portion of the Biblical story of Abraham any written sources from which it is drawn must themselves be of relatively late date

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and be ultimately based on an oral tradition already very ancient: only a very few points, and those of minor interest, could possibly depend on documents contemporary with the events.

It would, of course, have been most satisfactory if the one chance in a million had come true and there had been found at Ur some document bearing the name of Abraham, the son of Terah. However trifling in itself, such a tablet would have possessed immense sentimental interest as giving a direct and personal link with the father of the Hebrew nation; it would have afforded definite proof that the site excavated by us was the Ur at which Abraham lived, and it might have given a precise date which would have been welcome indeed. But to establish Abraham's existence the evidence of the tablet is not essential.

The fact is that only too often an exaggerated value is set on such independent documentation. The exaggeration really betrays an unconfessed suspicion that the record which we do possess has small intrinsic credibility; it admits to a doubt of the veracity of the Old Testament, on the part of its defenders, which is uncritical and would not be entertained by

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them in the case of any other ancient history. My meaning is perhaps best explained by quoting a recent case in point. The discovery at Lachish of *ostraka*, letters written on potsherds, which mention the steps taken by Elnathan, the son of Achbor, to arrest the prophet Urijah at the instance of king Jehoiakim, has been hailed as proof that the definite statement put into the mouths of the elders in Jeremiah xxvi is actually founded on fact. Now the chapter in Jeremiah deals with more or less contemporary events; the story about Urijah is told by way of illustration, and the details of it, the name of Elnathan and his parentage, are put in not to make a didactic point but simply because they would identify for the audience a familiar incident. It would be incredible that the entire story should be a fabrication, for anything that did not at once commend itself to the hearers as true would have defeated its own purpose. There was therefore no need of the independent evidence of the *ostraka* to "prove the truth of the Old Testament": rather, the converse is the case, that only the detailed Old Testament narrative gives value to what would otherwise be meaningless and trivial. The historical books of the Old Testament, which are for most of

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the things recorded in them the only authority that we possess, must by any sane school of criticism be accorded due weight as authorities.

In secular history there are numberless facts, accepted as such without question, which rest on no stronger evidence than the unsupported statements of writers who lived long after the events; and the Bible as history should be judged by the same standards. That does not mean that its statements must be accepted uncritically, or that they will always agree with, or override, the statements of secular writers. The Old Testament authors were writing not cold-bloodedly but with a didactic purpose, and their narrative is coloured throughout by prejudices of nationality, of caste, and, above all, of religion. In the vast majority of cases the value of information from outside sources is not that it directly confirms or contradicts a statement, but that it gives a new point of view; the Biblical account may be shewn to be distorted and at the same time may gain in importance, for its distortion may give us the moral outlook of the writer's school and period. Again I would make this clear by means of an illustration. The picture of King Omri that we get from

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Assyrian texts is vastly different from that of 1 Kings xvi;<sup>1</sup> the founder of the *Bit Humri*, whose name continued to be used for the kingdom of Israel many generations after his house had passed away, was a very much greater person than we should imagine from reading the few and contemptuous verses vouchsafed to him by the Biblical historian; but that slurring over of a successful reign does shew how sincerely the historian believed that greatness was only compatible with zeal for the worship of Jehovah.

The author of 1 Kings xvi is dealing with a well-documented period not far removed from his own,

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<sup>1</sup> xvi, 23-28: "In the thirty and first year of Asa king of Judah began Omri to reign over Israel, twelve years: six years reigned he in Tirzah. And he bought the hill Samaria of Shemer for two talents of silver, and built on the hill, and called the name of the city which he built, after the name of Shemer, owner of the hill, Samaria. But Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him. For he walked in all the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger with their vanities. Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and his might that he shewed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? So Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria: and Ahab his son reigned in his stead."

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so that the distortion is deliberate. The case is quite different where in the books of the Pentateuch the writers of the post-Exilic age are dealing with more ancient times for which, as I have tried to shew, contemporary written records, if they existed at all, were necessarily of the most jejune description. Here they were editors, and as such were really less free than when as historians they wrote of comparatively recent events. For stories such as those of the life of Abraham came to them in a form already stereotyped, too consecrated by long usage for them to be able to tamper with it overmuch; they therefore incorporated the old documents in the new version with the minimum of editorial re-casting. Consequently our prime concern here is not to decide how much of the colouring of the narrative may be due to the latest redactors; we are thrown back on the documents of which they made use and we have to ask whether those are really worthy of credence. For relatively early though the documents are, they were certainly not put into written form before the eighth century B.C., and Abraham is supposed to have lived in the twentieth century: twelve hundred years is a long while for a tradition handed down by word of mouth

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to keep itself uncontaminated by exaggeration and distortion; and who can say that it did last so long? Might it not have started simply as an invention?

It might look as if by insisting on the oral basis of the narrative portion of Genesis I was abandoning all the advantage that might have been gained from the discovery of the early date of writing in Syria; we seem to be back in the position in which it was held reasonable to doubt the very existence of the patriarch. I have tried to clear the ground by pointing out the limits of the importance of that discovery. That there were written sources for some parts of the Old Testament record I am convinced, but other parts rest on oral tradition alone, and for the moment I am concerned only with them; and I would emphasise the fact that the oral tradition in itself is a very much more reliable authority than certain critics have allowed.

Of the sources on which the editors of Genesis drew we need take only the two earlier and more or less parallel documents—J, the Jahvistic, and E, the Elohist—*which admittedly go back as written texts to the time of the Hebrew monarchy: it is believed that J represents the form which the old stories handed*

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down from father to son had taken in the southern kingdom of Judah, and that E represents their northern or Israelite form. They seem to have been verbally identical throughout whole long passages, as is natural considering that they are derived ultimately from the same spoken version. On the other hand, there are very marked differences, both in what is told and in the attitude of the teller, as well as in the name used for God; the differences can only be the result of independent modification over a long period, and that means that the common spoken source, in a shape closely allied to that of J and E and identical with them where they are most alike, is removed by a very considerable lapse of time from the two literary documents as they can be seen through the Old Testament compilation. In other words, the comparison of J and E proves that the oral tradition must go back beyond the monarchy, is an heritage from the very early Hebrews and brings us appreciably nearer to the events which it relates.

Now when in non-literary times a nation hands down verbally from one generation to another stories which it claims are historical truths, these may well be coloured and distorted in the process; there will

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be errors of transmission, and a certain amount of alien material may be grafted on to the original; the picturesque and fabulous element is likely to be exaggerated. But generally there was in the story as originally told a fair substratum of literal truth—it did not start as an invention but as a record; and the patently poetical embellishments of later days do not mean that there is no kernel of fact at all. Thus the historical existence of Alexander the Great is not disproved by there being fantastic legends concerning “the two-horned Iskander” current amongst the Arabs; it was only because he played so great a part in history that the legends have attached themselves to him. The tale of Alfred and the cakes, the only tale about the king that has survived in popular English tradition, although it may not be founded on any actual incident faithfully reflects conditions in the life of a real person. And the stories about Abraham which the Hebrews handed down with such pious respect for their phrasing are something more than national folk-lore and nursery tales; they are essentially family records preserved amongst a people who believed that he was the physical founder of their line. Even to-day oral tradition in the Near East

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concerns itself largely with questions of descent: traditions of that sort current in that part of the world in a period when the family counted for yet more than it does now cannot be lightly disregarded, and a general belief on the part of the early Hebrews that their descent could be traced back to a common ancestor, Abraham, is likely to be well founded. The belief was general and it was early; it is intrinsic to the oldest sources that we can distinguish and was not foisted on the people by late scribes for tendentious reasons; it is part of the primitive heritage of the race. If we had no other evidence than the oral tradition enshrined in the J and E documents we could still maintain that on this, the main point of their own family history, the Hebrews as a Near Eastern people deserve our credence: indeed, it would not be too much to say that those who reject the tradition betray a complete misunderstanding of Near Eastern psychology.

The assumption of the historical existence of Abraham is, of course, essential to this book, for if there never was such a person our enquiry is stillborn. I shall try, in Chapter VII, to shew that quite apart from the general credibility of the oral tradition there

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are good grounds for believing that the fact of Abraham's existence was vouched for by written documents almost if not quite contemporary with him, but for the time being the mere assumption will serve our purpose. It has been shewn to be not improbable; before we involve ourselves in a detailed and abstruse argument it will be as well to decide whether the provisional finding does or does not agree with the archæological and other facts. If it does not it can be rejected off-hand. If it agrees, then it will be worth our while to investigate the Hebrew tradition further and to try to discover in it fresh evidence.

But while it is patently impossible to bring historical or archæological facts into relation with a person who never existed, it is possible but fatally unscientific to relate them to someone who did exist, but existed at a very different period. The history of Ur extends over thousands of years; to which phase of that long life are we to compare the lifetime of the Hebrew patriarch? For the purposes of this book the date of Abraham is scarcely less important than the fact of his existence.

And here again we have no proof, but may start

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with an assumption. The figures given in the Old Testament for the ages of the patriarchs and for the details of their lives form the sole basis of early Hebrew chronology; they give for the birth of Abraham a date about 2000 B.C. I shall postpone until Chapter VII the question of the reliability of the Old Testament figures, and for the moment shall assume, as most writers have done, that there is some element of truth behind them and that the round figure of 2000 B.C. may well be approximately correct; at least we can accept it so far as to observe to what extent it would harmonise with external evidence.

The external evidence is indirect, for there are only two points in which the Biblical record of the patriarchal age can even problematically be brought into contact with what we know of secular history.

The fourteenth chapter of Genesis describes how "in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar" five petty kings of southern Palestine revolted against their overlord and were defeated by him and his allies, and how Abraham with his trained men pursued the victors and recovered the booty which they had carried off. It was long believed that "Amraphel king of Shinar" was to be identified with Hammurabi king

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of Babylon, and in that case the Old Testament chronology would have been proved correct, for Hammurabi reigned in the latter part of the twentieth century B.C. Unfortunately that identification, while not impossible, is doubtful; the whole chapter indeed bristles with historical difficulties, and it cannot be taken as any proof of the date of Abraham.

The second point is not nearly so simple on the surface, but is far more conclusive. It concerns not Abraham himself so much as the Hebrew people as a whole. The name "Hebrew" is of early origin; it is applied to Abraham (in Gen. xiv, 13), and so should have been already a tribal name; if, as is usually held, it is derived from the name of Eber, an ancestor of Abraham, it must date back long before his time, for Eber is, in the genealogy, represented as the sixth in line from the patriarch; by the time of Abraham therefore the patronymic might have applied to a fairly numerous clan. Further, we can assert that the clan was related to the Aramæan or Amorite peoples of North Syria, for Laban, Abraham's nephew, is regularly referred to as an Aramæan (Gen. xxv, 20), and even Jacob is once so called (Deut. xxvi, 5). And here various scattered notices in Babylonian history tell

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us something which seems to have a direct bearing on the Old Testament record. Under the Third Dynasty of Ur, in the twenty-third century B.C., personal names of the Subaræan or Amorite type occur for the first time and, so far as the Third Dynasty period is concerned, for the only time, in tablets which relate to a sacred farm or cattle-park at a place called Drehem, south-east of Babylon; at Drehem then Amorites were employed in what would seem to have been the congenial business of stock-raising (cf. Gen. xxx, 25-43). Later on, in the time of Rim-Sin king of Larsa, whose reign falls in the second half of the twentieth century B.C., we hear of a people called the Habiru living in southern Mesopotamia. They are not Sumerians, but Aramæan nomads, undoubtedly of the same race as the stock-breeders of Drehem under the previous dynasty; they had come in from the desert and were enrolled as a subordinate class in the Sumerian army; the fact that they are sometimes referred to by an ideogram which may be translated "cut-throats" or "brigands" seems to shew that they were not regarded with much favour by the Sumerians.

Now the name "Habiru" is the same as "Hebrew"

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—"the philological equivalence is perfect. About this there can be no doubt at all."<sup>1</sup> Here then is definite evidence. And Professor Burney makes a further point; discussing the Hebrew language, he remarks<sup>1</sup> that there is a distinction in the verbal form between two types of the past tense which is peculiar to Babylonian and Hebrew and is otherwise unknown in Semitic; "it is reasonable", he concludes, "to explain the connection as due to the influence of the older civilisation upon the younger at a specially formative period in the history of the latter". That "formative period" was surely the youth of the Hebrew people, and the opportunity for Mesopotamian influence to be exerted on its speech was afforded by the residence in southern Mesopotamia of Terah and Abraham and by no other phase in its history. The philological argument—that "Hebrew" and "Habiru" are the same word—is in itself almost conclusive; when we find that the history of the Hebrews accords with what we can learn of that of the Habiru, and when the identification of the two alone enables us to account for the peculiarities of

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<sup>1</sup> So Burney, *The Book of Judges*, p. lxxiv.

<sup>1</sup> Loc. cit., p. lxiii.

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the Hebrew language, then we can regard the case as proved.

One discovery made at Ur may have a bearing on the question of the Habiru. Below the floor of a Third Dynasty temple (*circa* 2300 B.C.) there was found what was certainly the foundation of an altar. A square pit had been dug with neatly-trimmed sides and bottom, and in it had been laid three courses of rough limestone blocks, unshaped, with a thick layer of red burnt earth above them. We know that amongst the Sumerians a sacred construction might derive its sanctity from being a replica of what was buried beneath it, in this case burnt earth and stone, and we also know from texts that before the foundations of such a structure were laid burnt earth was used to purify the site. For the use of unhewn stone for an altar there is no hint in any Sumerian liturgy, nor has any parallel to the altar-base at Ur been found elsewhere. But it is thoroughly in accord with Hebrew practice, as is shewn in Exodus xx, 25: "And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it", and by Jacob's consecration of the rough stone at Bethel (Gen. xxviii, 18) and at

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Gilead (Gen. xxxi, 45), and apparently by Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. xxii, 9); it is therefore quite possible that we have here evidence that the presence of the Habiru or Hebrews in southern Mesopotamia affected even the ritual of the Sumerians.

After the time of Rim-Sin, the king who was finally overthrown by Hammurabi (1910 B.C.), southern Mesopotamia seems to know nothing more of the Habiru, but a little later they reappear in the northern parts of the country; they are constantly mentioned in the fifteenth-century tablets found at Arrapha, Kirkuk, and it is clear that the Habiru of Arrapha were kinsmen of the people of the Haran area.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The next step—though this does not properly concern us here—takes us to Palestine. From the Tell el Amarna letters, written to the Egyptian Foreign Office by the governors of the Syrian towns, we learn that in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. Syria and Palestine were being invaded by a warlike people called the Habiri; they are classed with the Šutû or Aramaeans and the ideogram SA.GAZ which in the letters is used as more or less equivalent to Habiri means “cut-throats” or “brigands”. Not all scholars are agreed as to the identity of the Habiru and the Habiri, but most of them favour it. It certainly is not possible simply to identify Habiri and Hebrews, nor would there be any advantage in doing so, for the information that the Tell el Amarna letters

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Gadd fairly sums up the main case as follows:<sup>1</sup>

"It is not indeed necessary to suppose that all the tribes which shared this general appellation ('Habiru') moved northwards and westwards together at some time after the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon, but the Biblical tradition of Abraham's migration from Ur to Haran at least corresponds in a general, and even a rather striking, way with this change in the location of the 'Hebrews' as traced by references in cuneiform tablets. The result of all these considerations is to suggest (1) that the tradition of Abraham's birth at Ur may be fearlessly accepted; (2) that his sojourn there may have been under the reign of Rim-Sin or Hammurabi, probably the former, and thus about 2000-1900 B.C., though this cannot be sustained by Genesis xiv, as usually supposed; and (3) that his traditional journeying from

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give us about the Habiri invasion of the Egyptian territories in Syria could never be harmonised with the Biblical story of Joshua's campaigns; but it is perfectly reasonable to hold that the Biblical story is concerned with the activities of one element in an inroad of far greater scope and that the Hebrews were one of the loosely confederated Aramaean tribes which overran Syria and Palestine at this time.

<sup>1</sup> C. J. Gadd, *The History and Monuments of Ur*, p. 180.

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Ur to Haran does in fact broadly correspond with a general northward transfer of the Habiru or Hebrew peoples from southern Babylonia, where they are first mentioned in secular literature."

Gadd arrives at his conclusions purely on external grounds and without any reference to the chronological system based on the genealogies of Hebrew scripture; that the latter gives a date in harmony with what non-Hebrew sources would shew to be correct is a fact whose importance it is hard to overestimate.

I had previously assumed that the oral tradition might be relied upon for the basic fact of Abraham's historical existence; we are now told by Gadd that we can "fearlessly accept" this in the light of external knowledge. The Old Testament evidence, supported by the independent testimony of secular literature, justifies us in holding that there was such a person, that he was an Aramæan or Amorite, the founder and head of a clan which later developed into the Hebrew nation, that he lived originally at Ur in Mesopotamia, that he and his people moved thence into northern Syria and subsequently into Palestine, and that he lived in about the twentieth century before Christ.

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If we can assume that, then we have common ground on which Hebrew tradition and archæology can meet; for we know where Ur was and what it was like in about 1900 B.C. All that we know about Abraham comes from the stories in the Old Testament, and we can now put these to the test: are they apochryphal legends fathered on to a genuinely historical person, or do they bare the stamp of truth, reflecting accurately the conditions of Abraham's time and place? For if they do that then our assumptions are greatly strengthened, and Abraham becomes at once more real and knowable. Can we then argue to the truth of the tradition in its details?

Direct evidence there is none. There is not and presumably there never will be available any secular record concerning the details of Abraham's life, and in the only case where such would seem to be possible, the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, we have seen how difficult it is to establish any correlation. But indirect evidence is possible; the "local colour" of the Abraham stories will be found a very fair criterion of truth.

When a man invents a tale, a work of pure fiction, he is at pains to introduce a local colour which will

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give to it an air of verisimilitude and commend it to his audience. Thus H. G. Wells' romance *The War of the Worlds* is convincing because his fantastic Martians are set against a background of present-day suburban life almost photographic in its accuracy; Flaubert spent ten years in archæological study before in *Salammbô* he re-created with compelling realism the drama of ancient Carthage. These are different means to the same end, deliberately adopted and consistently employed; in the case of a traditional story there is, of course, no deliberate fabrication, and there is not necessarily any consistency, for the setting of the tale must *seem* true to life, but need not *be* so, and the local colour will depend on the ignorance of artist and of audience. The Old Testament stories about Abraham are graphically told with a wealth of details and of local colour which are not essential to the didactic purpose for which we may suppose that the stories were chiefly valued, but form a background which is incidental and almost unconscious. They are, of course, traditional, and if they did not take shape until long after the events the "local colour" would have been a mixture of what was familiar to author and hearers by tradition and of what they

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knew from their own experience, and the result would have been not unlike that of the English Mummers' plays, wherein the story of Saint George was constantly brought up to date until the saint was confused with the king and Buonaparte masqueraded as the dragon. Anyone could distinguish the anachronisms in the Mummers' Plays, but that is not the case with the Abraham stories; there are late elements in them, certainly, but such are confined to the religious and homiletic parts, or at least are there most obvious, whereas the background seems to be consistent. Now the degree to which a legend can survive uncontaminated depends on the accident of its popularity. If it falls out of currency and is revived at a later date when social conditions have changed, then its original setting will have become in part unintelligible and will have to be brought up to date or explained by glosses which will gradually creep into the text; if on the other hand it be always part of the people's repertoire, then its background as well as its incidents becomes familiar tradition and needs no explanation. The local colour of the Abraham stories is consistent; if it is also true to the period of the events that can only be because the stories were

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handed down by an unbroken tradition from early times.

But before going on to prove that the local colour is indeed true to its period, we can define more explicitly what is the antiquity of tradition which its truth would imply.

A very large proportion of the Abraham biography is derived from J, which represents the tradition current amongst the southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, and for them at least the continuity of tribal history had been interrupted by the long sojourn in Egypt. During that time the outlook of the tribesmen themselves must have been to some extent Egyptianised, and it is certain that in Syria and Palestine conditions had changed very greatly. Whereas in Abraham's time those countries had been more or less dependent on Babylon, they had now for many generations been subject to Egypt; Egyptian troops had garrisoned the towns, Egyptian governors had been responsible for law and justice; the entire social atmosphere was different from what it had been before the sons of Jacob settled in the land of Goschen. If the stories about Abraham had first been put into shape after the establishment of the tribes in the Promised Land,

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it would have been virtually impossible for their authors to have recovered with any degree of fidelity the local colour of the patriarchal age; men's memories would not have reached back across the gulf of the years spent in Egypt, their immediate surroundings so far from helping would have but misled them, and inevitably we should recognise in their narrative anachronisms such as would betray not merely a late editing but a late authorship. But if, on the other hand, we can discern in the background of the picture touches not laboured but spontaneous and almost unconscious which can only be explained in the light of conditions which we know to have been those of Abraham's lifetime and not to have been those of the time of the Judges or the Kings, then only one conclusion can be drawn; the tradition must go back to the pre-Egyptian period. And that is precisely what we can do. There are in the Abraham record allusions, and more than allusions, whole descriptions, which could not possibly have been either remembered or invented by the later Israelites, which were indeed so far alien to them as to be only half intelligible, and owe their survival simply to the fact that they were embodied in the old familiar traditions,

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When we find that in the light of modern research these allusions take fresh meaning and can be definitely connected with features peculiar to the Mesopotamian civilisation of Abraham's day, then the record has to be accepted as more or less contemporary, and therefore in its essence true.

The proof of this is the subject of the following chapters. I shall attempt first of all to picture the civilisation under whose influence Abraham was brought up, and then to see to what extent it forms the background of his story and is its proper explanation.

## *Chapter 2*

### THE SITE OF UR AND ITS DISCOVERY

“**A**nd Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there” (Gen. xi, 31).

As late as the second century before Christ the Jewish writers not only preserved the tradition, which, as enshrined in their sacred books, they could not indeed neglect, but could identify the actual scene of Abram’s early days. Eupolemus, an Alexandrian historian, says that “in the city Kamarina of Babylon, which some call the city of Urie (that is, being interpreted, city of the Chaldæans), there was born in the thirteenth generation (after the Flood) Abraham, who surpassed all in birth and wisdom”. The so-

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called "interpretation" of the name is no interpretation at all but an allusion to the Biblical phrase, but the name Kamarina, "the Moon City"<sup>1</sup>, faithfully recalls the religious significance of the ancient Ur whose patron was Nannar, the Moon-god, and the qualification "of Babylon" defines its whereabouts.

Eupolemus based his account on that of an earlier historian, Berossus, who wrote in the third century B.C. By that date Ur was in the last stages of decline, and by the time of Eupolemus himself it had probably ceased to exist; very soon afterwards even the memory of it had passed from men's minds. Abraham had come out from "Ur of the Chaldees" and it was vaguely known that Ur lay "beyond the River", i.e. east of the Euphrates, but the Babylonian records had been lost, no name attached to the shapeless mounds in the barren plain which the Euphrates had deserted, and when the growing interest of Christian writers in the geography of the Old Testament drove them to search for the original home of the patriarch they had little to guide them.

High up on the middle reaches of the Euphrates,

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from *kamar*, the Arabic for "moon".

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beyond the river, on the extreme northern confines of Syria, lies the town of Urfa. For the modern reader it is a place of no significance, but in the Middle Ages its religious fame was great, for under the name Edessa it had been the capital of the first Christian kingdom; indeed, it had been established as such in the lifetime of Christ, and copies of letters exchanged between Christ and its king Abgarus were current and believed to be authentic. The similarity between the names Ur and Urfa could not be overlooked by writers whose etymology was of the simplest and most unscientific sort, and actually legend did connect the site with Abraham; to-day there is in front of the Mohammedan mosque a tank full of fish which are still regarded as sacred, for local tradition has it that when Abraham's cattle were raided by the soldiers of Nimrod and the despairing patriarch called on God for help these issued from the water in the guise of armed and mounted men and only returned as fish to the pool after the stolen beasts had been recovered and the hosts of Nineveh put to flight. Nor was this all; close to Urfa was Haran, so intimately associated with the beginnings of Hebrew history, the place to which Terah went from Ur, at which Abraham and

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Jacob lived; for an uncritical age nothing more was needed to confirm the identification, and accordingly for many years "Ur of the Chaldees" was placed on Biblical maps at the spot where Urfa stands to-day.

Really the proximity of Urfa and Haran was a strong argument against the former's being Ur. The migration of Terah's house becomes rather ridiculous if the move were but for a dozen miles or so and the new home was actually in sight of the old; moreover, the fact of Abraham's sojourn at Haran is quite enough to account for legends about him attaching themselves to another important site in the immediate neighbourhood. But there are more conclusive reasons than these for rejecting the old theory. We know now that Urfa never was called Ur; the likeness between the names is purely superficial and accidental. The Ur of Abraham is "Ur of the Chaldees", and at no time in its history could Urfa have been described as a Chaldæan city. Eupolemus qualifies Ur (Kamarina) as a city "of Babylon", and although Urfa lies within what became the Roman province of Mesopotamia and what the modern Arabs call *al Gezireh*, "the island" (the equivalent of the Greek word "Mesopotamia"), he could never have applied

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to Urfa the geographical description "of Babylon". We must abandon altogether the old conjecture and look elsewhere for the birth-place of Abraham.

In the year 1854 Mr. J. E. Taylor, British consul at Basra, was commissioned by the Trustees of the British Museum to investigate some of the ruined sites of southern Mesopotamia. Amongst the places he visited was one called by the Arabs *al Muqayyar*, the Mound of Bitumen, lying about eleven miles west of the Euphrates, a tangled mass of low sandy mounds dominated by one great pile where above the debris rose walls of red kiln-fired bricks set in the bitumen mortar which earned the place its name: the obvious importance of the building attracted Taylor, and he determined to excavate it.

In the upper part of the mound he found a rectangular structure whose walls, tolerably preserved, were of baked bricks enclosing a core of light red bricks of sun-dried clay. He drove a great shaft into the heart of the mass and proved that it was solid throughout; then he dug down into the corners, demolishing the brickwork, and discovered in each of them, hidden away in little boxes contrived in the courses of the bricks, cylinders of baked clay covered

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with cuneiform inscriptions. The discovery was of first-rate importance for the cylinders commemorated the rebuilding by Nabonidus, the last native ruler of Babylon, of the Moon-god's Ziggurat at Ur: "Nabonidus king of Babylon", the text reads, "the upholder of Esagila and Ezida, the reverent worshipper of the great gods am I. E-lugal-malga-sidi, the Ziggurat of E-gish-shir-gal in Ur, which Ur-Nammu, a king before me, had built but not completed, did Dungi his son finish. On the inscription of Ur-Nammu and of his son Dungi saw I that Ur-Nammu had built but not completed that Ziggurat and that Dungi his son had finished the work. Now was that Ziggurat old. Upon the ancient foundations whereon Ur-Nammu and his son Dungi had built I made good the structure of that Ziggurat, as in old times, with mortar and burnt brick. . . ." and he dedicates the restored building anew to Nannar, Lord of the gods of heaven and earth, and ends with prayers for the life of himself and of Belshazzar his son. Here was proof that the hitherto nameless ruins of *al Muqayyar* were those of the city which alike in Nabonidus' day, 555-539 B.C., and in the time of Ur-Nammu, *circa* 2300 B.C., was known as Ur. This city, famous as

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the capital of the great empire of Ur-Nammu, was the only city that was called by that name. It was, at the time when the Old Testament was written, a Chaldæan town, Ur of the Chaldees. It is true that to-day its ruins lie outside Mesopotamia proper, west of the confines of the Mesopotamian "island" enclosed between the Euphrates and the Tigris, but that is only because the Euphrates has changed its course: air photographs clearly shew the old river-bed running from al 'Ubaid past the foot of the western wall of Ur towards the ancient city of Eridu in the south, whence it turns sharply eastward to empty into the great marshes that extend to Kurna; in ancient times the city did indeed lie "beyond the River". Here then was the Ur of the Old Testament, the birth-place of Abraham.

The Old Testament phrase "Ur of the Chaldees" as applied to the city of Abraham is an anachronism. In the twentieth century before Christ Ur was a Sumerian town subject to the Elamite dynasty of Larsa, and the "Chaldæans" had not yet emerged into the light of history. It was only towards 1100 B.C., when the Tigris valley was being overrun by Aramæan invaders, that a kindred people, the Šutû, in-

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vaded the south country; and with the Šutû, or after them, came a tribe called the Khaldu who, securing the mastership, founded a dynasty of kings and gave to southern Mesopotamia their own name, Chaldaea. The writers of the sacred books of the Hebrews naturally applied to the city of Abraham's birth the name by which it was known in their own time; it is just as if a modern historian wrote that Julius Cæsar, having landed on the south coast of Britain, marched north and crossing the Thames fell upon London from the west—the form of the names would be an anachronism, but the truth of the narrative would not be impaired thereby; but in the Old Testament the gloss “of the Chaldees” is of positive value because it definitely locates the Ur of Abraham in that south Mesopotamian area which alone was Chaldaea. To Taylor then belongs the credit of having discovered the site of Ur.

But in spite of the importance of his discovery the work was not continued, for that chanced to be the time when in the northern part of the country Layard was unearthing the palaces of Assyrian kings and bringing to light the colossal man-headed bulls and the rows of bas-reliefs which are to-day one of the

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chief treasures of the British Museum, and compared with them the brick buildings and the clay tablets of the lower valley seemed a poor reward for the labour and cost of excavation. It was only when the tablets had been deciphered and the site identified that the scientific world could realise its interest, and then it appealed rather as the ancient capital of the empire than as the birth-place of Abraham; but in the meanwhile Taylor's work had been shut down and the mounds of *al Muqayyer* were to know sixty years of neglect before the British Museum again took up the task it had begun. Then the war gave archæology its chance in Mesopotamia; after two seasons of preliminary work the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania was formed, and from 1922 until 1934 excavations were conducted regularly. After that, field work had to stop in order that the publication of the vast amount of historical material brought to light might be pushed forward; and how necessary it was is shewn by the fact that whereas in King's *History of Sumer and Akkad*, issued in 1916, the discussion of the site and monuments of Ur could be dismissed in a page, to-day the description of them

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requires many volumes. Much of the old city remains still untouched, but the Sacred Area with its temples and various sites within the town walls have been cleared and the work carried down through layer after layer of historical remains, in some cases to virgin soil; the buildings and the graves which we have found represent successive stages in a life-history of not less than four thousand years. Most of that long record does not concern us here; this book deals with but a brief interlude of a few generations. Since Abraham is the subject, the preceding ages of struggle and progress which made his city what it was must be taken for granted and only that described which he may have known; but chance has ordained that of all the periods of Sumerian history this of Abraham is most fully represented by monuments of every sort, by the ruins of houses and of temples and by written texts. Therefore we can picture with surprising detail the scene and the society wherein Abraham is said to have spent his youth, and that without invoking the powers of imagination; for every statement made we have the concrete evidence which archæology affords.

Only to those who have seen the Mesopotamian

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desert will this evocation of the ancient world seem well-nigh incredible, so complete is the contrast between past and present. The transformation of a great city into a tangle of shapeless mounds shrouded in drift-sand or littered with broken pottery and brick is not easy to understand, but it is yet more difficult to realise that that blank waste ever blossomed and bore fruit for the sustenance of a busy world of men. Why, if Ur was an empire's capital, if Sumer was one vast granary, has the population dwindled to nothing, the very soil lost its virtue? The witness of the buried walls is indeed irrefragable, but how comes it of Ur and her sister realms that they are to-day "a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither doth any son of man pass thereby"?<sup>1</sup>

It is the change in the Euphrates' course that accounts for the desolation of Ur. Lower Mesopotamia, the Sumer of Abraham's day, the Chaldaea of the time of the Old Testament writers, was a reclaimed marsh. That wide delta had once been a waste of reeds and brackish water; gradually the silt brought down by

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<sup>1</sup> Jer. li, 43.

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the current from the upper reaches and dropped here where the stream ran more sluggishly formed islands, the richness of whose soil attracted immigrants to the valley. The first task of the inhabitants was the drainage of the land, the second was the making of high-level canals for its irrigation, and in time the whole country was covered by a network of channels, great and small, which brought water to the thirsty fields or drained the water-logged ploughlands: the upkeep of this elaborate system was one of the main concerns of the government. The nature of the country made the problem a difficult one. In the time of Abraham the distance from Ur to the sea was at least a hundred miles, and to-day, with the delta's edge encroaching annually on the Gulf, it is a hundred and fifty miles, yet the plain is only fourteen feet above sea level, and in antiquity it certainly was less; drainage therefore was not easy. For the same reason the Euphrates had to be restrained between high artificial banks; its bed, like the beds of all the irrigation-canals, was sensibly higher than the surface of the surrounding plain, so that any breach would mean disastrous floods and had to be guarded against by all conceivable precautions; on such depended the well-

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being of the country whose fertility astonished Herodotus when he visited it in the fifth century before Christ. We do not know exactly when the change came, but it was not so very long after that visit, perhaps about the end of the reign of Alexander the Great, towards 300 B.C. Then the river Euphrates burst its banks and flowing across the open plain made a new bed for itself more or less where it runs now, eleven miles to the east; and with that change the entire system of water-supply was broken up. The old irrigation-canals that had tapped the river further up were left high and dry; the new river-course, not yet confined between artificial banks, was a wide lake whose waters, level with the plain, blocked the ends of the drainage-channels so that these became stagnant back-waters: the surface of the plain was scorched by the tropic sun, the sub-soil was saturated, and the constant process of evaporation left in the earth such quantities of salt that to-day irrigation brings to the surface a white crust like heavy hoar-frost which blights all vegetation at birth.

To make good the disaster required a co-ordinated effort which the country then was too poor or too ill-organised to attempt. In the course of centuries

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efforts have indeed been made, but on a small scale. The river now, as of old, runs between high-piled banks<sup>1</sup> and is fringed by a narrow belt of cultivation which widens out for some miles round the modern capital of the province, Nasiriyah, and in good years puts out tentative feelers almost as far afield as the suburbs of Ur: looking eastwards from Ur one sees the thin, feathery palm-belt that marks the river's course, the darker mass of the gardens of Nasiriyeh, and closer at hand some sparse green of the barley-fields. But to north and west and south the scene is one of absolute desolation; grey and yellow, the dried alluvial mud and the wind-blown sand stretch monotonously as far as the eye can see. The flat line of the horizon is accentuated rather than relieved by a low ridge of sand-dunes on the south, from behind which shews the weathered peak of the brick-built Ziggurat of Eridu shimmering in the mirage; to the north-west the little mound of al 'Ubaid, four and a half miles away, is scarcely visible, withdrawn into the flatness; westwards indeed there are gravel beaches shelving

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<sup>1</sup> How necessary this is is shewn by the fact that its bed is more than six feet above the level of the modern railway junction ten miles away.

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to the upper desert, the vast plateau of Arabia, but they are beyond the range of eyesight; all that one sees is the barren stretch which once was fields and palm-groves and is now more dead even than the brick-strewn mounds that hide the city's ruins.

## *Chapter 3*

### UR IN THE TIME OF ABRAHAM:

#### I. THE CITY AND ITS BUILDINGS

**I**n the twentieth century before Christ the vast plain of the Euphrates delta was as intensively cultivated as is to-day the delta of the Nile; palm-groves, gardens and tilled fields of grain stretched as far as the eye could see, and from its fruitful soil the organised industry of man won the richest harvests of the ancient world. The river was the ultimate source of all this wealth, but bestowed it only at a price; were it not checked and controlled it would sweep across the country in a devastating flood; were it simply confined between its banks it would avail nothing, and the tropic sun which stirred the irrigated fields to sudden life would scorch them to barrenness. From the river therefore there ran off to east and west straight high-banked canals, from which others branched out, making a network of waterways large

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and small over all the valley, so that when the corn had been sown the earth dams could be cut and the sunken fields flooded for just the right space of time, and then the sluices would be closed, and through the caking mud the young green would spring as if by magic. At intervals along the banks were the vertical cuttings for the water-hoists, and here all day long the *shadûf* workers toiled, the great back-muscles rippling under the bare skin as they bent forward and back with the rise and fall of the balance-pole that raised the full goatskin bag above their heads and sent its contents splashing into the trough from which it ran inland to fill the maze of miniature channels in the garden plot. Everything depended on hard work and upon system. The boast of a Sumerian king was that he had honoured the gods, had overcome his enemies, had secured equal justice for his people and had built canals; the last was not the least important function of the government. But the task did not stop with the building. The cleaning of the channels, the upkeep of the banks, the fair allotment of water as between different villages and different landowners, all this entailed constant work and constant supervision, and whilst the peasant's industry

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was amply rewarded so long as a strong hand kept control, the collapse of the government might well mean, and in the end did involve, the utter ruin of the country. As it was, the system worked admirably. Every landowner, whether peasant proprietor or corporate body, was entitled to his share of water, and in return was responsible for the normal upkeep of the channels; any act of neglect that involved waste or damage was heavily punished by the law; in case of need the local government would take charge and requisition the labour of men and animals for what was in the interest of all.<sup>1</sup> Further, that so much labour might not be spent in vain, it was a punishable offence to neglect the land, and a man who failed to cultivate his fields was fined the estimated value of the crop, if he were a tenant, and if he were a freeholder might forfeit his property; while to encourage industry specially favoured terms, with temporary relief from rent and taxes, were granted to those who brought fresh soil under cultivation or planted new orchards and palm-groves. While much of the land was in small holdings worked by peasant-owners with

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<sup>1</sup> On all this subject *cf.* Delaporte, *Mesopotamia*, Ch. III.

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the help of their families and perhaps of one or two slaves, there were also great estates running to thousands of acres where slave labour was used on a large scale. In any case, with so intensive a system, there was need of many hands, and the whole country-side was dotted with scattered farms, hamlets and villages where the headman's house would rise above the low flat-roofed cottages of sun-dried brick which were the homes of the peasants, or the yet more primitive reed-huts of the slaves, arched mud-plastered tunnels wherein a man could not stand upright. As one came nearer to the city the houses would be more pretentious and more closely set amongst the market-gardens, until they developed into regular suburbs which sprawled for miles along the banks of river and canals, sometimes on the flat, low-lying ground which until recently had been open country, sometimes rising high on mounds which were the piled ruins of old villages that had been swallowed up by the growth of the town. Especially to the north and east Ur spread far afield; the canals which three hundred years before king Ur-Nammu had dug here, "his beloved canal" and "the canal of his food-offerings", now ran between serried rows of houses; here

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there were fine buildings also, the Nig-ga-ra-kam, "the great and noble treasury" of king Sinidinnam, and the garden shrine of Anu, king of the gods, which Ur-Nammu had built and the Larsa kings had restored. From that shrine the narrow road bordered by houses led uphill and then dipped suddenly to the waters of a canal broader than the others; and on the far side of it rose the city.

Islanded between this canal and the great river Euphrates that washed the foot of its western wall the city stood high on its artificial platform, the accumulated debris of thousands of years of building. Times without number had the winter rains crumbled the mud walls of the houses into shapeless heaps, fire had swept through the crowded quarters, victorious enemies had laid waste the city, and after every disaster a new generation had levelled the ruins and built new houses above the stumps of the old walls, so that under the lofty platform of Ur of the twentieth century B.C. all its past lay hidden, layer below layer, and its citizens walked unconscious over the homes and the tombs of their forgotten dead. To one who looked at it from beyond the canal the town seemed higher than it really was, for mound and town alike were

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girdled by ramparts. From the water's edge there sloped up a steep grey bank that was in fact no bank at all but an enormously massive wall of mud brick holding up the platform and rising above it to a level top some twenty-five feet above the stream, and along that level, which was from fifty to ninety feet in width, stretched the city's bulwarks. In the old days Ur had sheltered behind the great military wall of burnt bricks set in bitumen built by Ur-Nammu, but that had been overthrown in the Elamite invasion of a century and a half before Abraham's time and no ruler since had dared to face the cost of its renewal; instead, a line of houses and temples was strung out along the top of the rampart, their blank outer walls conjoint and their flat roofs, protected by stepped battlements, making a manœuvring-ground for the troops of the defence. It was a formidable enough obstacle for any enemy who might try to cross the canal and clamber up the steep *glacis*, only to be faced by solid walls of brick from above which the defenders could pour down on him a heavy fire of arrows and javelins, and the fact that men had their houses on the walls meant that a garrison was always on the spot in case of surprise. No one could have

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said that Ur had not the air of a strongly fenced city. Here and there covered sally-ports ran down from the house-line to the water's edge and there the ferry-boats plied to and fro; half-way along, the channel that divided the suburb from the island was spanned by a wooden bridge that led to the eastern gate, and there the flat line of the wall-houses was broken by a high tower below which the roadway passed through a tunnel-like passage into the ancient city. Seen thus from the outside Ur was impressive rather than beautiful: impressive for its size, for the stark simplicity of all those brick buildings huddled close together, with their flat roofs relieved only by stepped battlements at the angles and by the awnings of yellow matting or woven rugs under which the women-folk sought shelter from the summer heat; there were no graceful spires or minarets to contrast with the monotony, and even where a great temple rose overshadowing its neighbours, it was but another brick cube differing from the rest in little but its size. Only at the north end of the city was there something really different, something that drew the eye and kept it fixed in forgetfulness of all else; there, behind a vast quadrangle of white walls, from amidst a cluster of

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buildings isolated on a high-walled platform, rose tier above tier the vast bulk of the Ziggurat of Ur.

Ur was the city of Nannar the Moon-god. To him "the exalted Lord", "the Crown of heaven and earth", "the eldest son of Enlil", "the beautiful Lord who shines in heaven", the whole town was dedicated; countless other gods were worshipped, but he, at Ur, was supreme, and while others might have their temples a whole quarter of the city was set aside for his worship. The city walls enclosed a rough oval some two miles and a half in circuit; within this, in the north-western part, there was a second enclosure, a rectangular space about four hundred yards long and half as much in width, which was the Temenos or Sacred Area of Nannar. Originally a platform raised above the general level of the town, it had now been dwarfed by the gradual heaping-up of the residential quarters where destruction and re-building was so much more frequent than in the carefully kept temple enclosure; but the great wall that ringed it round still rose high above its surroundings and made of the Temenos a place apart. If the old walled city be compared to the outer bailey of a mediæval castle, the Temenos would stand for the inner bailey, and inside

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this again, in its north-west corner, was the keep, the last line of defence in times of disaster. There there rose a higher platform girdled by a yet more massive wall, a double wall whose intramural chambers were stocked with the weapons of defence and its flat top was a vantage-ground for the defenders. Nannar was not only the god of Ur but its king, so that it was but fitting that his house should be the city's ultimate stronghold; it was indeed designed as a fortress, and before this its two jealously-guarded gates had had to resist the onrush of war and the enemy had sapped its stout walls. But it was none the less the Temple of the Moon-god, and its very looks proclaimed its sacred character, for the entire face of the walls was decorated with vertical grooves and shallow buttresses which gave to the brickwork the air of a construction in squared timber; it was a tradition that recalled the wooden buildings which had served as temples for the ancestors of the Sumerians before ever they had come down into the Euphrates valley. This walled platform was the Moon-god's terrace, and on the terrace stood the Ziggurat, which was the chief glory of the city and the core of its worship. It was a tower of solid brickwork. At the base it measured seventy

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yards in length by forty-six in breadth, and it went up in three stages, the lowest about thirty-five feet high. The buttressed sides sloped inwards, so that the whole had somewhat the effect of a stepped pyramid; it faced north-east, and against the front three brick stairways led to the top of the first stage, converging on a gate-tower with arched doorways and gilded dome, and from there more stairs ran on to the uppermost stage, whereon stood the shrine of Nannar, which was the most sacred thing in Ur. A mountain of brickwork, one might say, and rightly, for the Ziggurat was a "High Place", an artificial hill made by men who once had worshipped their gods on mountain-tops and finding nothing of the sort in this flat delta land had set to work to build one. They called it "the Hill of Heaven" or "the Mountain of God", and they planted trees on its stages as if in imitation of the real hills of their ancient home, so that its terraces were hanging gardens and the shrine was ringed about with green. In that shrine, which men called Heaven, was the statue of Nannar, and there was his bed-chamber, to which the priestess went by night to become the bride of the god; and once a year the priests in procession brought the

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image down the long flights of stairs to carry it outside the city to its summer temple, where was celebrated the mystic marriage on which depended the fertility of the soil and the renewal of nature.

Millions of bricks had gone to the making of that massive Ziggurat, which was already old in Abraham's time and survives to-day as the chief of the ruined monuments of Ur; labour and cost had counted for nothing, and the king who built it was proud to commemorate on a monument of carved stone the building in which he himself had played a labourer's part; but it was no mere desire for glory, no megalomania that had inspired him; in a vision of the night his god had bidden him build him an house: its magnificence was the measure of the greatness of Ur and on its maintenance hung the fortunes of the city.

The Ziggurat did not stand alone. In front of it, set between the three branches of its stairways, were twin temples, the day-houses of the Moon-god and of his wife, the goddess Nin-Gal, wherein were the shrines of all the minor gods who formed their retinue; and abutting on these, still on the high terrace of the Ziggurat, were twin kitchens furnished with ovens and vast copper cauldrons in which was pre-

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pared the daily food of the gods. In front of the Ziggurat, at a lower level, stretched a great open court seventy-five yards long, brick-paved and surrounded by a long range of chambers: on the south-west side of it a doorway and a flight of steps led to the Ziggurat terrace and its temples, on the north-east a huge gate-tower and a triple doorway gave on the Temenos enclosure. The building was in its general plan not unlike the *khan* or caravanserai that shelters even to-day the traveller in the less-trodden ways of the Near East. It was much larger and more splendid; the whole of the outer wall and the long inner wall of the court that separated it from the Ziggurat terrace were not only relieved by great double buttresses but were decorated for all their length with half-columns of moulded brick, so that in the bright sunlight the wall face was broken up into a series of vertical stripes alternately white and black, a type of decoration peculiar to sacred buildings; but the scene inside the courtyard might well have recalled the caravanserai. For day after day through the high north-east gate came a motley crowd, carrying baskets and bundles, driving laden donkeys, sheep and cattle, all those who would give gifts to Nannar or pay their debts to him.

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It was not merely that the pious or the prudent would offer sacrifice to the divine Lord of the city: the Moon-god was also the greatest landlord in his dominions, owning farms and gardens and house property, and he was king, levying tithe and taxes; and since there was no coined money in Sumer payment for all these things had to be made in kind. So the tenant farmer brought his sacks of barley and his cattle, the peasant his jars of milk and his cheeses, the city merchant his wool or linen, his copper and his gold; and since the priests were traders also there would be ships' cargoes coming from oversea, and the porters would come staggering in, their backs bent double under the weight of blocks of diorite to be carved into statues or baulks of hard-wood for the furnishing of the temples. On either side of the entry sat the receivers, each with a basket of damp clay tablets by his side; the goods were weighed and noted and despatched to one or other of the magazines whose doors opened on every side of the court, and duplicate receipts were drawn up on the clay, one to be given to the bringer of the tribute, one to be filed in the archives of the temple. These receipt tablets are common enough: "From So-and-so, one sheep", "From Such-an-one,

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eight *gurs* of barley", and side by side with them come the more elaborate vouchers of the issue-officer in charge of stores. The goods were required for the manifold services of the temple, but in the business-like establishment of the god strict account had to be kept, and whether it was the representative of the High Priest who demanded two oxen for the morning sacrifice or a temple sweeper who, armed with a medical certificate, requested a measure of liniment for a sore on his head, the voucher had to be drawn up in proper form, sealed with the storekeeper's seal and filed in the accountant's office. The great fore-court of the temple must have looked more like a market than a place of worship, and the noise of all the coming and going, the lowing of the driven cattle, the loud-voiced expostulations of the tribute-bearer disputing the weight of his goods would seem scarcely in keeping with the religious character of the place; yet in front of the inner door through which steps led up to the sanctuary on the higher terrace there stood a brick offering-table; not all the people there were paying their dues under protest, but some at least would push their way through the crowd to lay their free gift on the Moon-god's altar.

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But the Ziggurat and the wide court at its foot did not take up all, or nearly all, that fenced area which was the Temenos of the Moon-god. South-east of the courtyard rose the high, blank walls of a separate temple named E-Nun-Mah, "the House of Great Plenty", which was, so to speak, the harem of Nannar. In the middle of the building were twin shrines, dedicated one to the god himself and one to his wife, Nin-Gal, and inside everything was in duplicate, altars, antechambers and sanctuaries. In the double "holy of holies" a secret ritual was conducted such as befitted the privacy of the harem, and in the chambers round about were housed the *salme* priestesses, temple prostitutes, the lowest order of that hierarchy of women devotees of which the head was none other than the daughter of the reigning king. The "House of Great Plenty" faced on the Sacred Way, a broad thoroughfare that ran through the Temenos from north-east to south-west, first between tall buildings, then across the open court of Dublal-mah, and then again between Nin-Gal's temple and the fortress-wall of the Ziggurat terrace. Perhaps of all the buildings past which it went Dublal-mah meant most to the ordinary citizen of Ur. It was a little two-roomed

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building, vaulted and domed, that stood out from the corner of the Ziggurat terrace, and once there had been a way through it with steps leading up to the terrace top, and it had been called Ka-gal-mah, "the Great Gate". Centuries ago the passage had been blocked up and the building had been turned into a simple shrine, but the name still clung to it, just as London keeps the names of Ludgate and Bishopsgate although its walls and gates have long since gone, and very likely the origin of it was by many forgotten and the "great gate" thought to be that of the shrine itself, for facing the south-east was a huge arched portal whose folding-doors (as we learn from a later inscription<sup>1</sup>) were of box-wood, overlaid with bronze, their hinges of silver and the door-posts of gold, glorious enough to have won a title for any building. But traditions other than that of its name gave the shrine its special interest. In the old days "the judge had sat in the gate to give judgment", after the fashion of the East, and now, although men no longer passed through it to enter on the holy ground beyond, it was from the great arched doorway

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<sup>1</sup> *Ur Texts*, Vol. I, No. 169.

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that the findings of the Courts were announced to the people assembled in the paved square in front, announced from the shrine as the judgments of god; and so another name had come into use, Dublal-mah, "the Great House of Tablets", and in its store-chambers were kept the clay documents on which the sentences were recorded. The Sumerian temple was much more than a place of worship, and the Sacred Area of Ur could for its manifold activities best be compared with some monastery of the Middle Ages. The priests were judges and the temple was a court of law, but much besides legal business was transacted in its precincts. Ranged round the courtyard of Dublal-mah, forming part of the temple, were factories and workshops, offices and the house of the Moon-god's business manager, buildings not religious in themselves but bearing witness to the fact that in a theocratic state Nannar was king as well as god and needed his civil service as much as his priesthood. Indeed, the whole organisation of worship was on the lines of a royal court. The god had his Minister of Finance and his ministers of War and of Agriculture, his Master of the Harem, his transport officers,

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his archive-keepers and his treasury staff,<sup>1</sup> and all of them and those who worked under them did their business in the Temenos, which was his palace; while therefore the various temples within the Sacred Area first drew one's attention, most of their space, and other entire buildings, were given over to the secular business of the priesthood. But all these various activities were in theory, and largely in fact, subordinated to that ritual of worship on whose strict observance depended the welfare of the state, and no

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of Ningirsu, the god of Lagash, the temple built by Gudea "is clearly the celestial and sublime image of the palace", and Legrain ("Les Dieux de Sumer", in the *Revue d'Assyriologie*, XXXII, 3, p. 117) enumerates the officials as follows: "Not only is there a harem for his wife and the seven daughters of joy who delight his heart, but a general staff of officers of all grades. One of his two sons is regent, the other purifier in chief; his troops are under the orders of an army commissioner supported by a second-in-command; there is a chancellor to look after petitions and a majorduomo to execute orders . . . a chamberlain of the bed-chamber, a master of posts and transport, a master of the pack-asses, a keeper of the deer-park and estate-manager, a choir-master, a storekeeper and a treasurer in charge of the office of weights and measures, a superintendent of waterways and fisheries, a bailiff for the flocks and herds and an architect in charge of constructional works."

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small part of the country's wealth was lavished on the splendour of the temples proper; even the plundered ruins which the spade brings to light testify to their magnificence.

In the wide delta formed by the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates stone is wholly lacking, and the only building material which nature provides is clay. Consequently there was no possibility here of rivalling the vast temples of Egypt with their carved walls and massive columns of limestone and of granite, no chance of evolving orders of architecture to compare with those of classical Greece; all the buildings were of brick, and although the local builders developed the art of brick construction to the utmost, they could not but be bound by the limitations of their material. Harmony of line and balance of mass they might achieve, but for the decoration of a building they had to depend on added ornament. Of such applied decoration very little can survive. The ancient wood-work has perished, the metal has been stripped from the walls; the ruins which excavation lays bare are but skeletons from which the skin and flesh have gone, and to re-create them in imagination we must use such evidence as the ruins may afford, eked out

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by descriptions in the cuneiform texts. A king will boast how he overlaid the doors of a sanctuary with gold, and amongst the ashes on the threshold of a temple gateway there may be found shreds of gold leaf overlooked by the plunderers who sacked and burned the building; a fallen scrap of painted plaster can give a hint as to the adornment of a ceiling; the fragment of a stone head of a statue may preserve the drill-holes whereby were secured the gold crown and ear-rings and so confirm an account given in a tablet or dedication text; there is evidence, but it is poor and partial, and it is only by combining the material from different but contemporary buildings that we can hope to recover the appearance of any one of them. The ruins of the Gig-par-ku, the great temple of the Moon-goddess Nin-Gal which lay on the south-east side of the Sacred Way, lend themselves better than most to reconstruction; as ever, nothing is left standing except the bare brickwork of the walls, but the temple had been burnt in 1885 B.C., and amid the ashes that formed a thick layer over its pavements stray fragments helped to shew how it had once been adorned.

It was a huge square fortress of a building measur-

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ing some two hundred and fifty feet in either direction and contained two principal shrines, smaller chapels and offices of all sorts. Entering by a narrow door and passing through antechambers and an outer court one came into the main court of the south-east shrine. Pavement and wall alike were of brick, but the walls were plastered and whitewashed, their flatness relieved by the shadows of the buttresses that ran from floor to battlement and by the arched recesses of the doors. On the right as you came in was a water-tank, and beside it, on a stone columnar base, a bronze basin for the washing of hands or feet; along the front of the shrine, facing you, was a row of sculptured and inscribed stone slabs recording the benefactions of kings, and before the central doorway stood the wide table of offerings, of brick overlaid with metal, whereon the worshipper might lay his gift. Three high arched doorways, one behind another, led from the courtyard to the sanctuary. Between them, on either side, were long vaulted chambers, chapels dedicated to minor gods, the walls of which were panelled with cedarwood, their ceilings probably painted blue and set with golden stars and crescent moons,<sup>1</sup> their floors

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<sup>1</sup> This detail comes from another similar building.

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covered with matting and rugs; along the walls were low bases on which were placed the statues of these minor gods carved in diorite or alabaster and crowned with gold. Beyond the third archway lay the sanctuary, a little chamber whose walls were sheathed with plates of thin gold cut into an open-work pattern of overlapping scales in which were set pieces of lapis lazuli and agate and turquoise-blue paste: it was entirely taken up by a great raised base whereon sat the statue of Nin-Gal, and in front of this was a lower platform approached by a flight of steps up which the priest would go to make his oblation before the goddess. On one side of the sanctuary was a dark room, which was the bed-chamber of Nin-Gal; on the other side was the treasury wherein were stored the rich offerings brought to her shrine, vessels of metal and of semi-precious stone carved or inlaid, some of which had been stored here for hundreds of years and bore the inscriptions of kings of the past, so that the goddess' treasury was a veritable museum of ancient art. In all the temples there was this ostentation of wealth side by side with the prosaic business of daily life. Standing in the court of Nin-Gal you might turn from the magnificence of the shrine and looking

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through a doorway on your left see the weaver sitting in his pit before the loom on which the hangings of the shrine were being made; or you could pass out to the right and through a doorway in the long corridor enter the temple kitchen in which was prepared the food for the goddess and her many human servitors. Here was the well for water and the tank and the fireplaces for boiling the water, brick fireplaces in an open court from which the smoke could rise clear; the bronze ring in the floor through which was passed the rope tied round the bull's neck so that he could be thrown down on his back and made fast for the ritual cutting of the throat; the bitumen-covered brick table on which the carcase of the sacrificial victim was cut up; the domed bread-oven, and the flat-topped cooking range whereon stood the heavy copper cauldrons in which the flesh was seethed. The essence of worship was sacrifice, and by the ritual of sacrifice the cooked flesh of the animal was shared between the god, his priests and the worshipper; the kitchen was therefore not the least important part of the temple, and at all times of the day the fires would be burning and the priests would be overseeing the slaves who carried on the work of butchers,

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bakers, scullions and cooks. So it was throughout the whole of the Temenos or Sacred Area: there were more industrial workers than officiating priests, more scribes and civil officers than ministrants; behind the religious façade one could recognise the smooth working of a machine in which the spirit of religion played little part. Where the god was also the king, where Church and State were so nearly synonymous, material efficiency was only too likely to get the better of faith. Long life and well-being in this world was the reward men asked in return for formal service such as they might have rendered to a human overlord, and they regarded the wealth and prosperity of the Moon-god as a pledge for the welfare of the city: it would certainly seem that the worship of Nannar at Ur, like the worship of Cæsar Augustus in the days of imperial Rome, was a demonstration of loyalty to the State rather than the expression of a spiritual need. But that did not lessen its importance. We have to think of Ur in Abraham's time as dominated by a cult the essence of which was its material magnificence, a cult absolutely inseparable from the City.

But from the Sacred Area and its temples let us turn to the town proper.

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Outside the Temenos private houses and places of business crowded the whole space within the city walls. Like so many of our own mediæval towns Ur kept the character of the village from which it had developed; there had been no attempt at town-planning, and instead of straight, wide thoroughfares regularly spaced there were but narrow, winding lanes whose limits and direction had been dictated by the accidents of the ownership of house-plots on either side. The unpaved streets, many of them blind alleys which led only to houses in the centre of a block, formed a maze in which it would have been easy to lose one's way; they were dusty in summer, muddy in winter and dirty always, for the householder would throw the sweepings of his floors and all his household refuse into the public ways, and there was no system of municipal scavengers organised to remove it. Thanks to the rise of road-levels that resulted you might see houses whose front doors were below the street for half their height, and here and there old buildings were being dismantled so that they could be rebuilt above the reach of the mud that used to flood their entrance-chambers: it was all very well for the official soothsayers to assert that "a house,

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to be lucky, should be below street level," but there were very obvious inconveniences attaching to that which outbalanced any theoretical good luck. The houses were for the most part soundly built, so that the exposed brickwork looked neat enough, and many at least of the walls were plastered and whitewashed—they were usually white, for colours were supposed to be unlucky—but in spite of that Ur would to modern Western eyes have appeared as squalid as do the native quarters of most Oriental towns to-day. And in the twentieth century B.C. a good many of the buildings must have shewn signs of poverty and neglect; it was not that they were so very old, for it was not two hundred years since the entire city had been laid waste by the Elamite invasion, and there had been constant rebuilding after that disaster, but times were difficult and people had not always got the money to spare for external appearances. In the main quarter of the town excavated by us it was curious to remark how often a big private house had been cut down or turned to commercial uses; there was plenty of evidence to shew that the place had seen better days in the past, but that conditions were changed now.

Thus if you stood in Baker's Square, a little open

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space between the houses where the petty traders, bread-merchants and such-like, sat on the ground with their wares spread out before them, you had on your left the house of Gimil-Ningishzida the copper-smith; he had bought up the large house next to his own and had turned it into a workshop, dismantling the old family chapel, building furnaces in the old courtyard and making a stoke-room out of what had been the servants' quarters. So, too, if you left Baker's Square by the narrow passage that led into Paternoster Row<sup>1</sup> you would find that the corner house on your left there had been completely transformed. Not so very long before it had been a residence of some pretensions, but now the corner facing up the street had by the piety of the last owner been walled off and arranged as a little public chapel, and the rest had become a cookshop. A big window had been opened in the front wall; the wooden shutters,

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<sup>1</sup> This description of the town is based upon the discoveries made in the principal quarter excavated by the Joint Expedition, *v. Ur Excavations*, Vol. VII, and the names of individual owners are obtained from the tablets found in their houses or the engraved cylinder seals from their graves; the only imaginary touch is in the names of the streets, etc., which we christened to our fancy.

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hinged above and propped up on rough struts, served as an awning beneath which the window-sill made a counter whereon could be spread the cooked food and the thin flat loaves; through the window you saw on the right the stove with its row of steaming pans and in the far corner on the left the bread-oven on the inner face of whose clay dome the baker was for ever plastering fresh rounds of soft dough, to take them out a few minutes later hot and brown and appetizing. Behind the shop was the courtyard, and the guest room of the old house lying on the far side of it had been turned into the restaurant, with a new door opening on to the bazaar at the back; they had cut hatches through its wall so that the dishes could be carried from the kitchen across the court and pushed through into the dining-room. In the ruins which we excavated there was nothing that could not be matched in any cookshop of Baghdad or Aleppo to-day, and what one sees there one would equally have seen in Ur four thousand years ago.

Walking up Paternoster Row you passed a few shops on your left and then a big private residence. On the right the principal building was a great rambling place with three entrances from the street and

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another door giving on a blind alley at the back, an old building, so old that a whole flight of steps led down from the front door, whose threshold had once been at street level. Apparently it served now as a hotel; in the little entrance-court there was a kennel for the watch-dog, on the ground-floor were large dark magazines where travelling merchants might store their goods, and in a corner of the big paved courtyard there was a manger for their tethered asses. Such provision would be necessary in an inn. The winding lanes of the city were too narrow for wheeled traffic; people went on foot or rode donkeys—here and there you might see a stepped mounting-block for their convenience set against the house-wall—and all transport of goods was done by donkeys or by human portorage; the passer-by must have been jostled often enough by the swollen panniers of the asses and the blank walls must have echoed with the warning shouts of the unseeing porters bent beneath their loads. Through such a crowd you went along Paternoster Row until suddenly it opened out into a more spacious triangle where five roads met.

A spot upon which so much traffic must converge was bound to be important, and it is not surprising

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to find that most of the corner sites were occupied by buildings of a distinctive character; between Pater-noster Row and Store Street was the triangular chapel of the goddess Nin-shu-gu, between Store Street and Broad Street was a school, between Straight Street and Church Lane the chapel of Pa-sag.

The school afforded another instance of the remodelling of a private residence for commercial purposes. The house was perfectly normal in size and plan, but certain of its doorways had been bricked up and a new entrance had been made from the street, so that it was now divided into two distinct parts. The old front door just round the corner of Broad Street led to the private rooms of the owner, apparently a priest named Igmil-Sin, and you went through the lobby and a passage which served as library to the back of the building which, together with the whole of the upper floor, was retained for his own use, and from here there was only one door communicating with the boys' quarters; the new front door took you straight into the courtyard, and the courtyard, together with the old reception-room and the lavatory, formed the school premises. It was quite a small school—there was scarcely room for

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more than a dozen pupils—and judging from the tablets found here they were for the most part young boys being grounded in their elements. For practically the whole curriculum was represented by the documents which littered the rooms. There were writing exercises, starting with the single strokes out of which the cuneiform signs were built up and going on to something rather more difficult. The master would take a round, flat, bun-shaped tablet of clay of just the right stiffness and on one side of it would write a syllable or short sentence, using his stylus very carefully so that there could be no mistake about the signs, and then the pupil would study what was written and turning the tablet over try to reproduce the fair copy on the back of it from memory; often one could see how the priest had passed his thumb over the crude scrawl and the task had had to be done afresh. Then there was dictation. For the smaller boys it might be an exercise in memory and in vocabulary as well, for the master would read out a whole long list of words all beginning with the same syllable, AB, for instance, and then they had to write as many of them as they could remember; for the older pupils it was generally some pious aphorism—

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and if they bungled it they might be set to write the same thing fifty times. For reading lessons there were mostly hymns, the long repetitive chants which were part of the temple ritual, and it is easy to picture the class sitting on the ground in a ring, each holding his tablet and swaying his body to and fro as he recited at the top of his voice the verses which he knew by heart rather than read from the queer wedge-shaped marks upon the clay. For arithmetic there were multiplication and division tables, and the more advanced pupils worked at square and cube roots and did exercises in practical geometry—were given a diagram which stood for an odd-shaped field and were told to find out how many *sars* or roods it contained—and for grammar there were paradigms of the elaborately conjugated Sumerian verbs.<sup>1</sup> In a community such as that of Ur education was important and widespread; it is not to be supposed that everyone could read and write, but a surprisingly

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<sup>1</sup> About 2000 tablets were found in the ruins of this school. In another school for more advanced scholars there was a far greater proportion of literary (religious) texts and tablets with copies of inscriptions on the buildings and monuments of Ur, apparently intended to inculcate ideas of civic patriotism.

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large number could. Not only were the priests and professional men necessarily literate, but the majority even of the smaller traders must have been the same, and while the temples were the principal centres of higher education elementary schools such as this on Broad Street must have been common all through the town. Equally typical, it would seem, of social habits at Ur during this period were the chapels, of which two fronted on Carfax, as we called this meeting-place of five roads. Nannar, the Moon-god, was worshipped in the great Temenos; scattered about in the town and on the town wall there were other temples dedicated to other gods of the Sumerian pantheon, temples which like that of Nannar were erected by kings and maintained out of public funds, State institutions where a splendid ritual served ends almost as much political as religious; but there were also little public chapels which stood to those temples much in the relation of the wayside shrine to the cathedral of an Italian city.

The chapel at the corner of Straight Street was dedicated to a very minor goddess, Pa-sag, whose special function it was to protect travellers in the desert. Like all these buildings it was quite small and

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quite humble. Against either door-jamb was a terracotta relief two feet high representing one of the good demons supposed to avert the evil eye, a creature half bull and half man holding a spear; in the doorway were three or four steps leading up to the paved courtyard of the chapel. You passed through a lobby, having on your right a cupboard in which were kept the votive offerings presented to the goddess, clay models of carts and, especially, the stone heads of clubs of the sort that men carry with them on a journey, proper thank-offerings to the deity who had brought them home in safety; and so you entered the court. Everything was very simple. On a brick base to your right stood a limestone statue of the goddess, gaudily painted and wearing a gilt crown; on the wall above it there hung from a peg the skull of a long-horned water-buffalo, perhaps a souvenir of the most costly sacrifice that the shrine had ever known; immediately facing the entrance, but at the far end of the little court, was the brick table or altar on which you deposited your gift, and behind that was the sanctuary door, by which stood a roughly squared limestone pillar, decorated with crude carvings of men and birds and with a cup-shaped hollow in the

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top for holy water. The sanctuary had an outer door of stout wood which was bolted at night but in the daytime was swung back, leaving only the inner door, a light affair of reed panels set in a wooden frame; you pushed that open, and opposite you in a shallow niche in the back wall of the sanctuary, on a low pedestal of whitewashed mud, was the cult statue of Pa-sag. It was little more than a foot high, of white limestone, representing the goddess standing and shrouded in an almost shapeless cloak. Originally a rough and ugly piece of sculpture, artistically negligible, it now appeared to even worse advantage, for it had been broken in antiquity into three pieces, and while the body had been piously stuck together with bitumen the feet had been lost, and the lower part of the figure was embedded in its mud base so as to make it even more squat and ill-proportioned than it had been. One would not expect to find a masterpiece of art in a wayside shrine, but there must have been some sentimental reason for the preservation of the crude and broken statue of Pa-sag in the place of honour; perhaps it had to this extent survived the sack of Ur by the Elamites two centuries before, and so was prized as an heirloom from the city's past;

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but at any rate it was this, and not the new carving in the courtyard, that ranked as the cult statue of the chapel. The chapel was meant for the ordinary citizen; it stood open, inviting the passer-by to enter for prayer or thanksgiving, and to the ordinary citizen it owed its origin. Such were private foundations, built on what had been private property and maintained by private endowments.<sup>1</sup> In Pa-sag's sanctuary there was a library shelf whereon were kept the tablets concerning the shrine, lists of the priests who were attached to it, with the days of the week and the hours when they were on duty, lists of the house properties presented by benefactors to the shrine, the income from whose rents paid for the upkeep of the building and the salaries of the priests. Probably there was always one in attendance; alongside the sanctuary was a passage leading to two small rooms behind it, the vestry and waiting-room, where he could be at the service of any worshipper.

If the quarter of the city which I am describing

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets . . . in the British Museum*, VI, 36a. The chapel in that case occupied a plot measuring only some twenty feet by seventeen.

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was a fair sample of the town as a whole, then there must have been hundreds of little public chapels dotted here and there between the houses and the shops, and the part which they played in the daily life of the people must have been proportionately great. At the same time it would be easy to exaggerate their significance for religion in the modern sense of that word. The gods and goddesses worshipped here were not themselves major deities, but they were recognised members of the official hierarchy; departmental powers differing from the great gods chiefly in the fact that their spheres of action were more limited and more humble. For that very reason they came into closer contact with ordinary individuals. In the lifetime of the private citizen the crises which might interest or require the special interposition of the great gods were rare, but these were the powers who looked after the affairs of every day; the old oriental maxim that one should avoid incurring the anger of the magistrate, but must be a friend of the magistrate's door-keeper, applied equally in religion. That religion was a religion of fear; the gods were powerful and capricious, easily moved to anger by wrong-doing (though there was little of

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morality in themselves) and not above persuasion; sacrifice therefore aimed at propitiating them for evil already done, at winning their favour in advance, at discovering their intentions by omens of many sorts. It was rash to embark on any project without first discovering how it might be regarded by the special god within whose province it fell; it was wise then to gain his help, and having received it to make due acknowledgment, so that by soothsaying and charms one might achieve success. Material success was what men looked to gain from the gods, and in the ordinary business of life it was the smaller and more specialised powers whose influence was most direct; consequently their shrines would be numerous and their worshippers many. They were not looked up to for any qualities they might possess, but courted for what they could do and give, and to some extent at least they could be constrained by magic to do or give what was wanted. There was little inspiration, little spiritual comfort to be got from the State worship, whether that of the great temples or of the public chapels; more in the latter than in the former, probably, and the man who was moved to found or to endow a place of worship for the minor god who was

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his special patron may have had some deeper emotion than the mere desire for gain; but more likely his motive differed only in scale from that of the king who built his temple to Nannar that he might secure "a decree of life, a good reign, a sure foundation" or to avert some evil with which he was threatened by the priests.

The vestry of Pa-sag's chapel had a side door opening on to Straight Street. It was a blind alley, shut in by high buildings on either side, no shops, only the private houses of well-to-do citizens. On the ground floor at least there were no windows, for the ancient East, like the modern, valued its domestic privacy, and if there were windows to the upper rooms they were few and far between and closed by shutters of reed lattice, so that only the door-openings broke the blankness of the walls. All the houses of Ur were built on the same general plan. Naturally they varied much in size, and since the plots which they occupied were often irregularly shaped the architect had to accommodate his design as best he could to meet conditions not of his own choosing, but experience of the climate and the manner of life of the people had standardised their dwellings to such

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an extent that having seen one house you would have a tolerably accurate idea of all. More than that, so well did the design meet requirements that it prevails equally to-day. When we first began to excavate these houses at Ur of the twentieth century B.C. we were astonished to find that in every detail they corresponded to the modern Arab houses of Basra or Baghdad; the scheme of the lay-out was identical, the same rooms occupied the same positions; where the evidence of the ruins was scanty, as for the upper floors, it took meaning in the light of analogies from the modern building and sufficed to prove that here, too, the parallel was exact: in the end we were able to restore the houses of four thousand years ago with confidence in every detail.

The first house on the right beyond the chapel, as you go down Straight Street, is a good example of the home of a prosperous citizen of the middle class. It had a road frontage of forty feet (with another fifteen feet for the side yard) and a total depth of fifty-two feet, and it was two storeys high; the walls were built with burnt brick set in mud mortar up to the height of a few feet above ground level—this served as a damp course—and above that with mud

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brick; the latter, if not all the wall face, was mud-plastered and whitewashed. The street door took you into a paved lobby with a drain in the corner over which would be set a jar of water for the washing of feet, and here the porter would sit on his bench to receive visitors and, after due warning to those inside, conduct them to the guest-room. Through the lobby you went into the central court. All houses were built round a central court, on to which all the rooms opened; it was brick-paved and unroofed, and in the middle of it was the mouth of the sepage drain that carried rain and other water down into the sub-soil. At each angle of the court was a wooden upright supporting a gallery that ran round the wall on the level of the first-floor rooms, a wooden gallery with openwork balustrade sheltered by the projecting eaves. The roof, of mud laid over matting and poplar-poles, was nearly flat, sloping slightly inwards and coming forward some three feet from the walls so as to leave in the centre a relatively small open square through which came light and air; from its edge stuck out gutters of wood or clay, from which, in wet weather, the rain-water would pour down into the drain-intake in the court below. As you came

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into the court you had on your right, next to the lobby, the servants' room, with its low brick bedsteads on which the mattresses would be spread; facing you in the further wall were the doors of the kitchen and of the servants' workroom, the former equipped with beehive-shaped bread-oven, cooking-range and open fireplace, the latter giving access by a back door to the yard where were the lean-to stable for the asses and a range of sheds for storage. On the left there were two doorways. One, flat-lintelled, contained the stairs leading to the upper rooms; the lower treads were solid, built of brick, the first, flush with the courtyard wall, uncomfortably high, so that in front of it was placed a portable wooden step to ease the climb;<sup>1</sup> the brick steps led to a landing, and then the flight turned at right angles and wooden steps ran on over the narrow room entered by the

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<sup>1</sup> The brick flight was necessarily short, being limited by the thickness of the wall through which it ran, and as head-room was required under the return it had to be steep. The same feature can be observed in the modern Arab house, where, too, the bottom step is often a foot to eighteen inches high and therefore has placed against it the same wooden step as must have been used in ancient Ur.

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second door on this side of the courtyard; that narrow room was the lavatory, with the intake in its brick pavement and the soil-pit below of the precise model used in the Near East to-day.

In the fourth wall of the court a central door, wider than the rest and topped by a brick arch—as were indeed most of the room doors—led to the guest-chamber or reception-room, corresponding to the *liwan* of the modern house. It was a long room with the doorway in one of its longer sides, so that against the further wall there might be spread one of the long runner rugs still so familiar, with cushions on it, and the guests might sit in a row facing the door and the court; at night beds could be laid across it side by side and half a dozen people might sleep there at once. At one end of the guest-room was a tiny room with a drain in its paved floor, the lavatory and wash-place reserved for visitors; at the other end a room equally small which probably contained the great press wherein the spare mattresses and quilts were stored, and in its far wall was a second doorway leading to the private chapel at the back of the house. The whole of the ground-floor then was given over to guests and to the domestic staff; the family lived

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in comparative privacy upstairs, where there were five rooms reserved for their use, and in addition they had the flat roof which, sheltered from view by battlements and protected by awnings, was for a large part of the year the best place for both work and sleep.

Narrow and insanitary as were the streets (though we must remember that where glaring sun and driving dust are the main evils narrow and winding streets shut in by high walls have their advantages), the houses were comparatively spacious and afforded scope for a life decent, comfortable and, by Eastern standards, luxurious. The families who lived in them might be large, for not only did concubinage give the chance of many children, but the sons were loth even when married to leave the paternal roof; and slaves, too, might be numerous; yet with anything from ten to twenty rooms at his disposal the middle-class townsman, merchant or petty official, was well provided for, and there was not that overcrowding which the slum-like appearance of the streets would suggest. Well-built and roomy, self-contained, with a simple but adequate drainage, with their clean brick pavements and walls of plain whitewash constantly renewed, houses such as this were pre-eminently the

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homes of a civilised people and answered to the needs of a highly developed urban life. There were inconveniences, of course. Water had to be fetched from the public wells or from river or canal; lighting was of the most primitive sort, with clay saucer lamps wherein the wick floated in the oil; the charcoal braziers that warmed the house in winter had to be lit and left standing in the courtyard until the last flame had died down and the poisonous fumes that suffocate a man had been dispersed; but there were slaves to fill the great water-jars that stood in court and kitchen, and the work men did was not of a sort to require much in the way of artificial light—for the social meetings at the day's end when the guests reclined on their cushions in the long reception-room the open lamp was all that one would ask. Furniture was simple. Store-chests of wood or basket-work, a few low wooden bedsteads with decorated headboards, cross-legged tables, a few stools, and for the rest straw mats and rugs and cushions spread on the floor; clay vessels for food and drink were the most common, with plates and cups of copper, or even of silver, for the use of the richer householder and his guests, copper cooking-pots and copper knives and

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ladles; such were the main requisites, and with them the furnishing of the house was complete.<sup>1</sup> The tur-banned and clean-shaven Sumerian visitors came in across the shaded court, saw with satisfaction through the kitchen door the cauldrons steaming on the range and shuffling out of their red leather slippers<sup>2</sup> entered the guest-chamber to take a modest seat at the far end, and to be moved up, protesting, to where the higher-piled cushions bespoke a place of honour; pulling down their fringed mantles over the skirts of their undergarment they would sit cross-legged while the house-slave in his short white tunic brought in the plates and cups and set them on the stool at the side of each. There was no very elaborate paraphernalia of luxury, but there was all that was required for the decencies and comforts of civilised life.

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<sup>1</sup> In the modern Arab courtyard there are usually a few growing flowers; in the ruins of one house at least at Ur we found arranged around the court clay pots which apparently had contained plants.

<sup>2</sup> Sandals and slippers are constantly represented and are coloured red on the reliefs; a terra-cotta shews us also boots with high uppers of knitted wool; such were never worn indoors (v. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*, I, p. 408).

## *Chapter 4*

### UR IN THE TIME OF ABRAHAM:

#### II. SOCIAL CONDITIONS

**U**r was a great city. The population that inhabited its closely-packed houses within the town wall and in the far-spread suburbs in the twentieth century B.C. counted at least a quarter of a million souls, and may well have totalled twice that number. It is obvious that however rich the countryside, so great a city could not have been created and maintained by agriculture alone. Important as its agriculture was, the wealth of Ur depended on commerce and manufacture, and its urban classes lived not merely by supplying their neighbours' needs but by a trade whose ramifications extended far beyond the boundaries of Mesopotamia.

The owner of the house, No. 3 Straight Street, which I have described as typical of its class, was a merchant. In late years he had entered into partner-

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ship with one Eanasir, whose house backed on his own (since that faced on Old Street, and to get from one front door to the other meant a long *détour*, they had opened a communicating door in the party wall and could consult one another without loss of time), and the two were engaged in the import of raw copper for the local market. In ancient times copper had been got from Oman in the Persian Gulf, a naturally mixed ore that gave a hard alloy excellent for casting, but that source had long been cut off, and now it was from sources further afield and especially from the Anatolian mountains in the north that the ingots came. The firm had their resident agents abroad who bought the metal from the mines, sent it down country on pack-asses and loaded it into boats on the Euphrates; and with them constant communications had to be kept up. That was no easy matter when political conditions were unsettled and letters might never arrive at their destination, so that one agent writes to Eanasir in despair: "I have sent you five letters on this subject already and had no reply, and how can I do business?"; cheques and letters of credit had to be sent to far-distant and outlying places, and unless the policing of the roads was

## UR IN THE TIME OF ABRAHAM

properly done both the messengers with the cheques and the caravans that brought the goods might fall a prey to brigands or be held up and unduly mulcted by foreign rulers along the trade-routes. Men such as Eanasir led an anxious life and stood to lose heavily on their ventures; we need not be surprised to find that he tried to cover himself by local trade and speculation, buying up houses and gardens which he let out to tenants, dealing in ready-made clothing, lending money on usury, and even so, it would seem, had in the long run to cut down his premises and make over the best rooms in his house to a more prosperous neighbour. But in spite of difficulties and occasional disasters trade had to go on, for it was the life-blood of the city. In this alluvial land where nature provided nothing but the fruits of the earth everything that industry required had to be imported; by land and by sea there flowed in raw material to supply the skilled craftsmen of Ur. Water transport was the cheapest, and the river and the larger canals were waterways whereby came goods not only from the north but upstream from overseas; inside the walls of the city were two harbours, one at the north end, one on the western side, where ships back from long

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sea voyages discharged their cargo. We have the bill of lading of one such that in *circa* 2040 B.C. had come up from the Persian Gulf after a two-years' cruise; it brought copper ore and gold and ivory, hard woods for the cabinet-maker, diorite and alabaster for the sculptor's workshop. Not all these things would have come from the shores of the Gulf itself, but from much further afield, carried in foreign vessels to be transhipped in the Gulf ports: and when we remember that lapis lazuli, the favourite stone for jewellery and inlay, was brought *via* Persia from the Pamir mountains and that amazonite beads found in the ruins came from the Nilgiri hills of southern India, we can realise how far-flung were the activities of the Sumerian trader.

Two conditions had to be met, two great difficulties overcome, if commerce on such a scale was to be possible at all. In the first place, the merchant had to be guaranteed at least a reasonable measure of safe-conduct; to an adequate system of police patrols along the thoroughfares of Mesopotamia itself had to be added some kind of understanding with the foreign governments through whose territories the caravans must pass or in whose cities the branch offices of

## UR IN THE TIME OF ABRAHAM

Mesopotamian firms were established. Long before this time, in about 2500 B.C., Sargon of Akkad had had to lead his armies into Asia Minor to uphold the privileges of the Mesopotamian trading colony established at the town of Ganes; two generations later Manishtusu of Akkad invaded South Persia to gain control of its silver mines. Half of the quarrels with border states may have originated in the seizure of convoys or the levying of too heavy a toll on goods in transit, and where distance made it impossible to impose fair treatment by force of arms, treaties and subventions—"presents" they were called by the government that paid and "tribute" by that which received—secured the trade-routes. Within the limits of the empire there was a regular postal service for the use of the central government; along the high roads which were the canal banks the royal couriers passed and repassed between posting stations at fixed intervals, and in the same way the correspondence of private citizens was carried from town to town. It was an enormously elaborate organisation that enabled the merchant of Ur to do his business over so vast an area.

And the second difficulty was the medium of ex-

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change. In this great commercial empire there was no coinage, nor was it till the days of the Persian Empire, in the eighth century B.C., that money, in our meaning of the word, was to be invented. In the earliest days men had simply bartered goods for goods; then the most essential of those goods, barley, was adopted as the medium and standard of exchange, and it was in measures of barley that the value of other goods was reckoned. In time gold and silver were added as being more easily negotiable, but for the purposes of ordinary retail trade a sheep or an ox might stand on its own merits and be bartered without reference to any external standard. Under Hammurabi, in the twentieth century B.C., barley and silver were the two main standards and were properly correlated,<sup>1</sup> so that the salaries of governmental officials and labourers alike were assessed in terms of barley and paid in silver; but that silver was not coined money, it bore no stamp, no government guarantee.

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<sup>1</sup> The relation was not constant, even at different seasons in the same year; barley, as the primary foodstuff, remained the basic standard, and it was the amount of silver paid as salary that varied, its purchasing power being nominally at least the same.

## UR IN THE TIME OF ABRAHAM

The metal might for convenience be cast in pieces of certain sizes and of recognisable form, but they were not tokens; it was the actual amount of precious metal that counted, and that had to be determined by the scales; thus in payment for his field at Machpelah Abraham *weighed* "four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant."<sup>1</sup> For local business on a relatively small scale this system of qualified barter was adequate, if not always convenient, but it is obvious that foreign trade could not have been conducted on such lines; even if there had been enough silver current it would not have been safe to despatch into foreign countries quantities of it sufficient to pay for goods to be imported in bulk nor, in view of the exigencies of local markets, would it always be possible to pay for those imports by simple exchange—Ur needed copper, but the copper miners of Anatolia might not be prepared to accept wholesale the products of Ur. The difficulty was met by an expedient which more than anything else perhaps illustrates the sophisticated character of Sumerian civilisation. A trade which involved the greater part

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. xxiii, 16.

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of the then known world was carried on with remarkable smoothness by means of what we should call a paper currency based on commodity values. Eanasir's commercial traveller would set out from No. 3 Straight Street carrying not only manufactured articles for sale but letters of credit to branch agencies and bills of exchange written upon clay which would pass muster as cheques; he might buy and sell at all the stages along his route and arrive at his final destination with a stock-in-trade quite different from that with which he started and more suited to the market to which he had come; and on his return he might hand in not only goods but receipts which had the value of credit notes available for further purchases or for exchange. The fluctuations of currency values which are the bugbear of modern commerce were virtually overcome by a "currency" which depended ultimately on the staple necessity of life but was qualified by the use of a medium possessed of intrinsic value; the commercial traveller had need to use his wits and exercise his judgment as to the form in which he cashed his credit-notes, but there was no need to lose on the transaction.

Most of the imports were of raw material. We have

## UR IN THE TIME OF ABRAHAM

found in the ruins of Ur evidence of handicrafts carried on by individuals working at home, but the manufacturing industry that supplied goods for world trade could not be limited to methods so primitive. From the innumerable tablets that have come to light we can learn not a little about larger workshops and factories engaged in wholesale production. Some of these were private concerns, some were attached to the temples, for the god, too, engaged in trade, and much of the raw material brought to him as tithe or rent—flax and wool and metal—would be worked on the temple premises. The city was famous for its textiles, and many of the records of one small weaving establishment attached to the temple Dublal-mah have come down to us. Only women were employed here, temple slaves, and they worked so many to a room under the charge of an overseer, who kept the accounts. Twelve sorts of woollen cloth were made, and each worker might vary her output, producing different varieties perhaps according to the quality of the wool. A nominal roll of the workers was kept and the amount of raw wool handed out to each at the beginning of the month was entered, and against it the weight of cloth which she handed in at the

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month's end, a definite percentage being allowed for unavoidable waste in the process of manufacture. In parallel columns there were detailed the issues made to the woman during the month, issues of food, bread and cheese and meat, made in lieu of wages, and in the last column we have the balancing of profit and loss on the month's work. It is all extremely business-like. If a woman has been sick or has died her absence and the consequent failure to draw rations is duly noted, and if a relative has taken her place the substitute's name is given; the balance-sheets are made out for the month and also, in less detail, a summary of the workroom's activities and progress over longer periods. There must have been hundreds of such workshops engaged in different forms of manufacture scattered about the city; as has already been said, Ur was essentially a manufacturing and trading centre, and the vast majority of its population were not agriculturists but business men and artisans.

In describing the houses in which these business people lived as those of the middle class I have employed a very well-defined term. Sumerian society was by law divided into three classes, the *amelu*, the *mushkinu* and the slave. The *amelu* class were freemen

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of the upper rank, priests, government officials, the army; the *mushkinu* class were also freemen, but of a non-official sort, including traders, professional men, agriculturists, the entire democratic body; the slaves might have been born to slavery, taken in war, or reduced to slavery by poverty and debt; they might therefore be Sumerians or foreigners by blood, but though the law allowed them protection of a sort and certain privileges, and though they were not deprived of the chance of winning freedom, they had no part or lot in the State.

This apparently arbitrary division involved in practice less injustice than might have been expected. The "aristocrats" enjoyed certain privileges; they were accounted of so much more value than other people that their persons were more or less sacrosanct and an act of violence committed against one of them was punished much more severely than a similar crime against a *mushkinu*. But that was a not unnatural result of their functions; they served the State in peace or in war and therefore they had more value than the burgess who made money for himself; violence that might incapacitate one of them was either sacrilege or treason, and deserved to be pun-

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ished accordingly. And again the aristocrat paid for his superiority; for services rendered to him by doctor, lawyer, and so on, the legal fees were double what a *mushkinu* would pay. The *mushkinu* was not called on to go to war except in the last resort, when the invasion of the country necessitated the *levée en masse*; he was free to mind his own affairs, and it is perhaps typical of his outlook that the *lex talionis*, the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, which was enforced where an *amelu* was involved, was in the case of the *mushkinu* waived in favour of a money compensation. The slave could be bought and sold, but he could also protest against his own sale and submit the question to the courts; he could own money, engage in business on his own account and buy back his freedom; he could marry, and if he married a free woman his children would be born free; and although the punishment of a fugitive slave was severe, and although he might be flogged or branded, such penalties were likely to be rarely inflicted; where the slave can at any moment gain his freedom the treatment of the slave is seldom very inhuman. The experience of the ancient world

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proved that in the absence of other means of power<sup>1</sup> slavery was the necessary basis of higher civilisation; it is not by the institution as such, but by the use made of it, that we are entitled to condemn a people or a period, and judged by the standards of other races the Sumerians would seem to have been unusually liberal in their attitude towards the slave.

Similarly towards women their liberality is surprising. So far from being the chattel which in oriental societies she has often been, the woman was recognised by Sumerian law as an individual and a citizen. She could plead before the courts and give evidence; she had her own money, with which her husband could not interfere; she had a legal share in the estate of her father and her husband; she could embark on business independently, buy and sell, employ labour, own slaves, and in the absence of her husband she administered his affairs and took a third of the profit for herself. The husband could, if heavily

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<sup>1</sup> The ancients not only lacked machinery, but had not learnt how to take proper advantage of horse-power; until the Middle Ages the harnessing of draught animals was such as to utilise only one-eighth of their tractive force. For the heaviest forms of labour therefore man-power was the only thing available.

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in debt, reduce his wife to temporary slavery—three years was the maximum—i.e. could indenture her to the service of the creditor, and in proved cases of misbehaviour could make her his slave and marry again; but monogamy was the rule, and although barrenness entitled a man to take a second wife, the first remained the mistress of his house or, at her pleasure, left it and took back her dowry intact; and to her too the law allowed divorce. The real blot on the Sumerians' treatment of women was the custom of temple prostitution, whereby the lowest ranks of "priestesses" were harlots at the disposal of visitors to the shrine and even those of the higher ranks had once at least to give themselves to a stranger. In theory this was a veritable sacrifice by which the woman made to the god the supreme offering of her virginity, and the act won for her honour, not contempt; but such a rite was bound to degenerate into licentiousness, and loud were the warnings of the wise against the temple woman of the baser sort—"in thy misfortune she will not succour thee, respect and submission are not in her, every house into which she entereth crumbleth away".

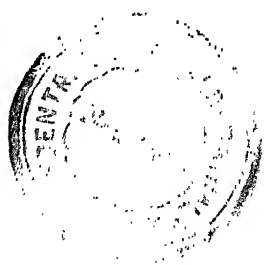
One has then to imagine a society highly individu-

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alistic, enjoying a great measure of personal liberty, materialistic and money-making, hard-working and most appreciative of comfort and the good things of this life. A society of the sort could only exist if safeguarded by an intricate system of law and by a government that could enforce it. Business can be conducted prosperously only if the rules of commercial morality are generally observed; the laws of Sumer covered most of the activities of life, but a very large proportion of the code as we know it is concerned with the business relations between men, and of the tablets which are unearthed the vast majority are receipts, contracts and inventories, documents drawn up to give a legal sanction to business dealings. The law required that every transaction should be recorded in writing, and in case of dispute the first demand made by the court was for the production of "the tablets", and every tablet, whether it recorded the sale of a house, a marriage-contract or the engagement of a day-labourer, had to be sealed by witnesses as well as by principals; one gets the impression of a people business-like indeed and methodical, but full of suspicion one of another and terribly litigious. It speaks well for the government

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that men were so ready to refer their quarrels to the courts—evidently they expected to get justice, and it is true that the regulations binding the judges, both priests and lay officers, were severe, and the courts were open to all. Two tablets found in different houses at Ur throw an amusing sidelight on the actual procedure. Each is the statement of a case to be brought before the courts. In the first, the plaintiff states that he had rented a market-garden outside the city; the contract-tablet had been drawn up and he had entered into possession and was working the ground when a third party arrived and attempted to evict him, declaring that he was himself the real owner. In the second tablet another plaintiff makes precisely the same complaint; he had rented his garden from a different landlord, and while he was busy there a man, the same person as the accused in the first case, had come and laid claim to the land and its produce. The two unfortunate lessees were neighbours, both living in the quarter of the town excavated by us; they had discussed their grievances and discovered that they had been the victims of one and the same trick, and they had decided to lay the matter before the judge. Then comes the curious point



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about the two tablets. The wording of them was very similar, certain odd turns of phrase recurred in both, the hand-writing was the same; it was evident that the two plaintiffs had gone together and consulted the same lawyer. One can imagine the scene played then exactly as it is played outside the law-courts of modern Baghdad; the notary sits on his little stool against the wall by the road-side with his writing materials on his knee; on either side of him squat the litigants, prompting him with endless repetitions of the same complaint, while he with a supreme disregard of their whispers and gesticulations searches his mind for the apt formula and reduces their tirade to the cold phraseology of the law. In many things Mesopotamia has changed but little in four thousand years.

A great and a prosperous city, you would have said, seeing its splendid public buildings, its comfortable homes, its crowded streets, its factories hard at work and its quays thronged with shipping; yet had you, one day towards the close of the twentieth century B.C., asked the opinion of one of those sleek-looking Sumerian merchants, you would probably

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have been told a very different tale; the good old times were gone, conditions were desperately bad, none dared to think what the future might bring forth.

Two hundred and fifty years earlier Ur had been the capital of a vast empire. The ruling dynasty, founded by Ur-Nammu, had enriched and practically rebuilt the city; wealth had flowed in from all sources, and from Susa in the east to the cedar-forests of Lebanon on the Mediterranean shore subject provinces had paid tribute to their Sumerian overlord. Then, in the fifth generation—it was in 2170 B.C.—disaster had come. Susa had risen in revolt, the Amorites of the north-west had taken up arms; the royal forces had been routed on one front after another, the fierce Elamites had swept over the Valley and while the king, Ibi-Sin, together with the cult statue of the Moon-god Nannar, had been carried off captive to Susa, the city of Ur had been sacked and overthrown. People had, of course, come back to the ruined town—such a site could not long be left desolate—but the sceptre had departed. A new capital for Sumer had been set up, first at Isin and then at Larsa, with an Elamite on the throne, and Ur must

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now obey the rule of a rival city and a foreign dynasty. It was true that these Larsa kings had done their best for the old capital; they had rebuilt the temples which their own people had destroyed, and there was not a public building in Ur to-day which did not own as second founder one ruler or another of the Larsa line; they had ensured peace for generations, and had encouraged trade, and they had so far identified themselves with their subjects that, foreigners though they were, they stood as champions of the Sumerian race. None the less the alien yoke must always have been hard to bear for a people which had once held the mastery, and at the close of the twentieth century B.C. even the material benefits which the rule of Larsa had secured were either lost or threatened. For there was now drawing to a head the long-standing danger of the southward push of the Semitic peoples. Up to the time of Sargon of Akkad (*circa* 2500 B.C.) the North had been Semitic and the South Sumerian, and there had been a fairly definite frontier between them; civilisation had been uniform throughout the land thanks to Sumerian domination, but the racial distinction had held good. Sargon had, of course, annulled that frontier by his conquest of the south coun-

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try, and the Semitic influx into Sumer had begun to take serious proportions; under the rule of the Third Dynasty they were firmly established there, so much so that king Ur-Nammu (*circa* 2300 B.C.) made no difference between the two races which were his subjects, freely admitting Semites to the offices of State. So it had gone on until now, under Rim-Sin of Larsa, the Sumerian element was being submerged even in the ancient capital of Sumer; the very language was losing ground and it was difficult to do business except in the Semitic tongue, and the time was quickly approaching when in the schools Sumerian would be taught as a dead language useful only for temple liturgies. And it was not merely a social revolution that was in progress; the political horizon was just as threatening. Since the great war of 2170 B.C. which had ruined Ur, Babylon up in the north had assumed the rank of an independent kingdom, and its rulers, having already extended their authority to east and north and west, were now steadily nibbling at the south country, partly by minor wars, partly by alliances. Rim-Sin of Larsa had held his own hitherto and had long been husbanding his strength for a final struggle, but he was an old man and an ill match for so energetic an

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opponent as Hammurabi of Babylon. It was impossible to say what the end of it all would be, but in the meantime Ur undoubtedly suffered severely. There must have been constant difficulties on the frontier, for Babylon either cut the trade-routes altogether or could impose such tolls on through traffic of goods as would take all the profits out of business, and it is probable that customs discriminations would be unfairly used to favour the Semitic as against the Sumerian merchant. It is quite certain that there was an active propaganda carried on in the Sumerian cities by Hammurabi's agents, and one can imagine that the Semites there were inclined to assert themselves and to talk openly of the time when Hammurabi would bring Larsa to heel. There was indeed small love for Rim-Sin in spite of his lavish expenditure on buildings and ritual; the Sumerians had ceased to be a warlike people, and the traders of Ur were beginning to ask themselves whether it would not be more profitable after all to let the nominal independence of Sumer go and to secure better conditions as subjects of Hammurabi. When the decisive moment came a single battle determined the issue; the aged Rim-Sin received no backing from his Sumerian vas-

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sals, and Ur transferred its allegiance to Babylon without protest, automatically. From the nature of its surrender it is easy to see what influences had been at work in the preceding years.

It was at such a time as this that Terah decided to leave Ur. Judging by what we learn from the scattered notices in the cuneiform tablets the departure of the patriarchal family was not an isolated thing but part of a general northward migration of the Habiru tribe. And the reason for that is not hard to seek. These Aramæan settlers can scarcely have been popular at Ur at a moment when peril threatened the city from north and west. Not properly established in the land as were the Akkadian Semites, hovering for the most part on the brink of civilisation or plying in the towns those trades which the townsman despised, many of them "brigands and cut-throats", they were ill neighbours to have in times of trouble. The government therefore may well have put pressure upon them, and for economic reasons they may have been glad to go. We read of them as mercenaries in the Sumerian army; the mercenary would be little inclined to fight for a losing cause, and the service of Hammurabi might offer better prospects than that of

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Rim-Sin. In Terah's case the motive may have been quite different. If from the fact that Abraham appears later as the owner of strings of camels<sup>1</sup> we can conclude that his father before him was interested in the camel business, then he had good cause for quitting Ur; for camels imply overland transport, and the blocking of the trade-routes by Hammurabi would have seriously hampered the affairs of anyone engaged in it, whereas at Haran, commanding as it does the alternative northern road and far removed from any frontier difficulties, he would have enjoyed a free hand. The suggestion is not unreasonable. It is a curious fact that whereas the camel had been domesticated in Arabia from very early times and must have been in regular use as a beast of burden, so that a large part of the trade between Mesopotamia and Syria must have been camel-borne, the camel is mentioned in literature for the first time in Genesis xii, 16, and in all the business tablets of Sumer there is no reference at all to an animal which must none the less have been familiar. The only explanation is that camels remained the property of the desert people, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. xii, 16 and xxiv, 10.

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were the Habiru, and therefore did not directly concern the Sumerian trader and do not figure in his accounts. Whether or not the caravans entered the city, and quite probably they did so but seldom,<sup>1</sup> there would in any case have to be local agents who would organise the hiring. So until his death a few years ago Hajji Mohammed ibn Bassam, living in Damascus, was agent for the Anezeh and the Ruwala and most of the tribes of Arabia<sup>2</sup> and controlled all the trade-routes of the interior; when the motor service between Beyrouth and Baghdad was initiated it was to the Hajji that a subsidy had to be paid to safeguard the cars from attack by the desert tribes. Terah may have had some such position at Ur, and it would be tempting to suppose that the main family business was now removed to Haran (with which, as is evident from the name of Abraham's third son, they had

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<sup>1</sup> The real desert Bedouin has a horror of towns, and when he is obliged to come into one plugs his nostrils with wool to save himself from the nauseous reek of street-bred humanity.

<sup>2</sup> On the ibn Bassam, al Salem and al Isa families so engaged see Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Ruwala Bedouins*, American Geographical Society, Oriental Explorations and Studies, No. 6. New York, 1928, p. 278.

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had long been in contact)<sup>1</sup>, while Nahor remained in his old home in charge of what was henceforth to be a branch of it. That is, of course, mere conjecture. No reasons for the move are given in the Old Testament, and archæology cannot prove the motives that actuate an individual; but the general migration of the Habiru must have been due to social and economic conditions, and the explanation that I have suggested is at least in harmony with the spirit of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. xi, 27.

## *Chapter 5*

### ABRAHAM: THE INFLUENCE OF THE CITY

**T**o no small extent men are moulded by their environment. If therefore Abraham was indeed a citizen of such a city as I have attempted to describe, he must have been, at least in his youth, a very different man from the nomads amongst whom he elected to spend his later life, a very different man from the man whom the Old Testament pre-occupation with his wanderings has accustomed us to imagine. But can we see, between the lines of the Bible narrative, the influence of the civilised surroundings of his early years affecting the conduct of one who would seem to have abandoned them of his own free will? The stamp impressed in childhood may be virtually obliterated by time; and if, as has often been suggested, Abraham quitted Ur from a revulsion against those very surroundings and

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sought in the vast spaces of the desert to escape from the corruption of the town, then it would necessarily follow that the traditions of Ur would have had no binding force upon him, and the dictates of his individual conscience would have been his own rule of life.

But this was not the case. It is perfectly clear that, whatever may have been Abraham's motive in exchanging a settled for a nomad existence, the link with the past was not altogether broken; sentimentally at least he was conscious of his superiority as a townsman and impatient of the rude tribes amongst whom he moved. Thus when Sarah would console him for her own childlessness the concubine whom she selects for him from among her slaves is no woman of the tents, but Hagar the Egyptian; she was at least a civilised creature, sprung from the second great centre of culture in the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> And Abraham himself will never suffer his son to marry one of "the daughters of Canaan", but sends his servant to his

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<sup>1</sup> Hagar had the same feelings: when Ishmael grew up for all that he was only a wild bowman dwelling in the wilderness of Paran, "his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt". (Gen. xxi, 21).

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own country and to his own kindred to find a wife for Isaac. His motive was not simply to keep pure the family strain, for descent was from the father, and the mother's nationality was not regarded. Ishmael was as truly a son of the house as was Isaac, so much so that when Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to be his wife she could say, "it may be that I may obtain children by her" (Gen. xvi, 2), and the superiority of Isaac rested solely on the fact that his mother was the *first* wife. The objection to marriage with foreign women was indeed to become an ordinance in later ages, when every precaution had to be taken to preserve the identity of the Hebrew people (cf. Ezra x and Nehemiah xiii, 23); but in the early days of the clan there was no reason for anything of the sort, and in particular the safeguarding of the national religion did not call for such prohibition. According to tribal tradition the wife must follow the husband so implicitly that the cult of the family god could not suffer contamination by the introduction of a wife from outside the family circle. No such consideration had weighed against the choice of Hagar, nor in the case of the wife to be chosen for Isaac does Abraham refer at all to the religious aspect; he only stipulates

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that she must be "from his kindred". If I am right in believing that there was a link between the family god of Terah and the faith of Abraham, then it is of course true that Rebekah as the grand-daughter of Nahor would from the outset be fairly at home with the magnified family cult practised in Abraham's tents; but if that view be not accepted, it follows that as a worshipper of the false gods which had been those of Terah and the elder Nahor she would have been as much a pagan as any Canaanite woman, and her standing as a member of a civilised country and people would have been her only recommendation. Certainly it is on the social side alone that Abraham lays stress, and precisely the same is true in the next generation. Esau took Hittite women to wife "and they were a grief of mind unto Isaac and Rebekah" (Gen. xxvi, 34); this was certainly not a religious grievance, as Rebekah's complaint shews very definitely: "I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth: if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these, of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me?": it is the true note of home-sickness and of the contempt of the city-bred for the rude Bedouin.

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Evidently then Ur was not forgotten, at least in so far as the memories of the City taught the nomad clan to hold themselves aloof and to despise the peoples of Canaan; but that is in itself a small thing, and the influence of Ur can be considered important only if it can be shewn that in practice as well as in sentiment it was a deciding factor in Abraham's life. We have to ask whether there are any acts of the patriarch recorded in the Old Testament which cannot be explained otherwise than in the light of Sumerian traditions.

The most direct testimony to this is given by the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar is a slave of Sarah's, and Sarah, being barren, offers her to Abraham as a concubine in order that there might be a son in the house. Hagar duly conceives, and at once shews her contempt for Sarah, who complains to Abraham; he answers that "thy maid is in thy hand; do to her that which is good in thine eyes", and Sarah thereupon treats Hagar so hardly that she runs away into the desert, and is only brought back by the direct interposition of an angel. Then a son, Ishmael, is born to her, and he ranks as Abraham's heir. But later Sarah herself gives birth to a son, and

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at the festival of his weaning Ishmael is seen to mock the child, and this time Sarah approaches Abraham not with a protest but with an ultimatum: "Cast out", she says, "this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac." And "the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight, because of his son"; but the Family God intervenes on Sarah's side and much against his will Abraham is constrained to obey; he sends his second wife and his son out into the wilderness to take their chance of life or death, and from that moment until Abraham's death Ishmael has no more part or lot in the house of his father.

The difference in Abraham's conduct on the two occasions is noteworthy. On the first, he plays a purely passive part and raises no objection at all to Sarah's brutal treatment of her rival; on the second he does object, and is only overruled by God's saying to him "in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (Gen. xxi, 12). Yet from the point of view of the succession the unborn Ishmael; at a time when Sarah was barren and seemed to have no hope of a son, was much more important than was the boy Ishmael after Abraham's first wife, Sarah, had given

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him an heir; one would have expected the objection rather upon the first occasion than the second, but it was only on the second that Jehovah had to interfere on Sarah's behalf. That is a point that calls for explanation.

If we take Abraham simply as he is pictured in the Old Testament and judge him by what would necessarily have been the standards of such a man, his conduct in the whole of his dealings with Hagar stands condemned. From the point of view of the Bedouin, the Semitic tribesman, he did an unspeakable thing in thus sacrificing his son, once before his birth and once again when he was a grown lad, to the jealousy of a woman. On the first occasion the whole hope of his house, the chance that there might be born to him one who would carry on the family, was made subordinate to the whim of her who had failed him in the first duty of a wife: on the second occasion he not only repudiated his firstborn at her orders, but deprived him of that share in the family estate which immemorial tribal law accorded to him as a right, and for a boyish offence virtually condemned him to death. In the eyes of the dwellers in the tents his behaviour towards Ishmael was a crime, his subservi-

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ence to his wife was contemptible. But this is not the view taken by the Old Testament authors. Abraham's original abandonment of Hagar to the wrath of Sarah is accepted as a matter of course; it is only the later act that seems to be a stumbling-block, only here that the direct command of God has to be invoked to justify what everybody would feel to be in itself unnatural conduct on the father's part; clearly there was something that put the two cases on a quite different footing.

In the first case Abraham did, beyond question, flout tribal custom and the public opinion of the desert. He cannot have done so merely from fear of or affection for Sarah; if that had been the reason Hebrew opinion would not have exonerated him lightly. He must have felt that he was obliged to act as he did, and since that compulsion certainly did not come from his environment in Palestine or from divine revelation, in what did it consist?

The answer is that he was bound by his upbringing. Abraham and Sarah had both been born and bred in Ur; its ancient civilisation was engrained in them and its laws and its traditions could hardly be eradicated by a few years of wandering amongst a more barbar-

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ous people for whom they felt, as they undoubtedly did, something like contempt. And the laws to which Abraham in his youth was subject are known to us; we have a contemporary copy of the great Code issued by Hammurabi of Babylon<sup>1</sup> towards the close of the twentieth century B.C., and we can examine its clauses and see to what extent the story of Hagar is related to and explained by Sumerian law.

The Sumerian could not in principle possess more than one legitimate wife, but to this, law and custom alike made certain exceptions. If the wife proved to be barren the husband could either divorce her or he could take another wife of secondary rank—"he shall cause her to enter into his house" but "that concubine he shall not put her on an equality with his wife". But since neither alternative might be agreeable to the wife, she could herself solve the difficulty in another way; from among her own slaves she could choose a maid and give her to her husband as a concubine or secondary wife; the slave-woman was enfranchised as soon as a child was born, the child would be the lawful heir, and the father was no longer free

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<sup>1</sup> On this see below, p. 178.

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to bring another woman into his house: "if she has given a maid to her husband and has brought up children (but) that man has set his face to take a concubine, one shall not countenance that man, he shall not take a concubine".<sup>1</sup> But the real wife did not lose her rights. Should the concubine aim at being her rival she could sell her if no child had been born and, if a child had been born, could reduce her again to slavery; "if she has given a maid to her husband and she has borne children and afterwards that maid has made herself equal with her mistress, because she has borne children her mistress shall not sell her for money, she shall put a mark upon her and count her among the maidservants".

This is exactly the procedure in the case of Hagar. She was Sarah's slave, given by her to Abraham because of her own barrenness; Hagar had "made herself equal with her mistress", and when Sarah complains Abraham's reply is: "Thy maid is in thy hand; do to her that which is good in thine eyes" (Gen. xvi, 6); it was the law, and he had no more to say in the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> I quote C. H. W. John's translation in *The Oldest Code of Law*.

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Now let us turn to the second part of the story. Trouble arises again between the two women, and Sarah, now herself a mother, demands Hagar's expulsion from the camp. This time Abraham refuses; "the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight, because of his son" (Gen. xxi, 11), and it requires a special order from his god before he will gratify his wife. It was not simply affection for his fourteen-year-old son that inclined him to withstand her; the affection was probably there, but it was supported by something far more cogent. On the former occasion Sarah had insisted on her legal rights; now she went flagrantly against the law of Sumer, and the same respect for that law which had made Abraham give way at first now forced him into opposition. It was the question of his son. Sarah desired to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, "for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac", and by raising the matter of inheritance she challenged Hammurabi's Code. In no case was it easy to disinherit a son; it could not be done arbitrarily, but only by process of law before a judge—"the judge shall enquire into his reasons and if the son has not committed a heavy crime which cuts off from sonship the father shall not

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cut off his son from sonship". But for the case of Ishmael the legal ruling was explicit. "If a man's wife has borne him sons, and his maidservant has borne him sons (and) the father in his lifetime has said to the sons which the maidservant has borne him 'My sons', has numbered them with the sons of his wife; after the father has gone to his fate the sons of the wife and the sons of the maidservant shall share equally in the goods of the father's house. The sons that are sons of the wife shall choose and take". Even Hagar's position was more or less secured; "If a man has set his face to put away his concubine who has borne him children . . . to that woman he shall return her her marriage portion and shall give her the usufruct of field, garden and goods, and she shall bring up her children". That also troubled Abraham, as is shewn by the wording of the divine order: "Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman"; and it may well be that the promise which accompanies the order "And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed" is meant as compensation for Ishmael's loss of his legal heritage. The whole business was wrong, and Abraham knew it. Sarah

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could claim that her rival be expelled, but provision ought to have been made for her; and she had no justification whatsoever for depriving Ishmael of his birthright. That was the law of Ur, and the phrasing of the Old Testament story makes it clear that Abraham was throughout guided primarily by that law: it was only against his will and in the light of revelation—or what he supposed to be such—that he could be persuaded to break it.

The point is driven home by the account of his behaviour to his other children, when he was free to act according to his normal standards. After Sarah's death Abraham took another wife, Keturah, and had children by her; "and Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac. But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastwards unto the east country" (Gen. xxv, 5). This was entirely in accordance with Sumerian law. Normally families lived together, under the same roof, or in close neighbourhood, and on the death of the father the children shared his estate according to fixed rules. But the father during his lifetime could make over part of his possessions to any one of his sons, or will

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it to him, and then when on his death the property came to be divided that son took out his special portion first and thereafter his legal share of the residue. Again, by agreement with the father, any of his sons who wished to go away from the family roof could receive in advance his portion of the estate (which might have been diminished already by special provisions) and had thereafter no further claim. It is the story of the Prodigal Son, and it is the story of the sons of Keturah, and it explains how it came about that Isaac was Abraham's sole heir.

Only in the light of Hammurabi's Code does the conduct of Abraham towards Hagar become intelligible. Taken by itself the story can only prove a callousness and a lack of justice strangely at variance with the high character which piety assigns to the patriarch. But the case is very different when we can regard Abraham not as a free agent but as bound in allegiance to Sumerian law, striving to rule his actions by it: and in every detail of the Old Testament narrative the working of that law is indeed unmistakable. There can be no doubt but that in the nomad tents the life of the patriarchs was guided and controlled

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by principles which Abraham had brought with him from his home in the civilised East.

In another great crisis in the history of Abraham we can surely see the influence of his early training brought to bear upon his new manner of life, and that is in the sacrifice of Isaac.

Sacrifice was an essential part of ancient religion. The gods, conceived of in such human wise, knew thirst and hunger as did men, and had to be propitiated by drink and food. The Babylonian legend tells how, when the Flood overwhelmed the children of men, the high gods hungered, being deprived of the daily offerings that men had been wont to make, so that when Uta-napishtim left the ark and set foot on dry land his first act was to offer sacrifice, and the gods "scented the sweet savour, and like flies the gods gathered about the sacrifice". In the purified Hebrew version that naïve simile has gone, but Noah still builds his altar and offers "burnt-offerings of every clean beast and of every clean fowl", and God still "smells the sweet savour" and vows never again to smite everything living. There could be no worship without sacrifice. So the patriarchs in their wanderings built their altars wherever the tents were pitched,

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and the head of the house acted as High Priest.

At Ur in the old days offerings had been made to the family gods by the head of the house: on the low brick altars we still find in place the little dishes that held the portion of cooked meat, of dates or bread, and the clay cups for beer, the simple meals which the gods shared with the family. But at Ur there had also been the major rites which were carried out by the priests in the great temples, when the private citizen brought his offering, sheep or pig or bull, to be sacrificed to the higher powers. For Abraham those temple rites were a thing of the past. There were no temples, and there was no caste of priests attached to the service of his god: the God of Abraham had ousted the others from his worship, so that sacrifice to Him was vastly more important than had been the sacrifices in the family chapel at Ur, but the old magnificent ritual had gone and the worshipper could only perform his vows after the crude fashion of the Bedouin amongst whom he moved: he might well have wondered whether that was enough to satisfy his god.

Now amongst the Semitic tribes of Palestine the sacrifice of the firstborn was a familiar thing. The

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Old Testament is full of references to the custom, archæology finds material evidence for it. Doubtless it was often reduced to a symbolic pantomime, but often it was literally performed; they passed their children through the fire to Moloch, "they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was defiled with blood".<sup>1</sup> So Abraham was tempted. He was not doing enough for his god. He was not doing so much as he had done for other gods at Ur. He was not doing what the people round him did for their gods; they sacrificed their first-born, would his god be content with less? He might cling to the traditions of Ur and despise the Bedouin, but none the less he was by blood more akin to them than to the Sumerians, and he was no longer in Mesopotamia, but in Canaan, the land to which his god had brought him, the land of his promise, and the gods of Canaan apparently demanded just that supreme sacrifice. It can scarcely have been other than the force of example that per-

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm cvi, 37.

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suaded Abraham to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering. And then, at the last moment, he killed a ram instead of his son.

The story epitomises it may be the birth or it may be the affirmation of a conception of god which at once put the nascent Hebrew religion far ahead of that of the Palestinian peoples; the substitution of animal for human sacrifice, whether actually initiated by Abraham or simply established by him as a principle, was an enormously important thing. To me it seems certainly an affirmation, the upholding of the beliefs in which the man of Ur had been brought up against the brutal superstitions of his new home. For so far as we can tell the Sumerians of that day did not indulge in human sacrifice; the innumerable religious texts give no hint of any practice of the sort.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "human sacrifice" does not quite properly apply to the ritual of the "death-pits" in the tombs of the prehistoric kings, and in any case they date to more than a thousand years before Abraham's time. There may have been a similar rite for the burying of the kings of the Third Dynasty (2300 B.C.), but again self-immolation, like the Indian *sutee*, is not really human sacrifice. We commonly find the bodies of infants buried in front of the altars in the household chapels of Abraham's time, but that may be due to the desire to put the child im-

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But long ago the practice had been known, and the knowledge of it had not altogether passed away; the offering of the animal had taken the place of the killing of the man, but the actual words of the service would not let people forget that this was a substitution.

“The lamb is the substitute for humanity;  
He hath given up a lamb for his life:  
He hath given up the lamb’s head for the man’s  
head;  
He hath given up the lamb’s neck for the man’s  
neck;  
He hath given up the lamb’s stomach for the  
man’s stomach.”

or again,

“Give the hog as his substitute;  
Give the flesh for his flesh, the blood for his  
blood,  
And let the demons accept them.”<sup>1</sup>

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mediately under the protection of the family gods; had they been killed, the practice could scarcely have failed to find record in the texts.

<sup>1</sup> Dhorme, *La religion assyro-babylonienne*, p. 274, and *Choix de textes religieux assyro-babyloniens*, No. 157; English version from Delaporte, *Mesopotamia*, p. 163.

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If Abraham could at the last rebel against the customs of Canaan that had so nearly led him astray, he was vindicating the beliefs which he had learnt at Ur. It may not be a mere coincidence that the description of the victim slain in Isaac's stead, the "ram caught in a thicket" seems to recall a figure stereotyped in Sumerian art of which the earliest and most vivid examples shew us the rampant he-goat tied by silver chains to the boughs of flowering shrubs.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the stories of the later patriarchs there are allusions which seem to shew that the tradition of Ur still held good. Jacob has a dream at Bethel, and "behold, a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it".<sup>2</sup> Surely the vision was based on what he had been told of the Ziggurat at Ur on the top of which stood the shrine called "Heaven" while three stairways, the "ladders" of the dream, went up from earth to the house of the Moon-god and up and down them went the solemn processions of the priests. The Ziggurat of Babylon,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ur Excavations*, Vol. II, "The Royal Cemetery", Pl. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. xxviii, 12.

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which was built by the same king as built that of Ur, and on the same lines, is faithfully described in the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel; the piety of its builders is indeed misrepresented as a threat against the gods—"Let us build us . . . a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven", and the Lord said, "This is what they begin to do, and now nothing will be withholden from them which they purpose to do"—but the misrepresentation is eloquent, for it rests on a misunderstanding of the name of the Babylonian Ziggurat, "the Link between earth and heaven".

And a curious, perhaps a characteristic light is thrown upon one of the less reputable incidents in the patriarchal story by a discovery of tablets made at Kirkuk in Iraq, on the site of the ancient city of Nuzi. The incident is that related in Genesis xxxi, 19-55, the theft by Rachel, Jacob's wife, of the *teraphim* or household gods of her father Laban, and the hot pursuit of the runaways by Laban and his sons. Jacob himself is declared to have had no knowledge of the theft; but it is curious that his favourite wife should involve them both in such risk in order to get possession of images which were not at all in keeping with the religious views of her husband; and it is also

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curious that if, as is probable, the images were things of little intrinsic value, mere figurines of moulded clay such as we find in quantities at Ur, her family should have made such strenuous efforts to recover them: yet Laban starts off prepared for murder. The Kirkuk tablets prove that the population of Nuzi was largely composed of Amorites or Hurrians who may be blood-relations of the Habiru or Hebrews, but the city was subject to Babylon, and therefore the Code of Hammurabi would be in force there. One of the tablets<sup>1</sup> shews that according to Nuzi law the possession of the household gods conferred the privileges

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<sup>1</sup> Gadd, *Tablets from Kirkuk* in *Revue d'Assyriologie*, XXIII (1926), pp. 49-161, Tablet No. 51, a contract between a man named Našwa and his adopted son Wullu reads: "If there be a son of Našwa, he shall divide (the estate) equally with Wullu, and the gods of Našwa the son of Našwa shall take: but if there be no son of Našwa then Wullu shall take also the gods of Našwa. Also, he has given his daughter Nuhuia to Wullu to wife; if Wullu shall take another wife he shall vacate the lands and houses of Našwa". Gadd points out the connection with the story of Rachel and the *teraphim* and also the resemblance of the last paragraph in the contract to Laban's exhortation (Gen. xxxi, 50) "if thou shalt take wives beside my daughters—no man is with us; see, God is witness betwixt me and thee".

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of primogeniture. Consequently Rachel, in stealing the *teraphim*, stole her brother's birthright and made Jacob the legal heir to the wealth of Laban—of which he had already secured so large a share—and it was to recapture their inheritance that Laban's sons pursued Jacob for seven days. Once again then the Babylonian tradition is necessary to explain the Bible story.

It would be patently unreasonable to expect that in every recorded incident in the lives of the patriarchs the influence of the early training of the first of them should be manifest: if we can but catch an occasional glimpse of it, that is all that we can ask, and that there are such occasional glimpses I have tried to shew. In the case of Hagar the whole story is really unintelligible without the background of the traditions which Abraham brought with him from Ur; in other cases there is merely an allusion which is not emphasised in any way and so causes no difficulty even if the point of it is missed, but is only properly understood through a knowledge of Sumerian customs. Such allusions are the hall-mark of an early date. Between the time of Abraham's wanderings and that of the Israelite settlement in Palestine

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the conditions of life had changed radically; it is most unlikely that any Hebrew author could have inserted them in a narrative newly composed; even if he had had the archæological knowledge his allusions would have been self-conscious and, since they were addressed to an ignorant audience, would have had to be accompanied by an explanation. As it is, they are unobtrusive, and they accurately reflect the conditions peculiar to the period with which the stories deal, and therefore they have the greatest weight as evidence for the date of the stories. From the faithfulness of the local colour, which a later age could not have produced, we can confidently argue to the antiquity of the oral tradition. This does not in itself prove that the stories are true; but if it can be shewn that the account of an event goes back to within measurable distance of the event itself we can reasonably assume that memory has played a greater part than invention, and where the account is not intrinsically improbable only prejudice will reject it.

The traditions relating to the life of Abraham must then be considered to be old because they presuppose a relation to Sumerian culture which existed in his day and would not have been understood in after

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times: that is an important point. But the fact that such a relation can be shewn to have existed is important in another way. As we see him in the pages of the Old Testament Abraham has no real antecedents; history begins with him. It is very different if we can regard him as the heir, though it be but by adoption, of the age-old civilisation of Ur, for so not only do his individual acts become intelligible but he himself appears as marking a stage in the ordered evolution of thought and morals: the continuity of history is not broken but emphasised by his emergence.

To prove that Abraham's citizenship of Ur influenced him throughout his life, it was necessary to trace what was latent in the narrative, unconsidered points to which only recent research has lent interest; but there are also two whole sections of the Old Testament, namely, the first chapters of Genesis with the stories of the Creation and the Flood, and the Books of the Law, in which Babylonian connections have long been recognised: have we here a direct legacy from Ur transmitted through the patriarchs?

The question has been much disputed, and since the arguments are not the same for the two cases I must treat of them separately.

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Of the Babylonian Creation-story only part has been recovered, and that is just the barbarous legend of the warring gods which was necessarily eliminated from the Hebrew version. In the Old Testament the non-Hebrew word *tehom* translated, on the strength of a later gloss, as the "darkness" that was on the face of the primæval waters, is beyond question the same as the Babylonian Tiamit, the goddess of chaos; the one word is enough to prove dependence. Even without it, the Mesopotamian origin of the legend would have been manifest, for the account given of the Creation is one which could appeal only to dwellers in a deltaic country. The mountaineers of Asia Minor would scarcely have imagined their ranges drowned beneath the primæval ocean, but when it is written "And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so", we recognise the process which the people of Lower Mesopotamia saw going on daily, the process whereby in truth the delta was formed. Moreover, the order of creation, which corresponds for the most part so well with the actual sequence of nature, is broken in one particular, for before the sun and the stars are made, as soon as the dry land

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appears, "the earth brought forth grass, herb yielding seed after its kind, and tree bearing fruit". Here again it is the dweller in the river valley who speaks. His is a strictly human outlook; for him the barren steppes of the high desert are nothing, he thinks only of that kindly earth which supports the life of man, and that was the earth which with the drying of the marshes formed gradually before his eyes, the amazingly rich soil of the river delta from which as soon as the waters were withdrawn grass and trees and grain sprang in luxuriant growth. That the Hebrew legend of the Creation originated in the lower reaches of the Euphrates is certain, but it has been entirely recast, and seeing that the whole account of the Creation and fall of man, which is so prominent in the Old Testament, is lost to us in the Babylonian, the degree of dependence cannot be estimated. But in the case of the Flood story accident has preserved for us the greater part of the Babylonian version, and here not only the incidents of the tale but often its actual phrasing can be found faithfully reproduced by the Hebrew: and since the oldest cuneiform copies now extant were written as early as the time of Abraham's birth, there can be no question as to their being older

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than the so-called Mosaic rendering. It is definitely a Mesopotamian legend, set against the background of an historical disaster for which material evidence has been found in the soil of Ur—the silt from the upper reaches of the Euphrates piled high above the ruins of the antediluvian town: it was a widespread but a local inundation, and only in the land in which it happened, in the Euphrates delta, could the story have originated and the precise touches of local colour been applied. The local colour is preserved in the Hebrew version, e.g., we have the caulking of the gopher-work ark with bitumen, that characteristic product of Mesopotamia, and the shallowness of the waters which were only twenty-six feet deep and yet deep enough to drown all the country; but, of course, the tale is moralised and, in spite of the retention in Hebrew of the plural form for God, the crude polytheism of the Babylonian has given place to the monotheism of the late Jews. The differences between the two stories in spirit are very great, but the parallels, extending to verbal identity, are not less remarkable, and that the Hebrew is derived from the Babylonian is a fact beyond dispute. But this does not affect the question as to the time in Hebrew his-

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tory at which they took over the Babylonian story and made it their own. Abraham could have brought it with him from Mesopotamia. The patriarchs sojourned in a Palestine whose towns at least were more or less impregnated with Mesopotamian culture.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the period of the Kings both Israel and Judah were in close touch with the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. During the Captivity the Jews lived amongst Babylonians and were profoundly affected by their religious as well as their social ideas. At any one of these times it was possible for the Hebrews to borrow the cosmological legends of the East.

It has been argued that only in the time of the Captivity in the sixth century B.C. did the Jews become acquainted with the stories of the Creation and the Flood. It is certainly true that the theological ideas inherent in the story as we have it are post-Exilic, and that the final editing must have taken place after or during the Captivity. But had the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> The Ishtar temple at Mishrifeh near Hamath and the records of the Sumerian business houses there go back to the twentieth century B.C., and what is true of Mishrifeh was true of other urban centres.

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scribes then first adopted the Babylonian legend they would have worked upon the more or less stereotyped and accepted version with which late cuneiform copies have made us familiar, whereas the Hebrew Flood story (like the Creation story) is a combination of two versions both differing in certain details from the late Babylonian. Further, one at least of those versions goes back to pre-Exilic times; J is assigned by the critics to the period of the Kings of Israel and Judah, and admittedly contains earlier material.

The "prophetic" books J and E were compiled not by painstaking scholars of the class to which the author of the Priestly Code would seem to belong, but by the simpler-minded champions of the religion of Jehovah, who wrote at times when that religion was constantly threatened by the apostasy of the kings and tribes. Such would seem to be the last people deliberately to take over from the heathen against whom they unwearyingly inveigh stories alien to the faith they upheld. Moreover, the fact which some critics have brought forward as evidence for the late introduction of the Flood and Creation stories, namely, that there is no reference to them in other parts of the Old Testament, really points the other

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way; if the stories had not been an essential part of the Hebrew tradition, there was no need for the late redactors to adopt and incorporate them. And that they should have been known and yet not mentioned in the later books need not surprise us. In modern English poetry, in political pamphlets and in "histories of our own times" we should probably search for a long time before finding any reference to Arthur and his Round Table; the reason is not that the writer and his readers had never heard of the Arthurian legends, but that the reference would be beside the point. In precisely the same way, the cosmological stories of the first chapters of Genesis are not germane to the subjects with which the Old Testament authors in general had to deal,<sup>1</sup> and it would have been surprising if they had referred to them. The fact that they were included in the written books in spite of their having so little to do with the subsequent history

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<sup>1</sup> The verse in the Decalogue "for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is and rested the seventh day" (Exod. xx, 11) is an obvious reference to Genesis I-II, 3; I do not emphasise it here because it has been supposed to be an addition made to the E text on the basis of P, who is responsible for the final form of Genesis I-II, 2.

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of the Hebrew race can only be taken to mean that they were already an essential part of the religious inheritance of the race and could not be omitted. And we can carry the argument further.

The two versions of the story (J and P) combined in the Old Testament differ considerably, and since they must have started by being the same they must have been in circulation for a long while for such variations to have developed. J is as old as the Monarchy, or nearly so, and P is here using a source not less ancient than J; consequently we have to look to a time anterior to the Monarchy for the first taking over by the Hebrews of the Mesopotamian legends. It is quite possible that those legends were current in Palestine in the time of the patriarchs; certainly amongst the Sumerian merchants and agents in the towns they must have been familiar, and there is nothing to shew that they had not spread more widely and formed part of the popular tradition: but on the other hand there is nothing to shew that they had. Seeing that we have no documentary evidence whatsoever for the religious beliefs of the Palestinian and Syrian peoples at that time, we are not justified in assuming that the patriarchal family borrowed the

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Flood and Creation stories from the tribes amongst whom they wandered; we may admit the possibility, but beyond that we cannot go.

A recent archæological discovery has an important bearing on the question. The hero of the Flood is in the Babylonian version named Uta-napishtim, in the Hebrew Noah; between the two names there is no connection. Although in the Old Testament an explanation of the name Noah is given, it is one of those punning plays on words which seem to be *post hoc* inventions—attempts to explain what would otherwise have no meaning; and although this is not necessarily so in the present case, yet there is very little point in the explanation given, and “Noah” does not recur elsewhere in Hebrew either alone or as a component part of a name. We might fairly ask why it became the name of the Hebrew version of Utu-napishtim. Father Burrows<sup>1</sup> has pointed out that in a “Harrian” fragment of the Flood legend the hero is named Nahmolel or Na-ah-mu(?)—li-el, and that this name either by derivation or by simple abbreviation such as occurs in Hebrew (cf. Pul, king of

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<sup>1</sup> *Notes on Harrian*, in J.R.A.S., 1925, pp. 281-4.

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Assyria = Tiglath-Pileser) is connected with the familiar Noah. The "Harrian" dialect in which the tablet is written was that spoken throughout the Middle Euphrates area, which includes the Haran district.

Abraham lived with Terah at Haran, Rebekah came from there, at Haran Jacob stopped for fourteen years. If the Flood story was current there, as we now know that it was, and was told of a hero whose name begins with just those letters which form the name of the Hebrew Flood hero,<sup>1</sup> does it not follow that the Hebrew version of the Babylonian story is indebted to a northern rendering of it? Further, as Burrows remarks, the fact of the legend being current in the North would also account for the interpolation of the name Ararat, which does not appear in the Babylonian original, as that of the "mountain" whereon the ark came to rest; for to a northern people who had adopted the story and no longer localised its scene

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<sup>1</sup> The vocalisation of the Sumerian and Babylonian names, which look so unwieldy as spelt out in the syllabic script, is quite unknown. *Nahmolel* as pronounced may have sounded very much more like Noah (semitic *Nuh*) than a comparison of the cuneiform and the modern English Bible names would suggest.

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in southern Mesopotamia, the highest mountain of their own world would naturally suggest itself as that which would first emerge above the waters of the Flood. We do not know how far, if at all, the Harrian version of the Flood legend extended into Syria proper, and therefore we cannot exclude the possibility that it came to the knowledge of the Hebrews in Syria or even in Palestine: but since we do know that it was current in Haran and that the patriarchal family was connected with Haran for several generations it is more legitimate to argue that the name of Noah was grafted on to the Hebrew tale of the Flood at Haran and in the patriarchal period.

I say "grafted on" deliberately. The patriarchs did not hear the Flood story first in Haran. If Abraham came out of Ur it is inconceivable that that story in its Sumerian form was unfamiliar to him, and it was only in one or two details that it later took on a northern tinge which the long connection with Haran makes perfectly natural. The Genesis stories of the Creation and the Flood are part of the inheritance which Abraham brought with him from his first home; as he received them they were the barbarous legends of the cuneiform texts, and it was only by

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slow degrees and by many editings that they assumed the form in which we have them now; but Ur supplied the raw material out of which was evolved, in the light of a higher moral conception of God, the majestic cosmogony of the Old Testament.

At the beginning of the year 1902 the French excavator, de Morgan, working at Susa in Persia, found a great stone on which was inscribed the code of laws drawn up by Hammurabi, king of Babylon, about 1910 B.C. The stone itself is in the Louvre; the text, which is nearly complete, only five out of the forty-nine columns having been erased, was first published by Scheil;<sup>1</sup> for English readers a literal translation was brought out by Johns in 1903.<sup>2</sup> At once it was recognised that between the new-found Code and the Laws of Moses, hitherto supposed to be unique, there were astonishing points of resemblance. The religious and ritual enactments of the Old Testament were, of course, independent; but on the social side, where conditions in the two countries might be even remotely similar, the legislative principles were the

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<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, Vol. IV, pp. 11-162.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. W. Johns, *The Oldest Code of Law*.

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same and individual laws were often identical; so close was the parallel that the dependence of the Hebrew on the older Babylonian Code could not be doubted. But such direct comparison might well be misleading. Criticism had had no difficulty in establishing the fact that in the Hebrew books of the Law there were numerous codes and numerous recensions; the latest codes were not older than the Babylonian exile, for the earliest the champions of the extremest orthodoxy claimed an authorship no earlier than the time of Moses, the traditional law-giver. Some clauses wherein Babylonian influence was most obvious were almost certainly late, and it could even be argued that the Babylonian influence became progressively more apparent in the various codes according as these were later in date. This being so, it might reasonably be doubted whether the original Hebrew law bore any relation at all to the Babylonian; the points of resemblance could be explained as accretions due to the subsequent history of the people. Thus, the pre-Israelite population of Palestine, much of which was absorbed by the Hebrews, had at one time lived under Babylonian control; throughout the period of the Monarchy the two Hebrew kingdoms had been in-

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dependent indeed of Babylonian rule, but often in close and amicable relations with Mesopotamia; and finally in Babylonia the Jews had passed their years of exile: there had therefore been every opportunity for the primitive Semitic customs of the Hebrews to be modified by borrowings from and imitation of their more civilised and infinitely more powerful neighbours, and the final recension of their laws would only accentuate a gradually growing debt to that Hammurabi Code which was still in the sixth century B.C. the basis of Babylonian law.

In all this there is a certain amount of truth. But if what is admittedly ancient in the Law of Moses, namely, the Book of the Covenant (Exod. xx, 23-xxiii, 33), be taken apart from what may be later accretions, the Babylonian colouring is still there, the influence of Hammurabi still makes itself felt. By the conservative school of modern critics the Book of the Covenant is assigned to Moses, the traditional author of the whole, and would date to about the fourteenth century B.C.; by the opposing school it is at least admitted to have been the law under which was organised the settlement of the tribes in Palestine, and whichever view be taken, the difficulty of the Baby-

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lonian colouring remains. If Moses first propounded the Book of the Covenant before ever entering the Promised Land, how did he come to base it on the ideas and on the phraseology of Hammurabi? And if it date from the troubled years of the settlement, can we suppose that the Hebrews took over as the groundwork of their future polity the laws of the nations whom they proposed to extirpate as accursed and unclean?

Hammurabi's Code is, of course, a compilation. He did not invent it, but reduced to a consistent system the varying laws already current in his empire. He had inherited the throne of Babylon; he had gradually extended his dominions, and after many years of careful preparation attacked his powerful rival, Rim-Sin, king of Larsa, and by his victory gained control of Southern Mesopotamia: then, as king of Sumer and Akkad, he proceeded to unify the social organisation of his realm, modifying no more than was necessary the traditions of his old and new subjects. There are fragments of older codes of Sumerian law extant, and by comparison with them we can judge of the extent to which Hammurabi was an innovator. Semitic custom and Semitic morality

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did not always agree with the Sumerian in the severity with which offences were to be punished; but the changes made in the old laws are changes of detail, and we can be sure that they were introduced not arbitrarily but in accordance with precedents existing in the northern part of the kingdom. In exactly the same way Moses in his social legislation must have codified the existing customs of the Hebrews; the Book of the Covenant, at whatever date it was written, gave authoritative sanction to what was already traditional.

The need for it was obvious. During a long sojourn in Egypt, where they were perforce subject to the law of the land, the Hebrews had lost touch with their ancestral customs—Moses himself omitted to circumcise his son at the proper season<sup>1</sup>—and if they were to regain their status as an independent people an affirmation of the half-forgotten tribal laws was absolutely necessary. The whole burthen of Moses' message is an appeal to the past. On the religious side he preaches the god who is, albeit under a new name, the god of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob; he

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<sup>1</sup> Exod. iv, 25.

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leads the people out of Egypt that they may have fulfilled in them the covenant made to their forefathers; the land of promise is no new thing, but an inheritance from the patriarchs who dwelt in it and to whom it had been given: the law also which from henceforth must be the sole law of the tribes can be none other than that sanctified by the ancient usage of the patriarchal family. I have tried to shew not only that Abraham as a citizen of Ur ought to have been familiar with Sumerian law, and may therefore have retained elements of it in his nomadic life, but that there is in the Old Testament concrete evidence for the fact that the tent-law of his family was actually the law of Sumer; that being so, the traditional law of the early Hebrew people which was codified in the Book of the Covenant would be in the main reminiscent of the Hammurabi Code.

If this view be not admitted the difficulty of explaining the close parallels between the two codes, that of Hammurabi and that of Moses, becomes almost insuperable. We have to assume that part of the common material is derived from a common source, the primitive customs of Semitic nomads as illustrated

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by those of the modern Arab,<sup>1</sup> and that such custom was (a) traditional amongst the Hebrews before their entry into Canaan and is therefore enshrined in the Book of the Covenant and (b) traditional amongst the Semitic subjects of Hammurabi and was therefore admitted by him into his Code. For the other part of the common material which is of definitely Sumerian character we must assume (since Moses was *ex hypothesi* ignorant of it) that the Israelites took this over from the settled inhabitants of Palestine who were living subject to Babylonian law. Now we know nothing at all as to what "primitive Semitic custom" may have been. That the Semitic subjects of Hammurabi were of nomad descent or would cherish nomadic law is a theory for which we have no historical proof, and the suggestion that such was the primitive law of the Hebrews discounts the general statement in the Old Testament that the ancestor of the Hebrews came from a civilised setting and disregards the fact that in one important case at any rate

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<sup>1</sup> But the modern analogy is very dangerous, for it is impossible to say to what extent modern Arab custom is itself derived from Hebrew and even from Babylonian codified law.

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he acted in strict accordance with Babylonian law. We cannot affirm that at the time of the Israelite invasion of Palestine the settled inhabitants of that country followed the Babylonian code—they had long been subject to Egypt, and we might rather expect their legislation to shew Egyptian influence, but as a matter of fact we know little or nothing about it; and we cannot prove that the Israelites did borrow wholesale the social customs of their enemies and neighbours.

The laws upon which the Code of Hammurabi is based were current in Ur at the time when Abraham lived there, and we know that on occasion he would act upon those laws after he had begun his wandering life in Palestine. There was a great deal in the Code which would not be applicable to that manner of life and would therefore be dropped; there were clauses which desert conditions were likely to modify in detail, even while the principles of the Code were preserved; but as the family developed into a clan and the clan into a tribe the judgments of the elders would still be based on the tradition of Sumerian law inherited from Abraham. These were the traditions resuscitated and reaffirmed by Moses. Even if there

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were no part of the corpus of Hebrew law contained in the Mosaic books which could be assigned to an early date in the history of the people, we could still fairly argue that whatever enactments Moses may have made would have been in the Babylonian tradition: if no more than the Book of the Covenant be allowed by critics to be early the Babylonian influence is there and can be explained in no other way than this. And if the earliest Hebrew code is derived from Babylon through the patriarchs, this explains also that on which critics have insisted, the increasingly Babylonian colouring of the later additions to Hebrew law. For under the Monarchy the more complex conditions of urban life called for new legislation to supplement that which had sufficed for the wandering tribes. There were established communities all about, more civilised than Judah and Israel, and the kingdoms were in touch with the great empires of Babylon and Assyria and of Egypt; naturally the law-makers would look about them for guidance, and naturally they would select for imitation that body of law which was most in harmony with their own; and since their law was based on Hammurabi's, and Hammurabi's Code was still pre-eminent in Mesopotamia, it would

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approve itself to them as a pattern. The scribes of Israel were always conservative and traditionalist; the fact that they were so ready to graft Babylonian law on to their own was due to the fact that their own was by origin Babylonian, and the process therefore did no violence to the past.

Abraham then did not come away from Ur empty-handed. He brought with him a pride in his upbringing, in the greatness of his city, which kept him an alien amongst the tribes through whose grazing-grounds he moved and saved him from sinking to their level and losing his identity in the common ruck. He brought with him those stories of the world's creation and of the Flood which, moralised by his descendants, have been as history or as parable treasured by half the world for four thousand years. He brought with him the laws of Ur and, handing them down through the generations of his house, laid the foundations of that Mosaic code which is still the Law of the Jews and has been professedly adopted by most Christian nations as the basis of their own systems.

## *Chapter 6*

### ABRAHAM: THE FAMILY GOD

**B**ut it is as the founder of a new religion that Abraham interests us most. The contribution which the Hebrew people has made to civilisation is pre-eminently a contribution to its moral and religious aspects; the modern world is permeated with religious ideas either taken directly from the Jewish scriptures or inculcated by the Christian and Moham-medan faiths which were in large measure founded on them. In any case, simply as the traditional begetter of his race, Abraham could not fail to rank high amongst the historical characters of the past, but his claim ranks infinitely higher if he was at the same time the originator of the faith which has at once set the Hebrews apart from the world and brought them into spiritual affinity with so large a part of it. That he did originate that faith it would be idle to deny, but can we not go behind the mere affirmation and

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define more closely what it was that he did? We may ask by what steps, whether by the gradual evolution of ideas or by a sudden flash of enlightenment, he arrived at a new knowledge of God.

It has been held by some that Abraham was the depository of divine truths handed down in his family from the remote past. The theory, which is based simply on a sentimental reluctance to admit that he was ever a pagan, can be dismissed forthwith. There is no evidence whatsoever to shew that any esoteric knowledge was treasured by the ancestors of Abraham, concerning whom we know nothing at all, and on the other hand it is expressly stated by early Hebrew tradition that in Mesopotamia the patriarchal family shared in the common paganism of the time and place—"your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood (i.e. of the Euphrates) in old time, even Terah the father of Abraham and the father of Nachor; and they served other gods";<sup>1</sup> lastly, the theory is quite inconsistent with the Genesis account of Abraham himself. The Old Testament explicitly attests something in the nature of a revelation granted to the man

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua xxiv, 2.

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[though in the older Jahvistic document this takes the form of a promise rather than an enlightenment (Gen. xii, 1-3) and the "Covenant with the revelation" is preserved only in the Priests' Code (Gen. xvii, 2-9,)] and it would certainly seem to imply something in the nature of a conversion of the man such as later tradition has attributed to him. The narrative gives no grounds for supposing that he rose to any great heights in his conception of the nature of the deity—on the contrary, the promise of material blessing seems more important than the revelation of God, and the story of the sacrifice of Isaac proves how far short he fell of the spiritual insight which his successors were to attain,—but there was a change; something did happen. Not only the actions of the patriarch himself, but the whole subsequent history of the Hebrews makes this clear. Somehow or other Abraham freed himself not merely from the accidentals of paganism but from an element essential to it, so that his personal freedom was a turning-point in the religious advancement of the world.

Revolutions are seldom if ever purely arbitrary, and it is only in the light of the past that they can be understood. On the one hand their attitude to-

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wards existing conditions is negative—they deny their validity and profess to have nothing in common with them; but on the other hand their opposition to the world as it is must needs be prompted by an antecedent concept of a different world. The rebel translates into action thoughts or tendencies perhaps unconsciously but none the less vitally at variance with those which have made things what they are; and those thoughts have generally been maturing for a very long time before, in the hands of one man or of a group of men, they become an instrument for change. Even in the case of the individual and where the change seems most bewilderingly abrupt it yet is possible to find the seeds of it already in existence, to distinguish currents of thought which bring into the orderly scheme of things what would otherwise be outside the bounds of logical action. In the Old Testament account the “conversion” of Abraham appears as causeless as it was to prove momentous; nothing prepares the way for it, and yet that change of heart must have had a motive and a method. The material setting of his youth with which archæology supplies us cannot have furnished the impulse, and it remains to ask whether in the religion

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of Ur there was anything which could have done so. In so doing we need not beg the question. It may be that the influence, if any, was one of mere repulsion, that we shall be able to recognise definite tenets against which Abraham rebelled with no more prompting than might have been due to an honest and an enquiring mind; on the other hand, we may discover in the paganism of the day tendencies which had only to be followed for them to lead to a higher level of thought.

The religion of Ur was a polytheism of the grossest type. Written texts preserve for us the names of about five thousand Sumerian gods, great and small—or perhaps it would be more correct to say, about five thousand names of Sumerian gods, which is not the same thing, for in many cases the same god is called by different names. A great deal of confusion not only in our knowledge but in the ideas of the ancients arises from the fact that the religion was at one and the same time the religion of Sumer as a whole and that of the individual Sumerian cities. There was a proper pantheon of Sumerian gods recognised by the nation, but as all the gods were essentially local the importance of each of them differed greatly in the

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different cities, and in different cities the local manifestations of the same god might receive different titles, and these might give rise to an apparent diversity of persons; thus Inurta is called Ningirsu at Lagash (where his temple was in the Girsu quarter) and In-Shushinak at Susa. Further, the functions of the various gods were not very strictly defined and would often overlap: thus Ninurta is at once a vegetation-god and a god of war, Lord of the Harvest and Mighty Hero, the First-born of Enlil; Ilbaba is also the First-born of Enlil, also God of Battles, and Ishtar is the Lady of Battles (in which case she can be called also Anunitu) as well as the Goddess of Love. According as one function or another was emphasised locally, the character of the same god would vary in different places; and again the functions attributed to one god at Ur might correspond to those of a different god at Nippur or Babylon. Consequently the precise shade of a Sumerian's religion, the conception which he entertained of the gods whom all Sumerians were supposed to worship, depended very much on the particular city in which he chanced to live. And there was another fact which made yet more important from a religious point of view the place of his habita-

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tion. Each city was under the special protection of one god, who was the city's lord and king. He ruled the citizens in time of peace, led their armies in war, and within the limits of his territory was supreme god, his worship there overshadowing the respect paid to all other deities. The patron of Ur was the Moon-god Nannar. Scattered throughout the city there were numerous temples and shrines consecrated to other members of the pantheon—we have excavated some and know the names of dozens more that existed in the twentieth century B.C.—but to Nannar the city itself was dedicated. In Chapter 3 of this book I have described how great an area in the heart of the old town was set apart as the Moon-god's sanctuary; the Ziggurat was his and his only, and although other gods had their shrines within the sacred enclosure they were there as attendants on the majesty of Nannar; he was the king of Ur, the Lord of Heaven. The only person who at all shared his splendour was Nin-Gal, his wife, whose temple under the shadow of the Ziggurat was one of the most magnificent buildings in the city; but she owed her position to the fact that she was the consort and counterpart of Nannar, and it was thanks to him that

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she enjoyed at Ur a prominence infinitely greater than was accorded to her in any other city. The gods of Sumer were organised not as a republic but as an aristocracy wherein each had his rank, but that rank was not the same in each of the old city-states that formed the Sumerian empire, and in each of them one god was by tradition set far above the rest, and the character of the city's religion varied with the personality of the god. How real was this local predominance of the patron deity can be seen from the cylinder seals wherewith people signed their letters and their legal documents. On the vast majority of the seals dating from the time of the Larsa kings, from the period, that is, towards whose close Abraham must be placed, the subject engraved is a scene shewing the owner of the seal being introduced into the presence of one of the leading gods of the pantheon, and while at Babylon that god would be Marduk and at Erech would be Ishtar, at Ur we find in almost every case either Nannar or his wife, Nin-Gal. The citizen of Ur could not but own allegiance to the divine king of his city, and even strangers living there would almost necessarily conform to the local cult; it would have been strange indeed if the household of

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Terah, living at Ur in the days when "your fathers served other gods" (Josh. xxiv, 2) had been other than followers of the Moon-god. And this inherent probability is supported by the fact that from Ur the household of Terah moved to Haran. Haran was the only other important town of Mesopotamia to have the Moon-god for its special patron; from the one city of Nannar Terah goes to the other, and the change of place involves no transfer of allegiance; it is, of course, impossible to say that the identity of cult determined the choice of Haran, but it does associate the family yet more closely with the worship of Nannar. The probability becomes a certainty in view of recent discoveries. The French archæological mission working at Ras Shamra on the North Syrian coast has found numerous clay tablets written in the Aramic speech of the early Phœnicians,<sup>1</sup> and amongst them are literary texts of a religious character: from them we learn that in North Syria the name of the Moon-god, the local equivalent of Nannar of Ur, was Terah. The man Terah was, as an Aramæan, a blood-relation of the North Syrian peoples, and their lan-

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<sup>1</sup> Reference has been made to these above, *v.* p. 23.

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guage was his also, and there can therefore be no question here of an accidental resemblance between words of different origin and meaning. Whether he was called Terah from the first or whether this is a translation into Aramaic of a Sumerian name compounded with Nannar, such as are common at Ur, e.g., Nannar-lu-du(g), Nannar-ishag, makes no difference at all; in either case he was definitely named after the Moon-god. Nor can it be argued that a name need not necessarily mean anything, that it was simply a label; these "theophoric" names compounded with the name of god—there are many in the Old Testament—were not so stereotyped as to lose their religious significance,<sup>1</sup> and if the father of Abraham was called after Terah-Nannar it can only be because he was under the special protection of that deity. We can take it as certain that the worship of the Moon-god was the faith in which Abraham was brought up.

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<sup>1</sup> This is clearly seen in the case of Saul's son Esh-baal (1 Chron. viii, 33), who was called after the Canaanite god; the orthodox follower of Jehovah who wrote the Second Book of Samuel calls him Ish-bosheth (2 Sam. ii, 10), substituting for the hated name "Baal" a word meaning "abomination".

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And against this certainty we can set the fact that in the story of the patriarchs as recorded in the Old Testament there is not the slightest trace of any Moon-god cult. It cannot be argued that evidence of it may have existed there once but has been bowdlerised by the later editors of the text, as they did deliberately gloss the polytheism of the Creation and Flood legends taken over from the Sumerians, because just as in the Bible version of those legends hints of the old polytheism do remain, so in the Abraham story something would surely have escaped the vigilance of the redactors. But there is nothing. And the argument is not merely a negative one, based on the silence of the historians; everything that we are told about the faith of Abraham and his immediate descendants is essentially opposed to any tenets of the sort. Abraham, from the moment he appears as an independent person, the head of his house, cannot be suspected of Moon-worship; since therefore that had been the worship of his father and of himself in his youth the "conversion" of Abraham becomes a tangible fact.

We can say that we know from what particular form of paganism Abraham was converted; is it

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possible to say how that conversion took place?

As to the manner of his conversion there are the picturesque tales told in the Jewish and Mohammedan traditions. Terah was a manufacturer of idols in Ur, and Abraham being left one day in charge of the shop was approached by an old man, who duly selected a clay figure and wished to buy it. The boy asked what he would do with it when he had got it, and being told that he meant to worship it, expressed his astonishment that one of such reverend age should pay respect to a thing made yesterday and still warm from the oven. Again, returning from the market with the images which had not been sold because he insisted on pointing out to would-be purchasers how useless they were, he set them down in the road and asked them whether they would give him food and drink; and when they did not answer, being bits of stone and wood, he kicked them and broke them in pieces. Again, he enquired of his father which of the gods in the workshop was the most powerful, and being told that it was the largest of the images, waited until his father had gone out and then smashed all save it. On his return Terah, horrified, demanded who had wrought such havoc, and Abraham, pointing to the

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great statue, told him that this had broken all the rest. The angry shopkeeper swore that that was a lie, seeing that the statue was but a block of stone and could have done nothing of the sort, whereupon the boy, taking up his father's words, pronounced all alike to be idols and no gods. Brought before the courts for his blasphemies Abraham raised a more philosophic objection; the statue was but a representation and it was therefore not the statue but what it symbolised that should be worshipped; but that too proved on examination to be an effect and not a cause; behind the visible things of the universe, behind the forces of nature, there was always to be found something more remote and more powerful, until ultimately, through all these mere manifestations, one realised the immanence of the one unseen God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the substance of tales in the Jewish *Midrashim* and in the Koran; cf. also the Aethiopic *Kebra Nagast* quoted by Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, p. 145. Of the Jewish sources the oldest written authority is the *Book of Jubilees* (after 135 B.C.); the versions in other *Midrashim* were mostly written in the Christian era, and it is impossible to trace their oral source; they are in some cases at least fanciful elaborations of the canonical books produced at a late period. The Koran, written at odd times both before and after the Hegira of A.D. 622

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These stories cannot be taken seriously; they are purely apocryphal, based on no ancient authority. The editors of the Old Testament in the form in which we have it make not the slightest reference to them; either then they did not know them, because they were only invented at a later date, or they knew them but considered them unworthy to be included in the text: that the former was the case is virtually certain, and apart from all other considerations it may be pointed out that the arguments whereby the young Abraham is said to have confuted the supporters of image-worship involve theological conceptions which were assuredly not those of the Abraham of the Old Testament but belong to a much later age. The only historical interest that the tales can possibly be said to possess lies in the fact that they agree in making Abraham begin as a "worshipper of strange gods"; otherwise they are amusing and dramatic, but untrue.

In the Old Testament account it is not even stated explicitly that there was any process of conversion; all is taken for granted. Terah died in Haran, and

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and only collected later, depends for its Old Testament history on Jewish sources, and can scarcely rank as an independent authority.

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after that "the Lord said unto Abraham, 'Get thee out of thy country,'" and Abraham obeyed (Gen. xii, 1). How he regarded this "Lord" we are not told until later; how he came to distinguish him from the many gods in the knowledge of whom he had been brought up we are not told at all. Here there is no lightning-flash on the Damascus road, but the whole thing reads so simply and so naturally that it is indeed tempting to look on it, the call and the obedience, as the logical outcome of what had gone before, whatever that might have been. I think it can be shewn that there had been at Ur religious practices and currents of popular thought which, reacting on the altered conditions of the patriarch's life, may have prepared the way for this seeming revolution; it may appear that momentous as the change in Abraham was in its nature and in its consequences, the manner of it was quite unsensational, something that required no comment and no explanation, and that the matter-of-factness of the Biblical record is therefore peculiarly apt.

My fourth chapter closed with a picture of the Sumerians, amongst whom Terah and his family lived, as a dying race. It was not merely that the imperial

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fortunes of Ur had declined and for two hundred years the city had borne the yoke of a foreign overlord, but that the Sumerian nation itself was drawing to its end. And the sickness was of long standing. Once the undisputed masters of the south Mesopotamian valley, by force of arms as well as by genius and culture raised high above their neighbours, they had for many centuries past been losing grip and courage. With the victories of Sargon of Akkad about 2500 B.C. the sceptre had been wrested from Sumerian hands, and for the first time the land was ruled by a Semitic king, and in politics and in trade alike the Sumerians found themselves ousted from the posts of profit by Semites ranking as their equals. Sargon at least maintained the form of the empire which he had taken over from the Sumerians, but his dynasty ended in disaster, and a wild horde of mountaineers, the Guti, "who knew not kingship", swept over the Delta, and for fifty years anarchy prevailed; individual cities might secure themselves by tribute paid to the barbarians, but the complex machinery of a central government had broken down altogether. Such had been the course of history prior to 2300 B.C., and it is therefore not surprising that even before the

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great uprising which introduced the Third Dynasty of Ur, an uprising which was not really a Sumerian renaissance but a revolt of Sumerians and Semites making common cause against the Guti invaders, men of the old conquering race seem to have begun to despair of the State. So I at least would explain why in the art of that time portraiture, the delineation of the character of the individual, reached so high a level at the expense of other branches of sculpture;<sup>1</sup> it was that when the outer world seemed in a hopeless pass man sought refuge in the things of the mind and of the soul, as Saint Augustine brought out his *De Civitate Dei* six years after Alaric and the Goths sacked Rome. But now, in Abraham's time, the process of decay had gone much further. The Third Dynasty of Ur had fallen in its turn, and its fall had been signalised by the complete destruction of the royal city (2170 B.C.); then had come the Elamite domination, and now Hammurabi (1940 B.C.) had made Babylon the capital of a Semitic kingdom and was patently aiming at the conquest of the whole land; even while the southern cities still held out pre-

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Development of Sumerian Art*, p. 131.

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cariously under their alien master Rim-Sin the "peaceful penetration" of the Semites was so insistent that the very language of the Sumerians was falling into disuse, and the scribes were busily entrusting to writing their records and their ritual for fear lest the tradition of them should pass out of mind. There was no mistaking the signs of the times.

Pessimism as regards public life is apt to drive men back upon religion, but for the Sumerian there could be little comfort in the great lords of heaven. The weakness of the theory whereby the gods were strictly localised and the particular god of each city was virtually identified with the city itself lay in this, that the fortune of the city became the measure of godhead. In the spacious days of the Third Dynasty the citizens of Ur, at least those of them who were less far-seeing, might well have turned in gratitude and adoration to Nannar, who had granted them dominion and thereby manifested his power. But the empire founded by Ur-Nammu had come to a sudden and a fearful end, Ur had been burned with fire and a victorious enemy had carried off the statue of Nannar into Elam. The rape of the image was not merely an incident in the general looting of the city,

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it was an act of high symbolism. Nannar himself, the Moon-god, had endured a shameful captivity in the house of the Elamite god In-Shushinak, his conqueror;<sup>1</sup> and although he had later been restored to his place in the shrine that crowned the Ziggurat his old prestige had been shaken, nor was the present condition of Ur, a vassal city dependent on the good will of an ancient rival, likely to restore it. Men who had lost their faith in Ur had lost their faith in Nannar also; but since Ur was still his province they could not shift their allegiance to other great gods whose stars might be more obviously in the ascendant, to Nirgal or to Marduk, for in any case they had little power at Ur, and some at least of them must be reckoned as enemies of Nannar and his people. Where the basis of State government is theocratic there is always the danger that the State worship may become a political formula and cease to have any spiritual appeal, but where theocracy takes so concrete and materialistic a form as it did in Sumer, the divine ruler who has failed to assure the welfare of his subjects

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<sup>1</sup> So the Philistines brought the captured Ark into the house of their God Dagon (1 Sam. v, 1).

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may still impose obedience on them, but they can no longer look to him as a present help in time of trouble.

But it would seem that as men lost touch with the major powers of the pantheon they found another outlet for the religious emotion which plays so large a part in Eastern character. It was not, or was not wholly, in the worship of the minor deities whose shrines we found scattered among the houses of the town.<sup>1</sup> Those deities had their uses, men looked to them for certain material benefits, for success in certain undertakings, but they were strictly limited each to his own department, so that in order to achieve all-round prosperity one had to apportion one's allegiance between them all; there was no one of them who could deal with the whole life of a man or satisfy at all the spiritual element in him. What it was that could inspire and comfort an individual we shall not learn from the religious literature of the Sumerians—that is concerned on the one hand with the State worship, on the other with omens and the rites of sympathetic magic; it can be got only from the interpretation of what archæology has found in the ruins

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<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 104 ff.

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of Sumerian cities. I have reserved until now a description of those features of Sumerian life which seem to throw light upon the more intimate beliefs of the people, namely, their burial customs and their practice of family worship; these must be described and discussed, for only so shall we be able to decide whether in the popular religion of Ur there was anything that could pave the way for Abraham's advance.

Throughout early times it had been the custom of the Sumerians to bury their dead all together in cemeteries lying inside or close to the city. At Ur we have excavated many hundreds of graves which range in date from the period soon after the Flood to the latter years of the Sargonid Dynasty, i.e. about 2400 B.C., and in each period the burials lie close together and one above another in regular graveyards. But after that, apparently at the beginning of the Third Dynasty of Ur (*circa* 2300 B.C.), a new custom was introduced which by the twentieth century had become invariable; there are no more cemeteries set apart for burial, but the dead are laid under the floors of the houses which they had inhabited in their lifetime and in which their descendants continued to dwell.

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And with this change came another, this time connected with the offerings placed in the graves. In the old days men had made provision for the dead according to their means. In the case of the very poor this would mean no more than a few clay vessels for the food and drink absolutely necessary for the needs of the departed soul; in the graves of the better class such are supplemented by vessels of copper or of stone and by weapons and personal ornaments, necklaces of semi-precious stone and gold ear-rings; in the richest graves and in the tombs of kings—the tomb of Queen Shub-ad, who reigned towards 3200 B.C., is a case in point—there is a bewildering abundance of offerings of all sorts, treasures of gold and silver, hundreds of vases in alabaster and coloured stone as well as in precious metal, musical instruments and gaming-boards, everything that might secure to the dead man in the next world the material enjoyment to which he had been accustomed in this.<sup>1</sup> The custom held good throughout the Sargonid Age, but in the twentieth century B.C., although the ordinary householder might be laid below the floor of his home

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<sup>1</sup> See *Ur Excavations*, Vol. II, "The Royal Cemetery".

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in a vaulted brick tomb-chamber such as once had been the prerogative of kings, yet the furniture that was placed with him was beggarly in comparison with the past. For this period also we have excavated hundreds of graves, some of them brick vaults, some of them clay coffins, and it was rarely that we found so much as a single copper bowl or a string of beads; the dead man might have his cylinder seal, because that was a peculiarly personal possession which would have no value after his death and might indeed be a source of danger in anybody else's hands, but in the richest grave there are no treasures of any sort and in most one clay pot for food and one clay cup for drink were considered quite enough. It is undoubtedly true that Ur was not so rich in gold in the days of Abraham as it had been in those of Queen Shub-ad, but none the less it was a great and still fairly flourishing commercial city, so that it would be absurd to pretend that the owners of the large and comfortable houses beneath which the graves lie were too poor to make better offerings to their dead than those graves produced. Nor can we suggest that mere parsimony was the reason, for that could not apply to all cases alike, and the graves were without ex-

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ception poor. There are few things in which men are more conservative than they are in regard to burial rites and few occasions on which they are more ready to make sacrifices than at a funeral; for so marked a breach of custom as we find here the only explanation is a change in the religious ideas of the age, which had come to believe that rich offerings were no longer necessary to the dead. And the change in the matter of offerings is obviously associated with the change in the place of burial.

The dead were buried beneath the floor of their houses, but not at random; there was a proper place reserved for them, and only when that became overcrowded were bodies disposed of elsewhere. The proper place was the family chapel.

In nearly every house, indeed in all but the very poorest, there was at the back, behind the guest-chamber, a long and narrow room which was the chapel for the worship of the household gods. Whereas the rest of the house was generally of two storeys this was of one only; it was entered by a door set towards one end of one of the longer sides, and this end of the room was unroofed and open to the sky, while at the far end a pent-house roof sheltered about

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one-third of the room's length. It therefore formed an outside annexe to the building proper. That extraordinary importance was attached to it is shewn by the fact that in this crowded city where building-land must have been valuable a very considerable part of the area of every house site was sacrificed to it; in most cases it is the largest room in the building, and its presence entailed the loss of a corresponding space on the upper floor also.

The floor was paved with bricks. Under the roof, extending along the whole length of the end wall, there rose from the pavement a solid platform of brickwork about a foot high and three feet wide; this was the altar, and on it we sometimes found still in position the clay cups and platters which had held the offerings. Above it, in the thickness of the end wall, there was a square niche nine or ten inches deep from which a deep groove like an open chimney ran up to end abruptly just below the roof-line; it was in fact a chimney and the niche was a hearth, but it was a hearth for burning incense, and therefore the chimney was left open in front so that while it might make sufficient draught for the incense to burn properly the smoke should come out into the room and not

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be carried through the roof. In one corner of the room there rose from the altar platform a square three-foot pillar which was a pedestal or shew-table; it was built of bricks and plastered with mud, but the plaster was worked into a pattern in relief, generally a panelled design borrowed from woodwork, and was neatly whitewashed; probably on it there were placed *ex votos* and the little terra-cotta reliefs of the gods. In one instance we found against the base of the "shew-table" bitumen sockets for horizontal rods which must have taken the lower ends of curtains; the table therefore would usually be hidden, and only when a service was being held and the rites performed would the curtains be drawn back and the table and whatever stood upon it be exposed to view. The altar, hearth and table are then grouped together at one end, which is, so to speak, the chancel; sometimes it is distinguished from the rest of the chamber by having its pavement raised to a higher level; very often there was behind them a tiny cupboard-like room entered by a door beside the altar, and since in such cupboards we constantly found hoards of inscribed tablets it would seem that they were store-rooms for the family archives.

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The other end of the chapel was open to the sky, and here, a foot or two below the brick pavement, lay the vault which was the family burying-place. To excavate this we would have to lift a few paving-bricks and clear away the earth filling from the original pit or entrance-shaft which was in front of the vault; then the door would be found, roughly blocked with bricks and mud, and against it there might be one or two clay offering-vessels. Inside the tomb-chamber, which would measure perhaps six feet by four, the skeleton of the latest occupant would be seen laid upon its side in the attitude of one asleep, the legs slightly bent at hip and knee, the hands brought up in front of the face, sometimes holding a cup: at the back of the chamber and in the corners, unceremoniously cleared away to make room for the new-comer, there would be piled together in confusion the bones of the older dead, three or four or even a dozen bodies. These, then, were not the graves of individuals, but real family vaults intended to serve for all the members of the household when their turn came to die. Of course, the chambers might in time become over-full, or if two deaths occurred in the same house in quick succession it might have been

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unfit to re-open the vault for the second of the two; it is therefore very common to find in front of the vault or alongside it inverted clay coffins containing individual burials, and occasionally we have found such filled with loose, dry bones, not all belonging to the same body, as if the tomb-chamber had been swept clean and its contents decently reburied. In the case of children—and infant mortality was very heavy—it was not thought worth while to open the vault at all, and they are always buried apart, in clay pots, or in a bowl covered by a second bowl, or in a queer clay coffin like a rabbit-hutch, with a little door which was tied on with string; and there is nearly always one such child's burial set almost flush with the pavement just in front of the "shew-table". When the whole chapel area was full, then bodies might be laid under the floors of other rooms (or perhaps those we found there were the bodies of slaves and retainers not meriting the honour of a place in the chapel), but a man had to be buried in the chapel if that were possible, and if that might not be he must at least be buried inside the house.

The discovery at Ur of the domestic chapel as a regular feature of the private house was a complete

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surprise, for there is no mention of it in Sumerian literature and there had been no evidence for it hitherto in excavations. Houses of the Persian period have been dug at Ur, houses of the late Babylonian Age both at Ur and at Babylon, but they contain no chapels, and there are none in the few Kassite houses known to us, so that we can conclude that some time after the Larsa period they ceased to be built. What is more important for our present purpose is that they would seem to have been a comparatively recent introduction in Abraham's day, in fact, to have come in at about the same time as the custom of burying the dead inside the house walls; if that could be proved then the connection between the cult of the family gods and the continued presence in the house of the lead members of the family could be regarded as certain.

We have not found all the necessary evidence at Ur because there we have not excavated houses of the earlier periods, but further north, at Tell Asmar, near Baghdad, the Oriental Institute of Chicago has cleared a large part of the ancient town of Ashnunnak and in the houses of the Sargonid period there are no chapels. The Sargonid period comes shortly before that of the Third Dynasty of Ur. When the

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kings of the Third Dynasty were buried their bodies were laid in great underground vaults, and above these were built shrines in which the worship of the deified monarchs could be celebrated, for Dungi and Bur-Sin were gods as well as kings, and naturally therefore required temples; and the interesting point is that the buildings, instead of having the normal temple plan, were modelled on the private houses of living men. At first glance this would look like an exact parallel to the domestic chapels in the houses, especially when we find that in the royal building altars for food offerings were set in the room immediately above the vault, which therefore becomes *par excellence* the chapel of the mortuary temple; but the question cannot be settled so easily. We found indisputable evidence that the mortuary temples were only built after the tombs beneath them were occupied; consequently they were built expressly for the dead and were not houses in which men had lived or would live thereafter; they were really temples, and if they looked like houses it was perhaps only because Dungi and Bur-Sin, being human, were only half gods. On the other hand, although the dead king's family did not inhabit the house under which he lay,

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yet the ritual of the worship of the deified monarch, the burning of sweet oils before the statue in the chamber above his tomb, was in theory at least performed by his eldest son, who bore the title of "Burner of oil for his father", so that up to a point the cult of the dead was even in the case of kings a family affair; and the analogy is strengthened by the fact that the same title "Burner of oil for his father" seems to have belonged to the eldest son of the private citizen also. Certainly we can say that the private chapel and the royal mausoleum were similar in their use, seeing that in each the due offerings were made to the dead who lay below, and the mausoleum was given the form of a house in order that the deified king might live there just as the private citizen was supposed to be still at home with his descendants after his death; and the differences between the two buildings may but reflect the differences between the private man and the deified king. The partial analogy leaves us still in doubt as to which is the original. It may be that Dungi in planning his mausoleum (for he would seem to have started it in his lifetime) made an innovation which set an example to his subjects, or he may have adapted to his own royal and god-like

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state something that already existed in private houses. If Dungi's building was the first, then the private citizen who imitated it added a chapel to his house and at the same time began to bury his dead beneath its floor instead of in an outside cemetery, and in that case chapel and tomb are essentially connected and we can date the change of custom precisely. If Dungi merely modified an existing practice that must mean either that chapel and tomb were already part of the private house or that the dead were buried in the house, but there was no special chapel, and therefore Dungi's building took the form of a house complete with all its rooms; and in that case the private chapel would be a later addition perhaps based upon the royal mausoleum. It is tempting to assume an exact date, but the evidence does not warrant our doing so; it does however justify the conclusion that the domestic chapel was introduced either during or very shortly before the period of the Third Dynasty, and that from the beginning it was intimately connected with the family vault.

I have pointed out how, during the three centuries that preceded the birth of Abraham, the Sumerians' confidence in the State had been shattered by disaster

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and their expectation of help from the State's gods weakened thereby; it was during that time that there grew up amongst them a new practice based on the importance of the Family. With the decay of patriotism the individual as such gained in interest; as the old social order seemed to disintegrate men grasped at the Family as the indestructible unit of society, and to the gods of the family they paid the honour that had once been devoted to the great gods now far off and in part discredited. For the meaning of the change of burial custom is obvious. Instead of being carried out to a cemetery apart where he would be but one of a mixed multitude, soon to be forgotten, the dead man was laid to rest at home, in the home chapel: he never left the house, but continued to inhabit it, shared the same roof as his descendants, was still a member of the family circle, interested as they were in the house's well-being and participating in their life; he took part with them in the family worship that went on above the spot where his body lay and the rites performed in his honour mingled with that worship. And this conception explains also the apparent poverty of the graves. In the old days the mourners had placed in the distant tomb all that they could afford of what a

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man might need in the next world, food and drink in abundance, clothes and jewels, objects of the toilet, tools and weapons, and this they had done partly to do him honour, partly out of fear lest if he should miss anything to which he had been accustomed in life his angry soul might leave the grave to haunt, as an avenging demon, the living who had so cheated him of his own. Of course, regret and the desire to do honour played their part, but there is no doubt that superstitious terrors formed the main motive, and while it is certain that the placing of offerings in the tomb implies a belief in the soul's survival, it is easy to exaggerate the content of that belief. The Sumerian had but the vaguest idea regarding personal immortality. The earnest prayer of a man to the gods was for the good things of this world—"length of days, years of abundance, a throne securely based, a sceptre to subdue the people may she grant me for a gift" is what Warad-Sin asks of Inanna in return for the restoration of her temple, and there is neither here nor anywhere any hint at all of happiness to be had hereafter. For the Sumerian, as for the ancient Greek, the next world was at the best a melancholy place of shadows "where earth is their food, their nourishment

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clay, on the gates and the gate-posts the dust lies undisturbed". That in some manner the soul did survive death he believed, but to little more effect than that it was prudent to propitiate the dead man's soul by offerings which might keep it from doing hurt to the living. What survived was a ghost, and a ghost could be dangerous if angry, dangerous for the very reason which made it possible to avert its anger, namely, that it was not divorced altogether from this world; it was in the tomb, and if it received there what it had enjoyed in this life it was content; if deprived of them, it left the tomb and preyed upon the living.

In the Larsa Age men held as firmly as ever to the belief that the interests of the departed soul centred on the things of our material existence, but they gave to it a new expression. The dead man now remained at home. He still demanded all that had been his in life, but there was no need to make special provision for him as for one cut off from his kind; the lavish offerings of the past were now superfluous because the whole house and all that it contained were at his service. This did not at all mean that due honours paid to the dead were no longer necessary; on the

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contrary, the neglect of one who was so very close at hand would be even more perilous than if he were lost in some outlying graveyard, and a man had to be more careful than ever—from the Books of Omens we know that the spirits of dead relatives might often appear in the house in bodily form “like a living man” and always boded evil. Therefore the cup of water was still placed in the tomb, just as the good Moham-medan peasant to-day will put a cup of water at the grave’s head so that the dead man may have the wherewithal to moisten his lips when he has to face the dread ordeal of Azrael’s cross-examination; there were eventualities to be guarded against, and a vessel of food and drink were still set before the door of the tomb or against the side of the coffin to satisfy any sudden desire whose thwarting might lead to the appearance of an angry ghost; but the real safeguard was the regular ritual of the chapel worship, which continued the respect paid to the father of the family, and the fact that the dead man enjoyed all the goods of the house. The effect of the new custom was to keep him at home and well-disposed, a beneficent and not a fearful spirit.

But the new custom was not inspired by any senti-

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mental interest in the dead man for his own sake; its object was to keep the family intact, to preserve its continuity, the link which binds generation to generation, in defiance even of death. For this reason the dead were buried not at random within the house walls but in the chapel, because that was the essential focus of the family's life, the spot in which its sacred unity was most clearly emphasised. Indeed, we have here a curious parallel to the *penetralia* of the old Roman house with its *lāres* and *penates*, but the actual bones of dead and gone Sumerians took the place of the waxen portraits of the Roman's ancestors: and in the Sumerian chapel as in the *penetralia* the gods of the Family were worshipped.

It would seem that in the Sumerian hierarchy there were really three grades; there were the great gods to whom the State temples were dedicated; there were the lesser gods for whose worship the little shrines by the roadside were built, and there were the family gods. The great gods were pre-eminently personifications of the forces of nature, sun and moon, water and earth and fire, lightning, war—which is the most obvious form of force—fertility and reproduction and death. All power resided in them, but the omni-

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potence of any one was circumscribed by the conditions of polytheism; they were localised, and therefore each could claim full allegiance only from the territory which he ruled, Nannar from Ur, Ishtar from Erech; and they might be at variance one with another and the all-powerful might at any moment be reduced to impotence—Nannar had himself been a prisoner in the hand of his enemies, and now that Larsa was mistress of the south country Shamash, the Sun-god, might claim supremacy even over other cities that had passed under his sway, and the victory of Babylon would mean the overlordship of Marduk. There was no more permanence and no more logic in heaven than there is in human society; nor was there more morality. Virtue was indeed somehow pleasing to the gods, but it was difficult to understand why, seeing that they themselves were far from moral; these grossly anthropomorphic deities who lived in brick houses, kept a regal court, governed cities, owned estates and married mortal women—not in legends, but as an everyday affair—were far too humanly capricious for virtue. They might punish the wrong-doer, but merit could not expect always to be rewarded by them. Consequently the ritual of

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their worship was very largely a matter of magic, the suppliant seeking by spells to bind the god to his wishes, or at best to bribe him with gifts: as with the human official, so with the god; you might hope, illogically, for mercy and justice, but it was generally influence or favour that counted. And the lesser gods who controlled the accidents of life were like them. Because they were strictly departmentalised the functions of any one of them might bring him much more closely in touch with the interests of the individual citizen; thus, if Pa-sag protected travellers in the desert, her goodwill would be of constant service to the caravan-owner, but on the other hand her services were open to all, and there could be very little that was personal in the relations between her and her worshipper, while the narrowness of her sphere unfitted her to be the object of any general and whole-hearted worship. There remained the family gods.

Just as each city had its patron god, so each individual citizen placed himself under the protection of a special deity. Obviously he could not choose one of the greater gods for his purpose; they were too far off and too engrossed in higher politics to be at the call of any ordinary man or to concern them-

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selves with his daily welfare;<sup>1</sup> and it was equally useless to adopt one of the departmental gods whose efficacy was so limited; the patron had to be a very minor deity whose province could be nothing more nor less than the interests of his ward. Only a small god could play so humble a rôle, and one so small as that could not by himself assure protection and good luck; the high gods were still omnipotent and their favour essential, and since they were hard to approach it was the duty of the patron god to act as mediator and intercede with them for man. I have before now spoken of the cylinder seals which the Sumerians carried for the signing of their documents, and have said that the vast majority of those of the Larsa period found at Ur have for their subject the introduction of the seal's owner to Nannar or to Nin-Gal. Always this introduction is made by another god who is the owner's patron. The name of the minor deity is not inscribed on the stone, and the little figures seldom if ever bear any such attributes as would enable us to identify them with any known

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<sup>1</sup> Occasionally a ruling king might presume to do so, but his was a special case and it was not an example that the private citizen would follow.

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god of the pantheon; they are simply human figures wearing the horned head-dress which is the sign of divinity, and while the owner's name may be written, the god who holds him by the hand and leads him into the presence of the Moon-god remains anonymous. Similarly in the domestic chapels no inscriptions have been found to tell us who was worshipped there. It is quite certain that the rites whereby the dead ancestors were honoured and placated formed only one aspect of the family cult and that the chapels were primarily dedicated to the gods, and while there were probably a number of these, we can be sure that the patron deity who figured on the seal of the head of the house was chief amongst them; but his identity remains unknown. We commonly find in the houses and sometimes in the graves of the Larsa period small rather crudely modelled terra-cotta figurines and reliefs of a religious nature.<sup>1</sup> Many of them are religious only in their purpose, that is, they are votive offerings intended to be placed in a shrine, but they represent human beings—the young girl who dedicates her virginity, the woman with an infant at her breast who

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<sup>1</sup> The *teraphim* of the Old Testament, *v.* above, p. 163.

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by her *ex voto* either prays to be given children or returns thanks for the gift of them, the man who would have the god think of him as perpetually in the act of adoration. But very often they represent gods and goddesses, either singly or in pairs, gods walking together, a god and a goddess sitting side by side, with their arms affectionately round each other's necks; very seldom is there an attribute such as would give a hint of their identity, but the horned caps prove their godhead, and we can see in them the nameless minor deities who were the objects of domestic worship.

Between the great gods and the private citizen there was a barrier set over and above that of their moral aloofness: if a man desired to sacrifice to the Moon-god it was a costly and an elaborate business in which he himself played no direct part; everything had to be done through the priest acting as intermediary. But in the private chapel the ritual was conducted by the head of the family, and the Sumerian father, like the Roman *paterfamilias*, was the priest as well as the master of his household. At once the door is open for something far more personal and more intimate than was possible in the State worship

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for the ordinary man; he is now brought into direct contact with his god. Moreover, the family god is not a god of fear; he is the luck-bringer, for the simple but sufficient reason that he is identified with the family, rises and falls with it; and so far from his anger having to be averted, he is there to avert the anger of the High Gods. One would like to know whether his normal namelessness is due to his having no external reality but being an emanation from and a symbol of the family, as was the equally nameless "genius" of the Roman house, but that is pure speculation; similarly it would be more than rash to assume that the Sumerian regarded his patron god as more than a bringer of good luck, approachable, a family god who stood to the household in the same relation as the Moon-god stood to Ur, but of no significance outside of the family circle, a divine mascot not important enough to have a name of his own. We have no right to suppose that the worship of the Family god as practised at Ur in Abraham's time had any more consciously moral appeal than had that of the State gods; in so far as the worshipper's relation to the god was necessarily more personal and more intimate it was perhaps only the more self-seeking.

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The idea of the patron god as mediator for the individual was very old<sup>1</sup>; now, when for the generations that had watched the State's decay the family had become the basis of society, the cult of that god as god of the Family also had grown very much more important than before, but that it had advanced in any other way is unlikely.

Abraham then, brought up in the official worship of the Moon-god of Ur, had at the same time been subject to some such currents of popular belief as I have tried to picture; it remains to be seen whether they can be held to have influenced his later development.

The migration from Ur to Haran, from one city of Nannar to the other, involved no transfer of religious allegiance. Terah and his family would take with them the *teraphim*, the household gods whose province was the home wherever the home might be, and in the North they would find upon the throne of the Aramæan city the same Moon-god worshipped with the

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<sup>1</sup> So Entemena, governor of the city of Lagash, *circa* 2750 B.C., says "Entemena is he whose god in the house of his father is Shul (?); for the life of Entemena unto days long hence may he make prayer to Enlil". (Ur, Royal Inscriptions, No. 1.)

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same ritual as they had known at Ur; there would be nothing in their new surroundings to necessitate or to prompt a change of belief. And as a matter of fact the Old Testament does not associate this migration with the conversion of Abraham; that came later, on the occasion of his leaving Haran for Palestine, after Terah's death. The first recorded revelation of God to Abraham, the first act of obedience to God on Abraham's part, is when at Haran "the Lord said, 'Get thee out of thy country'," and the clan moves towards the land of promise; it is then that Abraham turns to the god whom he is to serve henceforth, and that conversion is the cause of his departure. But in any case it was bound to be the result of it. In the land to which Abraham was setting out Nannar possessed no territorial rights, and although his deity might be recognised there under one name or another he was not the lord of the land. By expatriating himself the second time Abraham cut himself adrift from his country's god also.

It was of course perfectly possible to establish an alien religion in a new centre. A king who conquered his enemies defeated their gods, and if he chose to annexe their territory would add it to his own god's

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dominions, building a temple for him in the captured city and proclaiming him its divine master; that was indeed a normal procedure, for according to this anthropomorphic religion it was the god who led the host, was the real victor and did by his victory acquire new possessions. Thus the outward and visible sign of vassalage was the presence in the vassal state of a temple of the chief god of the overlord, and an obvious compliment to an ally was to dedicate in your own city a shrine to the god he worshipped, so ranking him as one having authority in your land also;<sup>1</sup> always the principle that the gods were local powers held good, and divine supremacy could not be conceived of as divorced from territorial rule. It was not possible then for a private individual coming into a new country to establish his own familiar gods there, for the simple reason that the country necessarily belonged already to some other god or gods who would not admit the claims of an interloper, and the private individual had no power to enforce those claims; he would have had to leave his old gods be-

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<sup>1</sup> So Solomon, in honour of his ally Hiram sets up in Jerusalem a temple of the Phœnician goddess Ashtoreth. (1 Kings xi, 5.)

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hind him, and his most prudent course would be to enquire who were the gods who exercised dominion over the new country and to transfer his worship to them.

This is precisely what Abraham did not do. Instead, he adopted, or acknowledged, a god of his own; and he seems to have done it in a perfectly natural way, so much so that the record takes it as a matter of course. Who then was this god?

Eastern religion has always laid great stress on the *name*. It is not only a mark of identity; it bears in itself something of the virtue of that for which it stands, and the mere knowledge of it bestows power.<sup>1</sup> Thus it is the *name* of God that is in God's emissary to give him authority (Exod. xxiii, 21), and is written on the foreheads of the blessed servants (Rev. xxii, 4), it is on the *name* of Christ that men should believe (1 John iii, 23); merely to mention the name is to acknowledge the reality and the power of the god (Exod. xxiii, 13), and such is the awe of it that to this day the Jew who reads "Jehovah" in his sacred text pronounces it as "Adonai", Lord. It is therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Hoskyns and Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, p. 166.

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the more surprising that nowhere does the Old Testament give the name of the god to whom Abraham transferred his faith, and that Abraham himself did not know it, nor was the knowledge of it vouchsafed to Jacob (Gen. xxxii, 29). Only some centuries later was the identity of this god with Yahweh or Jehovah revealed, and then Moses is definitely told "I am Jehovah, and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah was I not known unto them" (Exod. vi, 2). At the beginning he is simply "the God of Abraham", and as the generations pass he becomes known as "the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob", and there is no title other than this, implying a purely personal relation, by which he can be distinguished. For he has no place-name either, as had so many of the gods. When God once (Gen. xxxi, 13) speaks of himself as "the God of Bethel" it is merely to assure Jacob that he is the God of Abraham by reminding him of a past occasion when he had shewn himself as such, and not in any way to localise his divine power; and although Jacob was tempted to see in Bethel "the house of God and the gate of heaven", yet Bethel was not and never

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became God's seat, his fixed habitation. Although this god promises a wide territory to the descendants of his chosen servant, he has no defined territory of his own; he travels with the nomad clan and his altar is built wherever they may pitch their tents. He is manifestly the god of one particular family, claiming their undivided allegiance and owning no subjects other than them.

It is a perfectly possible thing for a man to invent a god, or to have a revelation of god, and for his descendants to hold fast to the faith which he thus originated, and such is generally supposed to have been the case with Abraham. It is assumed that he received a divine call, and that from that moment the God of whose existence he had suddenly become aware was acknowledged by him and by his sons after him as their God: that is "conversion"; its motive power comes from outside, and so far from depending on the antecedents of the converted it involves a complete break with the past. Now, as I have already pointed out, the Old Testament account, almost casual in its simplicity, does not at all suggest a dramatic change; but in another place it applies to the God of Abraham a title which not only disproves

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anything of the sort but seems to solve the whole question of who that God was. Jacob has been living for fourteen years and more with his kinsman Laban in Haran, where Terah and Abraham had lived before him, and when Laban wishes to bind him by a most solemn oath, he says: "The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge betwixt us" (Gen. xxxi, 53); the God of the patriarchal family is carried back a step and is shewn as the god of Abraham's brother, Nahor, as well as of Abraham, the god of Terah as well as of his sons. Laban surely knew what he was talking about, and the occasion was one on which he would not use words lightly.

Terah, as we know, had worshipped Nannar, the Moon-god, after whom he was named, but of Nannar Laban was certainly not thinking, for Abraham and his house had deserted the Moon-god, and an oath by him would have no binding power on Jacob. Certainly he was not thinking of a nameless god who had been unknown until he revealed himself to Abraham at Haran, for a god recognised then for the first time could not have been equally the god of Nahor, who did not share in his brother's "conver-

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sion", and still less the god of Terah, who was already dead; but none the less he was thinking of that god whom Abraham had made particularly his own and whom Jacob worshipped in his turn. Laban, as the grandson of Nahor, knew that "the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob" was a god whom not Abraham alone in his day but his whole family and his father before him had revered.

In yet another passage there is clear reference to the fact that the God of Abraham had been his God before the time of his supposed conversion at Haran. According to Genesis xv, 7, God said to Abraham: "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees". Now this sounds perfectly natural to the modern reader; God was working out his purpose in bringing Terah and his sons from Ur to Haran, and whatever Terah's conscious and avowed motive may have been for leaving his old home, he was unconsciously fulfilling the will of God; we see no inconsistency between the divine statement on the one side and, on the other, the theory that only after Terah's death at Haran did Abraham come to have any knowledge of God. But to a contemporary of Abraham (and we assume that the story is old and

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true to the life of the day) the inconsistency would have been glaring. For the move from Ur to Haran was made not by Abraham but by Terah; the son was not a free instrument during his father's life, for by Sumerian law the head of the family held absolute authority, and therefore it was the father who in this case decided to depart and took his son with him. If the journey was undertaken in obedience to divine orders—to an omen—which was likely enough, the orders must have been given to Terah by a god whom he recognised as such. If then the God of Abraham is said to have been responsible, that can only be true if he and the god of Terah were the same, that is, if he was one of Terah's gods; whereas had he been a god first discovered by or manifested to Abraham alone, after Terah's death, the whole story would have been absurd. By this claim that he brought Abraham out from Ur the God of Abraham identifies himself with some god whom the house of Terah had worshipped from the first.

Of all the multitudinous deities which the forefathers of the Hebrews had known in the old days "beyond the River" there is only one whom we can possibly link with the nameless, landless god who

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followed the clan's shifting tents, was solely responsible for their welfare, had no worshipper other than the clan and no priest other than the clan's leader, and that is the family god of the Sumerians.

The conclusion, however foreseen, will to some people at least seem unacceptable. For, it may be said, while the precise manner of Abraham's conversion need not greatly concern us, the matter of it is all-important. Something either happened to Abraham or was done by him in virtue of which he symbolises a real advance in man's thoughts about God; he *did* in effect found a religion, and how is it possible to reconcile with that historical fact the theory that he simply followed in the footsteps of his pagan forebears? If indeed the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, if Jehovah, as he was afterwards to be called, be resolved into the little tutelary genius, the luck-bringer, to whom offerings of bread and beer and incense were made on the brick altar in the family chapel behind Terah's house at Ur, in what does the world's debt to Abraham consist? The answer to that question is given in the form in which it is put; the measure of the debt is the contrast between that little domestic luck-bringer and Jehovah.

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We have seen how there had developed amongst the Sumerians of the decadence a cult of the family and of the family gods which was more intimate and potentially more spiritual than the worship of the great gods of nature. Abraham had lived in that world and shared its outlook, and to that extent he was a child of his city and his age; but the potentialities of the cult, which in other minds were still-born, he realised, and the forward step which he took was individual. To a certain extent he was reacting to external forces, the accident of new surroundings brought him face to face with a dilemma and required of him a choice; but he had the good fortune, or the inspiration, to choose that way out of it which was the way of truth and of life.

Abraham left Haran faced with the inevitable loss of those great gods whom he had been accustomed to serve from childhood but could not carry with him into a strange land, and knowing little or nothing of the gods of the land to which he was going nor of what welcome they might extend to a new-comer: and he naturally clung to the one familiar god who could bear him company. Any other man of his contemporaries would have started forth light-heartedly

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enough, taking indeed his *teraphim* with him, but quite prepared to accept in each place to which he came the sovereignty of the god of that place; his wanderings so far from moderating his polytheism would only have increased his experience in it—seeing many cities of men, he would have learnt to know their gods also. But Abraham was not setting out alone as a commercial traveller might have done or an agent establishing a business branch in a foreign town; he was taking his household with him in search of a new home, and there was deeply impressed upon his mind, perhaps the more so because of his exile, the lesson he had learned in the chapel at Ur beneath whose floor his ancestors lay buried. If in the complex and highly-organised civilisation of Ur the family had been the ultimate social unit, it was now for Abraham something infinitely more important; it was the whole of society itself. He was embarking on an adventure in which he and his small clan must stand alone, their hand probably against every man and every man's hand against them; they could not afford to be friends with the peoples of Palestine, to amalgamate with them and to lose thereby their own identity; if they were not to disappear they must fence

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themselves off from their neighbours and hold fast together. This was not a matter of mere physical isolation, of keeping the blood-strain pure by in-breeding; actually that was the least important thing about it, and at no time were all the followers of Abraham, the men "born in his house", of unmixed kin to him: what made the Family was the cult of the common hearth, a tradition which found expression in the worship of the family god. And now, when the great gods were perforce left behind, the god who was the symbol and the essence of the natural link binding the clan together, the god who had protected Abraham from a child, as he had protected his father before him, was the one god not tied down to any one locality but able to be with him in the highlands of Palestine as well as in Haran or at Ur; obviously Abraham would cleave to one so pre-eminently suited to his needs.

And it was by following consistently a line of conduct so obvious and so natural that Abraham revolutionised his religion. At Ur the family god, for all the reverence paid to him, had been a very minor power, but now in these changed conditions when he stood for the only thing that was of real value,

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the existence and welfare of the clan, he became of paramount importance and, judged by the province over which he presided, the only god that mattered: and on the other hand the gods of the despised barbarians of Palestine were nothing but a menace, for the recognition of their sovereignty would put the Hebrews on the same footing as their other subjects and lead to disintegration. Abraham resolved in self-protection to stand aloof from the strange gods and to confine his worship to the one god he knew.

He did not, of course, become a monotheist; that was a development which was to come very much later in the history of religious experience; but he did become monolatrous. For him the other gods existed as they had always done, but they meant nothing to him; they were either hostile or indifferent, and his entire reverence was to be paid to the god who was his friend and peculiarly his own. The family god was unique in this, that he could be the peculiar possession of one man; and to be such was his very essence, in that he could admit no alien worshippers and have no outside interests, but the circle of his interests was not narrowed to a single point, and the reverence paid by him who owned him was not

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merely self-regarding. He was the Family god, the god not of the individual as an isolated unit, but of a man as son and as father, and he had been called into being as the personification of an intimate human relationship. It is quite clear that in that conception there are possibilities of progress, even though they were not to be realised until long afterwards. For the little band of fighting men who struck out from Haran for the Promised Land it was the exclusive character of their god that counted most, his undivided interest in their success, but the mere increase of their numbers and the greater safety that numbers gave was by itself enough to change their outlook. As social morality widens and deepens the god of human relationship will become more spiritual. The God of Abraham starts as the embodiment of the naïve oriental ambition for a seed as numerous as the dust of the earth, possessing all the land northward and southward and eastward and westward; this is what he promises, and in return he demands complete obedience, but nothing more than obedience, for he does not lay on Abraham a single moral ordinance, and on the one occasion when "justice and judgment" are mentioned by him (Gen. xviii,

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19), they are to be the qualities of Abraham's descendants. But in after years this same god under his name Jehovah, requiring for himself the same undivided worship, with equal insistence enjoins in the Decalogue a man's duty to his neighbour; and in the later chapters of Isaiah he is the One God and the source of all good. It is a transformation indeed, but by a logical process of growth which was made possible only by the latent character of that with which it began, by the character peculiar to the Family god. For the gods of the forces of nature cannot progress. They are as limited by their functions as, in Mesopotamia, they tended to be by their territorial rights—the lord of thunder and lightning can only terrify or slay with his bolts, the Sun-god can only give the blessed light or parch the fields until men starve, the sea-god grant easy passage or swallow up the ships of the seafarers; it is only by a confusion of their persons that they can enlarge their field of action, and, above all, they are essentially unmoral, like the forces which they embody, and, as the Greek philosophers discovered, you can only moralise them by explaining them away. Abraham's merit lay in this, that he acknowledged the claims

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upon himself of one god only, and chose for his own the god whose province was the hearts and minds of men.

But from the very beginning the concentration on a single god of the worship formerly divided between a number led inevitably to a widening of the conception of that god, for the disregard of all the others left a blank which could not but be filled. The God of Abraham did not indeed take on all the attributes of Shamash and Nannar, Ishtar and Enki, but in so far as the family had to be protected against or helped by the natural powers which those gods had controlled, the outer world of nature did become a concern of Abraham's god. To a certain extent that had always been the case. In the past one of the chief functions of the patron god had been to act as intermediary between the man and the great lords of nature; and now the man's needs remained the same as ever, but the great lords had been dethroned. If Nin-khursag could no longer be asked to assure the increase of the flocks, nor Ishtar be asked to give children, nor Marduk to grant victory in battle, then the god who had ousted them would have to assume their functions at least so far as his particular wor-

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shipper was concerned; for, after all, these were strictly speaking, family interests, and the family god must needs safeguard them. The attitude of the man towards his god need not have been consciously changed, at any rate for the time being; he had been accustomed to address prayers of all sorts to his patron, trusting him to recommend them in the proper quarter whether he specified it or not, and now he might continue to do the same thing without realising that mediation must be replaced by direct action on the god's part. Yet it was a complete transfer of power which must soon become obvious, and it was a transfer which could not have been made in the case of any other deity than this. The fact that the patron god was the god of the family and that his duty towards it could be regarded as covering all its contacts with the outer world enabled him to break through that departmentalism which fettered the other Sumerian gods; human life being what it is, there were no boundaries for him to overstep. Consequently the choice which Abraham made rendered possible the advance to a conception of God as not only moral in himself but universal in his authority.

There was certainly in the patriarchal family a

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tradition, which later was crystallised into an ordinance, that their god could not be represented in bodily form; amongst ancient religions that of the Hebrews stands alone in its categorical rejection of the graven and the molten image.

The Sumerians had from the beginning, so far as we can tell,<sup>1</sup> made statues of the deities in their pantheon, and always they represented them in human shape.<sup>2</sup> With each god is associated a symbol which directly or allusively referred to the god's particular province; above the head of Shamash we see the sun, above Nannar or Nin-Gal the crescent moon, Ishtar has the scorpion, Nina the fish, and Adad the thunderbolt; it is by these attributes that the several deities can be distinguished and identified. Where the patron god—the family god—is represented on the cylinder seals he also is shewn in human form, and the horned

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<sup>1</sup> At least from very early times; see Legrain, *op. cit. Revue d'Assyriologie*, XXXII, 3.

<sup>2</sup> By a sort of artistic shorthand the non-human symbol may be used to represent the god, as is commonly done, for example, on the boundary-stones of the later periods, but this is no violation of the anthropological principle; Ishtar was not conceived of as a scorpion any more than Christ is conceived of as a cross; the person was understood behind the object.

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cap of power bears witness to his divinity, but he carries no attributes.

And the same is the case with the terra-cottas; indeed, the main justification for our recognising in them the household gods is precisely the fact that they are definitely gods in that they wear the horned cap but cannot be any of the major gods because the proper attributes are lacking. Just as the family god is normally given no name, so he is given nothing to denote his province. And in this the Sumerians would seem to have been perfectly right; there is no attribute which can denote the province of the family god, it was too general and too intimate for that. He was the god of a relationship on the one hand between a man and the high gods, on the other between men of the same house; ideally (though not consciously to the Sumerians) he was humanity seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; he is himself a symbol, and when you have shewn him as a man and endowed him with the crown of godhead you have probably done the best that you can do.

Now Abraham was not less anthropomorphic in his ideas than were his contemporaries; his God, when he chose to shew himself, was found in fashion as a

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man, one with whom a mortal could walk and talk and make friends and drive a bargain. Abraham again was familiar with the *teraphim* or household images, and it is likely enough that he was accustomed to seeing his own family god portrayed in human shape on Terah's seal. It is astonishing that he should have refrained from portraying that same family god in the same traditional way when he became for him the only deity of any interest; and yet it is difficult to escape the view that the prohibition of statues does go back to patriarchal times.

Here we have a definite breach with traditional practice, yet again it might appear to have followed logically from Abraham's religious antecedents and the changed conditions in which he and his descendants found themselves. In all the household chapels that we have excavated at Ur we have never found a statue of a family god, and probably there never were any, such expensive luxuries being reserved for the major gods; it was only when the family god became supremely important that a statue might seem to be required. Was Abraham then to set a novel precedent? It may have been tempting to do so, for the miniature engraving on a business seal, the crude-

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ly moulded little terra-cottas representing the tutelary genius who had shared with the dead the simple ritual of the private hearth, were scarcely consistent with the dignity of a god supremely honoured. But there was a practical difficulty in the way. Statues were made exclusively for temples. That was necessarily so, because the image stood for the god, who entered into it at pleasure, was immanent in it, and the temple was the house in which the god lived; a temple without a statue would be meaningless, a statue without a temple would be an insult. For one who was contemplating a nomad life, who was to dwell in tents and move from pasture to pasture with the changing seasons, the building of a temple was patently impossible<sup>1</sup> and therefore the idea of a statue could not be entertained. And there was a further difficulty, for how was the God of Abraham to be represented? The old people in Ur had felt this and had solved the problem by simplification, but now

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<sup>1</sup> The "tabernacle", the movable tent-temple, was a later invention, at least for the Hebrews. It would probably have rather scandalised Abraham. Even Jacob thought in terms of permanent temples of stone and contemplated building one at Bethel if he should return there and settle down (Gen. xxviii, 22).

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that the household god had become the sole god of the clan and had thereby so widely enlarged his powers and his significance the bare simplicity of the terra-cotta would not suffice for a cult statue, and what new symbolism would meet the case? The attributes of the old gods could not be usurped, because that would have made the God of Abraham simply an amalgam of all those gods, which he was not; he was himself, and although so far as the family interests of Abraham were concerned he had taken over their powers, they still existed and he could not be identified with them. By external attributes you could only prefigure severally the individual aspects of deity; therefore no artistic convention would apply to a god so many-sided as this; his real image was only to be got by a still more radical simplification, it was the Family in which he was immanent, and nothing less abstract and less human than that would serve.

There is, of course, no reason to imagine that the patriarchs ever thought the matter out on these or any lines; what was done was done unconsciously, by the natural process of ideas rather than by any deliberate act of rejection. Abraham had his *teraphim*

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at Haran, and there is no reason to suppose that he discarded them—rather the reverse; but even to him they may have come in time to seem inadequate, and they became less adequate in proportion as men's conception of the Family God widened until, when Jacob was head of the clan, they could be ranked amongst the false gods of old Mesopotamian days and the tents were purified by their removal (Gen. xxxv, 4). Intent upon the idea, and perhaps not realising that they were compelled by the nature of the idea to do so, the patriarchal family gave up these concrete symbols of it, and their practice became the rule of their descendants. It was the most natural thing in the world, and vastly important. It is easy to exaggerate the danger that there may be of men taking the symbol for the reality and worshipping the image instead of the god behind it, and throughout history there has been much less actual idolatry than people are prone to assume; but it can safely be said that had Abraham's God been regularly represented in concrete form, as were all the gods of all the nations, he would have been confounded with them and his identity would have been lost. Because the God of the Hebrews alone was characterised by a symbol

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which was all the more striking for being negative, they could remain a peculiar people and could keep uncontaminated the faith of which Abraham had laid the foundations.

In his religion then, as well as in his thought and conduct, Abraham can be understood only if he be regarded as one who came out of and belonged to Ur; the new ideas which he developed, revolutionary though they came to be, had none the less their roots in the past.

This is not equivalent to saying that the entire content of Abraham's religion was derived from the Sumerian. The Habiru were but sojourners in the Euphrates delta, and however much they had imbibed of its civilisation—and they had imbibed much, as I have tried to shew—they had yet their own traditions, and those must have been operative in their measure: in the development of the family god of the domestic chapel at Ur into the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, some part must have been played by the character of the race from which Abraham sprang and by the beliefs of the kindred people amongst whom he moved in the land of his adoption. In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac we can see how

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Palestinian ideas influenced Abraham, if only by repulsion. We can see a hint of something more positive in the respect he shews to Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (Gen. xiv, 18-20); on that occasion he had, as sheikh and head of a fighting clan, identified himself with his Palestinian neighbours and championed their cause, and the tithe he paid to the priest of *El Elyon*, the Most High God, can only mean that he was prepared to recognise a bond with the faith of his ancestors. Lastly, it is very probable, though it is not certain, that long before the time of Moses the name Yahwe, or Jehovah, was known as the name of a god by the Semitic tribes who had moved up into North Syria or were still to be found in southern Palestine and Moab. But while we must admit that South Arabian influence may explain part of the change in Abraham, that change did not consist in his adoption of or return to South Arabian beliefs. Even if Yahwe was worshipped in his day by tribes in northern Syria, yet the identification of Yahwe with the God of Abraham was not to be made until some centuries had passed, and tempting though the title "the Most High God" may seem as a basis for speculation, it was not amongst his Palestinian neigh-

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bours that Abraham found the monolatry which was to make of the Hebrews a peculiar people; their religion was definitely polytheistic, and later history proves that it did not contain anything that could lead to a monotheistic or even a monolatrous system. Nor was that a matter of inheritance. It is a mistake to suppose that the Semitic peoples have always had, in spite of practical polytheism, an inkling of the essential one-ness of God, that Mohammed, for example, in championing Allah against the three hundred and sixty gods of Mecca merely emphasised an idea which had always been latent in the consciousness of his race; Mohammed learned his monotheism not from the traditions of the Arabs, but from his association with Christians and with Jews.

Neither his racial traditions nor his Syrian experiences could of themselves have given birth to the faith of Abraham. We may rightly hold that each helped in its development, but they are too ill-defined and little-known for their parts to be assessed. But with one thing we are familiar, namely, the city and the civilisation of Ur, and we can see in tolerable detail what was the background of Abraham's youth and how his spiritual growth was encouraged by the

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very inadequacy of Sumerian religion to the changed conditions of his later life. The wide spaces of the desert, which are supposed by some to have given to the Semitic mind its contemplative and speculative cast, did make physically impossible the localised gods of Sumerian polytheism; there had to be a break with the past. But the break was not complete. The religion of Ur, in one of its less considered aspects, supplied something that would bear transplantation: it was a mere germ doomed to sterility in its native country (the cult of the family god led to nothing higher in Mesopotamia), needing to be fertilised by new contacts in Syria and by the innate genius of the Semite, yet it contained the root of the whole matter. That we can trace the new ideas to their humble source in the domestic altars of Ur does not minimise their importance, and that we can recognise something of the nature and the process of the change in Abraham does not lessen his credit.

## *Chapter 7*

### ABRAHAM: THE WRITTEN TESTIMONY

**I**n my first chapter I started with two assumptions which were to be tested by the evidence available from outside sources; the first was that Abraham was a real historical person, and the grounds for the assumption were that the oral tradition recording his life was very ancient, and that a very ancient tradition current amongst the Hebrews and concerned with their family descent was likely to be founded on fact. The second assumption was that Abraham lived in the twentieth century B.C., and the basis for that was the accepted Hebrew chronology. The assumptions have assuredly answered well to the test. Wherever external history can be brought into contact with the tradition it is found to harmonise with it; the tradition is found to reflect most faithfully the peculiar conditions of the place and time described, and only those conditions avail to explain much that is other-

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wise puzzling in the tradition. It would seem that the case is proved and that assumptions can give place to assertions of fact.

But it is only now that the real difficulty begins.

In arguing for the historical reality of Abraham I emphasised the value of the purely oral tradition, and pointed out that of the narrative portions of the Pentateuch there is nothing that must necessarily, and very little that can possibly, have been based on written documents anything like contemporary with the events; any other view would be inconsistent with the character of the narrative and with the nature of what men wrote at the time. But there still remains the possibility that in the non-narrative portions of the Biblical record there may be statements resting on the authority of written documents which without being contemporary with him might yet be so near to his time as to constitute trustworthy evidence. And when I assumed that Abraham's date was in the neighbourhood of 2000 B.C. I was really invoking such a statement.

Amongst the sources which criticism has discovered to be incorporated by the late editors in our version of the Pentateuch is P, the "Priests' Code". This

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appears to have taken the form in which the editors knew it at a time long after that at which J and E were committed to writing, and it differs very much from them in character. Instead of being a transcription of what might be called popular tales it is a history in the modern sense of the word, compiled by a scholar who utilised, as an historian must, material of all kinds, and for the most part written material. He draws upon older chronicles,<sup>1</sup> codes of law, temple records, original documents of every description available to him. Prominent in his work are the long genealogies which begin with Adam and are continued down to the kings of Judah: the first part, which deals with a remote antiquity, is an attempt to give, under the names of individuals, an explanation of racial origins and relationships; it is an elaborate

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<sup>1</sup> In Genesis xxxvi, 31, the list of "the kings that reigned in the land of Edom, before there reigned any king over the children of Israel", beginning with Bela the son of Beor (perhaps the same as the Balaam of Numbers xxii, the contemporary of Moses), is undoubtedly taken by P from an ancient written King-List which was not even an Israelite document. As an extant example of such non-Hebrew documents I would cite the famous Moabite stone.

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theory of history artificially cast in genealogical form; the second part is the genealogical tree of the Hebrew people.

Now the genealogical trees are not at all the sort of thing that would be recited in the tents of the nomads or in the houses of the settled Israelites; they are entirely divorced from oral tradition. But they are exactly the sort of thing that would be written at an early period. They offer a curious counterpart to the King-Lists of the Sumerian scribes, of which we have copies that go back as early as the twentieth century before Christ. Of course, they are not the same as the King-Lists, which deal with rulers and their dynasties instead of the generations of one family or clan; but they are in the same way an *aide-mémoire*, like that list of English kings which used to be the schoolboy's introduction to history, a skeleton outline which could be filled in at pleasure with the more picturesque details preserved in other forms. The Sumerians did not, so far as we know, write out their family trees, but in the national annals of the King-Lists they set an example which could easily be adapted to the records of a single house.

There does seem to be a parallel between the early

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part of the Hebrew table, concerned with periods which outdistance all possibility of written sources, and the part of the Sumerian King-Lists which deals with prehistoric times, for although there is no connection between the names in the two, yet we find in both a fantastic longevity which makes Methusaleh live for nine hundred and sixty-nine years and the antediluvian kings of Sumer for thousands. Again, it can hardly be a mere coincidence that Noah comes in the tenth generation after Adam and that Uta-Napishtim, the hero of the Sumerian Flood legend, is also, in Berossus' version of the King-List, represented as the tenth of the kings who reigned before the Flood. It is quite likely that the early Hebrews, striving to bridge with a few names what they felt to have been vast spans of time, may have been influenced by the chronology of the King-Lists, which had been drawn up in writing and were studied at Ur before Abraham's day. But the parallel does not go beyond a certain point. When the Biblical genealogies come to deal with what might be called historic times, for which written authority was at any rate not impossible, and with the direct ancestors of the Hebrews, there is a change; the exaggerated figures

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are modified, and the more detailed records of the later patriarchs, some of which, e.g., Genesis xxxvi, have little bearing on the main narrative, and possess a purely family interest, present all the appearance of properly kept domestic archives. Indeed, that they are domestic archives is indubitable; the only question is, whether they are likely to have been properly kept, and for the answer we can only appeal to the practice of the later Jews, who were most meticulous in this regard, and to that of Semitic peoples generally. The modern Arabs have in some cases preserved the pedigrees of their mares for many centuries, and what they do for a horse they will do not less carefully for man: thus there is a small clan living in the extreme north of Syria, near Alexandretta, which came there more than two hundred years ago from the neighbourhood of Medina, and ever since that time, at intervals of a dozen years or so, a deputation from the south has made the long journey of a thousand miles to register the births in the colony and so to keep complete and undefiled the record of the tribe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I cite this on the authority of the late T. E. Lawrence, not from my personal knowledge.

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We must then ask, how early did the Hebrews begin to keep their domestic archives, and how far can those we have be considered authentic? Nobody has ever suggested that the author of the Priests' Code invented the genealogies; he found them written ready to his hand. The main facts of them are implicit in and are occasionally explicitly repeated by the oral tradition represented for us by J and E, but the fuller and more detailed lists of P cannot be derived from the J and E narrative; rather the reverse is the case, and the narrative portions depend for their genealogical details on some such literary source as that which P so freely quotes and which therefore must be older than they. We have seen that J and E date to the early Kingdom and that the oral tradition behind them must go back at least to the time of the Judges: now at that time the organisation of the Hebrew people was inchoate, and there existed no central authority capable of imposing on the tribes a uniform belief regarding their family origins; if such a belief was uniformly held it could only have been because a warrant for it in the shape of family archives had been handed down from father to son. It would follow that the documents cited by P were ultimately

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based on records which went back, not necessarily to the time of Abraham, but to a time sufficiently close to his to make their testimony to the historical existence of Abraham unassailable.

Such might seem to be the natural conclusion, and yet it can be urged that the exact contrary is the case and that the documents themselves contain their own refutation. In the very genealogies for which historical value is claimed we find the obvious untruth that Abraham lived for a hundred and seventy-five years, an exaggeration which invests this "domestic" part of the genealogy with the mythological character of its antediluvian introduction; and the same impossible longevity is implied in the narrative derived from oral tradition. How could such falsehoods creep into the record if it were indeed based on early written archives?

The difficulty is a real one. The statement concerning Abraham's age is quite definite, and since we know that neither four thousand years ago nor at any time in man's history was the span of human life greater than it is to-day, we cannot accept the statement. It is certain that the late editors of Genesis did not themselves invent this absurdity and interpolate

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it in what had been until then a sober and credible record: they, having no anthropological knowledge to make them hesitate, believed that what they were told by their authorities was literally true, and nobody in antiquity saw anything wrong in the idea that men ages before had lived for a century and a half or for many times that term of years. Such longevity could easily attach itself to any genuine historical character provided that he had been dead for a sufficiently long period; none would be shocked by it, and the accretion would not vitiate the fact of his existence or the truth of what else was told about him. But we do not explain the interpolation merely by suggesting that it was early. At no time was there any logical reason for crediting the patriarchs with superhuman age unless tradition known to be early and believed to be authentic seemed to shew that they had indeed lived longer than other men; there was no motive for invention and no means of securing its general adoption. I have been trying to prove that the sources of the Abraham story go back to within measurable distance of his own time and were in part at least family records put into writing too soon for such fantastic embroideries to have passed muster: have those

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then been falsified? And if the very sources on which the Old Testament is based are found to have been polluted, then the entire Abraham story and much else must be jettisoned; or, in view of the impossibly exaggerated figures, must we reject the theory of early manuscript authority? I would reply that we can only account for the figures by the assumption that they were to be found in manuscript sources, and the exaggeration of them is due to just those misreadings and mistakes to which ancient manuscripts were liable.

It is not a case of borrowed mythology. I have spoken of the Sumerian King-Lists, in the early part of which rulers are made to reign for thousands of years,<sup>1</sup> and have suggested that the earlier part of the Hebrew genealogies, dealing with the antediluvian heroes, may have been influenced by them; but this cannot apply to the patriarchs of a later date. The early Hebrews did borrow their cosmogony from

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<sup>1</sup> Various explanations have been put forward to account for the Sumerian figures, such as that they are based on an astronomical theory, or that very early records were written with a numerical system which later editors misunderstood.

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Mesopotamia, but they did not borrow their immediate ancestors, nor would they necessarily model the record of them on that of the Sumerian kings; but actually there is even in the matter of the figures a marked difference between the earlier, or anthropological, and what we might call the Hebrew or domestic parts of the genealogies which prevents our suspecting Sumerian influence in the latter. For in the case of the patriarchs there is a curious mixture of sober detail with the incredible; they usually beget their sons at a normal time of life, and only thereafter are made to live to an unconscionable age. If the major figures only had been given we should have had the same problem as in the anthropological section and should have had to explain it in the same way, as the exaggeration of a simple-minded people who realised that vast and empty tracts of time had to be filled and imagined that men living very long ago could be given credit for having lived very long: but in view of the other figures that explanation will not serve. The ages at which the patriarchs begat their children have a very convincing probability, and are in fact just what might have been taken from family archives. That is true of most; the case of

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Abraham is somewhat different. He is said to have had no children until he was eighty-six, when Ishmael was born;<sup>1</sup> Isaac was born when he was a hundred years old,<sup>2</sup> towards the end of his life he begat offspring in abundance,<sup>3</sup> and he died at the age of a hundred and seventy-five.<sup>4</sup> Here we have precise figures, but not one of them can be accepted literally. The impossibilities, it will be noticed, come mostly from the Priests' Code, for which I have suggested written sources in the form of genealogical records, but they are inherent also in the oral tradition which lies behind J and E. That is natural; if the written sources were indeed old the stories handed down by word of mouth would certainly conform to them, so that if we can explain the mistakes in the Priests' Code those in J and E need no further explanation. What is of interest is that those figures which conflict with the course of nature are most explicitly given by that source in which we have most reason to suspect manuscript authority and therefore to anticipate manuscript errors.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. xvi, 16. The source is the Priests' Code.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. xvii, 17; also from the Priests' Code.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. xxv, 1; from the J source.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. xxv, 7; from the Priests' Code.

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It seems to me highly probable that the writer of the Priests' Code had at his disposal written family trees which were themselves abbreviated copies of much older and fuller archives. The originals would have given the details of each generation, the names of father and son, the age of the father at the time of his son's birth, the age of each man at his death, and perhaps at intervals a sum total of the lives of those individuals who between them might be held to constitute an historical period. Thus the Sumerian King-Lists give the successive kings of each dynasty with the number of years in the reign of each, and then sum up the total "six kings, 136 years", "four kings, 177 years". In an abbreviated copy of the Hebrew family tree the less important names might be omitted and only that outstanding figure preserved who gives his name to the period, but the sum total remains, for it is essential to the chronology, and there remains also that date in the life of the eponymous individual which is the most important in his life, namely, his age when his eldest son was born.

For example, take Genesis xi, 14. "And Shelah lived thirty years, and begat Eber; and Shelah lived

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after he begat Eber four hundred and three years, and begat sons and daughters.

And Eber lived four and thirty years, and begat Peleg: and Eber lived after he begat Peleg four hundred and thirty years, and begat sons and daughters."

I would suggest that the (already abbreviated) original may have run somewhat as follows:

'Shelah lived thirty years and begat *A* (perhaps the age of Shelah at his death was also given).

*A* lived . . . . years and begat *B*:

*B* lived . . . . years and begat *C*:

. . . . .

*J* lived . . . . years and begat Eber:

And from the days of Shelah to the days of Eber son of *J* were four hundred and thirty and three years.

Eber lived four and thirty years and begat *L*; etc.

. . . . .

*V* lived . . . . years and begat Peleg:

And from the days of Eber to the days of Peleg son of *V* were four hundred and sixty and four years.'

In the Old Testament formula "and begat sons and daughters" there may be an acknowledgment of the omitted steps in the genealogy.

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The dropping out of generations which this theory presupposes does not present any difficulty, for there are examples of it in the later parts of the Old Testament. Jehu, the king of Israel, is commonly called Jehu the son of Nimshi; but from 2 Kings ix, 2 we learn that he was really the son of Jehoshaphat and that Nimshi was his grandfather—Jehoshaphat was presumably a person of small importance and was suppressed, at least in the popular version of the king's genealogy. It must be remembered that even to-day it is quite easy in Arabia for a father to lose his identity in that of his son. The family is so important that the individual counts for very little in comparison with it; as long therefore as a man is young and unmarried he may loom very large as the hope of his house, but as soon as a son is born to him the interest shifts to the new generation, and true politeness goes so far as to drop the father's name altogether and address him as "father of So-and-so" Where then the personal merit of the father is small the memory of him may well be swamped by the exploits of more worthy members of the family, and one item in the family tree may bridge several generations of men. Thus the present king of Arabia, Abdal'aziz, is called

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"Ibn Sa'ud", "the son of Sa'ud"; he is really the son of Abdarraḥman, and the Sa'ud whose name he bears died in 1724;<sup>1</sup> so Jesus is called "the son of David". Conversely, when the Israelites rebelled against the youthful intolerance of Rehoboam they shewed their contempt by passing over the hated name of his father, king Solomon, and linking Rehoboam to his humble great-grandfather "what portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel".<sup>2</sup>

The summarising of a period under the name of an individual at the expense of other generations of his house is perfectly normal, and the detailed figures which survive in connection with that name could arise from a manuscript source and could scarcely be accounted for otherwise. But while that may explain much in the genealogies, it does not cover the case of Abraham where, as I have pointed out, none of the figures are credible; can a possible manuscript corruption explain this also?

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<sup>1</sup> See Musil, *Northern Negd*, American Geographical Society's Oriental Explorations and Studies, No. 5, pp. 256 ff.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings xii, 16.

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In the Sumerian King-Lists it is stated that the first dynasty of kings who made Ur their capital was founded by one Mes-anni-padda; he reigned for eighty years and was succeeded by his son (?) Mes-ki-ag-Nannar, who reigned for thirty-six years. In the preceding dynasty there had been kings credited with fantastic reigns of centuries and even of a thousand years, and in contrast with those the figures assigned to the kings of Ur do become humanly possible, but even so a reign of eighty years seems excessive for a man who presumably had to win his crown by war and would scarcely have succeeded in doing so in extreme youth. Largely because of this improbability the historical existence of Mes-anni-padda was regarded by modern scholars as doubtful. Then at al 'Ubaid, near Ur, there was discovered in the ruins of a little temple an inscribed dedication-tablet whereon the founder of the building proclaims that he is A-anni-padda, king of Ur, son of Mes-anni-padda, king of Ur. At once the whole thing becomes plain, and we see that there are really two generations concerned, but that A-anni-padda has fallen out of the King-Lists because his name was so like that of his father: but, because the King-Lists were based on

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older records wherein the chronological figures were faithfully recorded, the sum total of the two reigns is attributed to the one name which survives. It is even suspected that the same mistake has occurred twice over in the same section of the King-Lists and that Mes-ki-ag-Nannar also is a conflation of two persons, for elsewhere reference is found to a Mes-ki-ag-nuna, king of Ur, a king who does not appear in the list but may well have lost his identity in that of Mes-ki-ag-Nannar. It is therefore the case that in ancient texts there can occur a confusion between two similar names which results in the confusion of two separate individuals.

If then we are to accept for the "Abraham period" the figure of 175 years, which is impossible as the span of one man's life, we might feel that precedents in Sumerian texts justified us in regarding Abraham as a conflation of two persons. And the theory has been brought forward by other writers on quite different grounds, namely, the curious duplication of names that is found in the Old Testament. Abraham starts his life as "Abram" and only later changes his name to Abraham; an explanation of the change is duly given by the Old Testament, but it is philo-

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logically unsound: similarly his wife is called Sarai, but she too subsequently has her name changed to Sarah: obviously there is a possibility that the different but similar names originally denoted different people who, like Mes-anni-padda and A-anni-padda, were wrongly identified by after generations. The Sumerian analogy holds good up to a point, but here there is a further difficulty, for we have to explain why, if the persons were amalgamated, their names are none the less preserved in distant forms.

But it is not by any means certain that the names are different. Commenting on certain new discoveries in the field of philology Professor J. A. Montgomery<sup>1</sup> says: "This fact of early indigenous Arabic scripts involving varieties of spelling, throws light upon two etymological puzzles in the Patriarchal story. According to Genesis xvii, 5 the Lord announced to Abram that "thy name shall no more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations do I make thee". Now Abram is a good ancient West-Semitic name, appearing in the Akkadian, and also elsewhere in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Arabia and the Bible*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934.

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Old Testament as Abi-ram (Num. xvi, 1); it means 'the (divine) Father is high'. The expanded form Abraham is interpreted in the Genesis text as 'Father of a multitude (*hamon*) of nations', i.e. as though *Ab-hamon*, an impossible etymology. Various attempts have been made to explain 'Abraham' from the Akkadian, but without success. But the South-Arabic shows the way out. There the letter *h* is often used apparently as designation of presence of a vowel, the exact rules for which use have not been agreed upon by scholars. Now this use appears to have been followed in our name: along with the unvocalised 'BRM<sup>1</sup> the Arabian spelling 'BRHM was also possible. Then finally in the course of time the *h* was understood as a consonant, the word was pronounced Abraham, consequently an explanation had to be given of the relation of the two forms, and hence the midrashic tradition that is given in the story. And interestingly enough the spelling of the name of Abraham's wife in the same story offers a similar play, v, 15: 'As for Sarah thy wife, thou shalt not call her

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<sup>1</sup> An unvocalised spelling, i.e. the writing of the consonants only, without the intermediate vowels, is the practice of all early Semitic languages.

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Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be'. Now the element *-ai* is the ancient Arabic feminine ending equivalent to *-a(h)*, the equivalent Hebrew form for the feminine, That is, the two terminations mean the same thing. and as *-ai* came in Arabic to be pronounced *-a*, 'Sarai' and 'Sarah' were only different spellings for one and the same pronunciation."

Dussaud<sup>1</sup> comments on this that "the suggested transition of 'Abram' into 'Abraham' is confirmed by a peculiarity in the writing of the texts from Ras Shamra in Northern Syria; the scribes forgot this and wrongly vocalised the name". Hence we must conclude, he adds, that "*the patriarchal legends were committed to writing very early, much earlier than has been supposed hitherto*".

We may take it then that Abram and Abraham are really the same name, as are Sarai and Sarah, and the difference in the written form is due only to the accidents of local spelling. If they were pronounced in precisely the same way, that of course makes it much more easy to explain how the two bearers of the name came to be confused; but we have still to ask whether

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<sup>1</sup> In *Syria*, XV, iv, p. 384.

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there is any precedent for two different members of the same family having names not merely similar but identical, and again how it comes about that while the bearers of the identically pronounced names were confused, yet in each case two different spellings of the name are handed down to us.

The first difficulty is easily resolved. At Ur were found clay documents<sup>1</sup> dated to the reign of the son of king Hammurabi which bear the imprint of inscribed seals giving the names of three generations in a single family; the first man is called Ilshu-ibisha, his son is Siniqisham, his grandson is Ilshu-ibisha again: it is, so far as I know, the only instance of a Sumerian being named after his grandfather,<sup>2</sup> but it does shew that such a thing was possible at Ur in the twentieth century B.C. Nor was it a peculiarity of the Sumerians. Abram's own brother Nahor was named after his grandfather, Nahor, the father of Terah,<sup>3</sup> so

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<sup>1</sup> *Ur Texts*, Vol. I, Nos. 149 and 304.

<sup>2</sup> Though cf. Dhorme in *Revue biblique*, XXXVII, 4, p. 484.

<sup>3</sup> If my theory of the omission of steps in the Old Testament generalogies is correct Nahor I would not be the grandfather of Nahor II but several generations earlier.

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that there was a precedent in the family for a grandson or other descendant of Abraham to have a name identical with his. It is a most illuminating fact. For while the King-Lists shew how in ancient manuscripts the confusion of two names may result in the suppression of a generation, did we push the analogy too far and suggest that just as A-anni-padda was the son of Mes-anni-padda so Abraham must have been the son of Abram, then the chronological difficulty in the story remains, since two generations do not suffice to bridge the span of a century and three-quarters. If, on the other hand, parallel cases justify us in assuming that Abram-Abraham represents not less than *three* human generations, then the difficulty of the Old Testament chronology disappears and the unnatural virility of a centenarian ceases to be a stumbling-block; the sum total of even three lives could satisfy the Biblical record.<sup>1</sup>

And the theory of three generations, if taken in conjunction with the historical date of the Old Testament account, solves the remaining problem

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<sup>1</sup> It would be still better satisfied if we were to assume five generations in all, of which the first and fifth or first, third and fifth bore the same name Abram-Abraham,

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concerning the two forms of the name. The passage which I have quoted above from Professor Montgomery's work explains *how* the transition from Abram to Abraham took place, but does not explain *why*. One can easily understand that the same name might be spelled differently in different documents; that is common in ancient manuscripts and was bound to occur where, as Professor Montgomery shews was the case, the question was complicated by a variety of languages and scripts. Further, one can easily imagine that when the documents were being used for the compilation of a continuous record the piety of the editors might make them preserve both spellings of the name. But if the original sources were more or less contemporary and the different spellings were due to the chance use of different scripts or dialects, then we should expect that in the new composite account the two forms would occur at random, whereas in fact the form "Abram" is consistently used throughout the earlier part of the Genesis narrative and the form "Abraham" is uniformly employed in all the stories of events represented as happening later.<sup>1</sup> This chronological order is not due to the

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<sup>1</sup> The only apparent exception to the rule is in Genesis

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editors; the explanation of the change given by the story of the re-naming of the patriarch shews that from very ancient times it had been recognised that the form Abram was proper to an earlier and the form Abraham to a later historical phase. That much is clear from the Old Testament; then comes the philological argument. "Abram", we are told, is a good West-Semitic name, appearing in the Akkadian; "Abraham" can only be a corruption of the name due to South Arabic spelling; it follows that the earlier part of the Biblical narrative must be based on written documents of a West-Semitic, Mesopotamian type, the later on documents written under South Arabic or Syrian influence. And the documents must have

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xiv, where the form "Abram" is employed in the description of the battle of the four kings against five. If Amraphael is to be identified with Hammurabi (which is very doubtful, see p. 43) then, since he came to the throne about 1940 B.C., the original Abram is not likely to have taken an active part in the battle, and one suspects that the hero of the incident was the second of the name. But Genesis xiv comes from a special source, neither J nor E, and that document may have retained the early Akkadian spelling for the name of the later "Abraham". The exception really only emphasises the regularity with which J and E (and P also) use the two forms in chronological order.

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been written at an early date. Now if the family register of the Hebrew clan were set down in writing in the time of Abram it would necessarily, in view of his local origin as given in the Old Testament, have been written in the West-Semitic or Akkadian dialect and script, and his name would have been spelt (in the unvocalised form) 'BRM. If the "Abraham" records were written not less than two generations later, during which time the clan had been closely associated with Syrian people, then the South Arabian spelling would naturally have been adopted and the same name would appear as 'BRHM. The Biblical story of the patriarchal wanderings gives precisely the conditions which would lead to the change, but even so, a certain lapse of time would be required to make the change absolute. The consistency in the use of the two forms, or spellings, of the same name is best explained by the theory that there existed two sets of documents referring to two different individuals, that those two people were separated by at least a generation, and that the documents were in each case more or less contemporary with the person concerned and reflected the influence of his particular surroundings. The only thing in the Old Testament

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account which is inconsistent with the theory is the story of the re-naming of the patriarch; but such a story was bound to arise when once the two persons had been confused while their several names yet persisted; and it carries its own refutation in the fact that the explanation which it gives of the new name is simply not possible; for "Abraham" cannot mean what it is said to mean, and it really does not mean anything at all.

But while we may thus explain the hundred and seventy-five years of Abraham as the sum total of three or more lives, there remain other stumbling-blocks in the chronology of the Abraham record. He was eighty-six when Ishmael was born, a hundred when Isaac was conceived; the figures are stated just as explicitly as is the number of his years at his death, and it might seem difficult to account for them by any scribal error. But in this case, too, a scribal error is as a matter of fact the most natural and obvious explanation if once it be granted that the Biblical genealogies are based on family archives written at a very early stage; and since the figures are not only stated in the tables of the Priests' Code but are intrinsic to the oral tradition behind the J and E documents they

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can only be derived from manuscript sources provided that those sources were very ancient. Again we have to ask, what would be the character of those earliest written sources? And we have to answer by analogy. In Sumer, at least, in the twentieth century B.C., it is common for tablets to be dated where anything in the contents would make the date of the document important; with such a practice then the Hebrew clan would be thoroughly conversant. For anything in the nature of a register of births, dates would seem to be essential, and the method employed might have been of the simplest sort—"Eber lived thirty and four years and begat . . ."—or the several entries might have been referred to some recognised system of chronology, as Sumerian tablets at Ur were dated by the year of the king's reign. Given a register drawn up on the latter principle, it would have been easy for a later editor to calculate, for example, that Isaac, Abraham's son, was born a century after the date recorded for the birth of Abram; if the intermediate generations had dropped out of the record and "Abram" and "Abraham" had come to be regarded as a single person, the editor would naturally

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conclude that Abraham was a hundred years old when his son was born.

Of course, I am not arguing that every figure given in the genealogies (or in the narrative based on them) is necessarily correct in itself or can be satisfactorily explained: there has been too much confusion in the course of various editings for anyone to-day to unravel the tangle. My point is that the genealogies have been taken from original sources, namely, family archives, of reputable authority. In the abbreviated version only some of the figures given in the original have been preserved, and they have not always been rightly applied; but the selectors probably saw to it that the sum total of them agreed fairly well with the total furnished by the original documents, and on that natural supposition we can put them to the test. For the dead-reckoning of the major figures in the genealogies is the sole basis that exists for early Hebrew chronology; if the figures are pure fiction, the chronology based on them can have no value; if the chronology is judged correct the figures must be approximately true. The genealogies would put the birth of Abram to about 2000 B.C., and we have seen that that date is the only one which will har-

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monise with the evidence of secular records: it does not constitute proof, but it is a very striking fact.

The individual figures in their present context are unacceptable, but we have absolutely no justification for discrediting them and at the same time affirming the historical value of the rest of the Abraham story, for the two are interwoven and must stand or fall together. The more clearly we can demonstrate that Abraham did exist and that the stories about him are true to life the more imperative does it become that we should explain the anomaly of those incredible dates. The weakness of the case for Abraham at the outset was that it relied so much upon oral tradition. If it can be admitted that the figures are taken from very early written sources and that the errors in them arise from the character which those sources necessarily had and from the accidents to which such are normally subject, i.e. from a process of abbreviation for which we have parallels elsewhere in Hebrew family trees and from a conflation of persons vouched for by secular analogies and by philological rules—then so far from invalidating the Biblical narrative the figures indicate for it a more solid foundation.

To some people it will be sentimentally repugnant

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that Abraham should be regarded not as one man but as a composite character, but that view is the only one which allows us to accept the Hebrew tradition as a whole and to reconcile it with reason. Nor does it otherwise affect the issue. The Hebrew people remembered that their forefathers came from Ur, and we can testify to the fact and to its importance; with true historical perspective they fixed upon the departure of the patriarchal family from Haran, the beginning of the nomad life, as the occasion of the nation's birth; they had no doubt as to the author of that crucial move, and their record must be deemed worthy of our credence. The man who led the clan into Palestine and who in so doing turned from the many gods of Ur to the undivided service of the God of his house was named Abram, and the name has that form because the documents preserved the spelling of it which was normal in his eastern home. The later stories are told of one who bears the same name in its Syrianised spelling, and that they should not necessarily refer always to the same man, but sometimes at least to a descendent of the original Abram, makes no difference whatsoever to their truth, and they equally bear witness to progress whether it took place in one man's lifetime or in the course of three

## THE WRITTEN TESTIMONY

generations. In the history of Abraham and in that of the Hebrew people as recounted in the Old Testament we can watch the gradual evolution of a conception of God to which Christian and Moslem are alike in debt. Abraham did not create that conception out of nothing nor receive it ready-made from others, nor indeed did he himself attain to it. He was bred in the crude paganism of his time; when circumstances made that untenable as a whole he was able to discard its grosser elements and to hold fast to the little in it which was, potentially at least, true and eternal. Here was the parting of the ways, and Abraham took the decisive step. It was for future generations to explore the road further. In the history of his descendants there were many back-slidings into idol-worship which endangered alike the racial identity of the Hebrew people and the conservation of the faith entrusted to them, yet there was always a remnant that kept to the straight path. Gradually and painfully they won through to the ideal which illuminates the later chapters of Isaiah. The prophet's high creed realises the utmost possibilities of the Old Dispensation, but it derives ultimately from the choice made fourteen hundred years earlier by the founder of his race.

### *Chronological Scheme*

- circa* 3200 B.C. The grave of Shub-ad.
- c.* 3100 Mes-anni-padda founds the First Dynasty of Ur and is succeeded by his son A-anni-padda, by Mes-ki-ag-Nannar and perhaps Mes-ki-ag-nuna
- c.* 2650 Entemena, governor of Lagash.
- c.* 2528 Sargon of Akkad establishes a semitic dynasty in the North and conquers Sumer.
- c.* 2370 The Guti invasion and the overthrow of the Sargonid dynasty; anarchy in Sumer.
- c.* 2278 After the conquest of the Guti Ur-Nammu, governor of Ur, sets himself up as king and establishes the Third Dynasty of Ur. The great imperial age of Ur is continued by Dungi (2260), Bur-Sin (2213), Gimir-Sin (2204) and Ibi-Sin (2195). During this time, the first appear-

## CHRONOLOGICAL SCHEME

- circa 2278 B.C.*      ance of Amorites amongst the popu-  
                          *continued*      lation of southern Mesopotamia,  
                               these being probably the Habiru or  
                               Hebrew immigrants, employed as  
                               herdsmen.
- c.      2170      Invasion of Sumer by the Elamites  
                       from the east and the Amorites from  
                       the north-west; defeat and capture  
                       of Ibi-Sin and destruction of Ur.
- c.      2170      After the disaster new dynasties of  
                       kings are set up first at Isin and then  
                       at Larsa, both southern cities, more  
                       or less under the control of Elam.  
                       Amongst the kings are Ishme-dagan  
                       (2100), Libit-Ishtar (2080), Nur-  
                       Adad (2010) and Sin-idinnam (1994)  
                       During this period the Habiru are  
                       in South Mesopotamia, employed as  
                       mercenaries in the Sumerian army.
- c.      2040      Rise of Babylon as an independent  
                       kingdom.
- c.      2000      Traditional date for the birth of  
                       Abraham at Ur.

## CHRONOLOGICAL SCHEME

- c. 1980      The king of Elam, Kudur-Mabug, puts in his own son, Warad-Sin, as king of Larsa.
- c. 1970      Warad-Sin is succeeded by Rim-Sin.
- c. 1940      Hammurabi succeeds to the throne of Babylon.
- c. 1910      Hammurabi crushes Rim-Sin and makes himself master of the South country. Ur surrenders without a blow. No more mention of the Habiru in South Mesopotamia. The end of Sumer as a nation.
- c. 1885      Ur revolts against Hammurabi's son, Samsu-iluna, and is laid waste and burnt.



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