

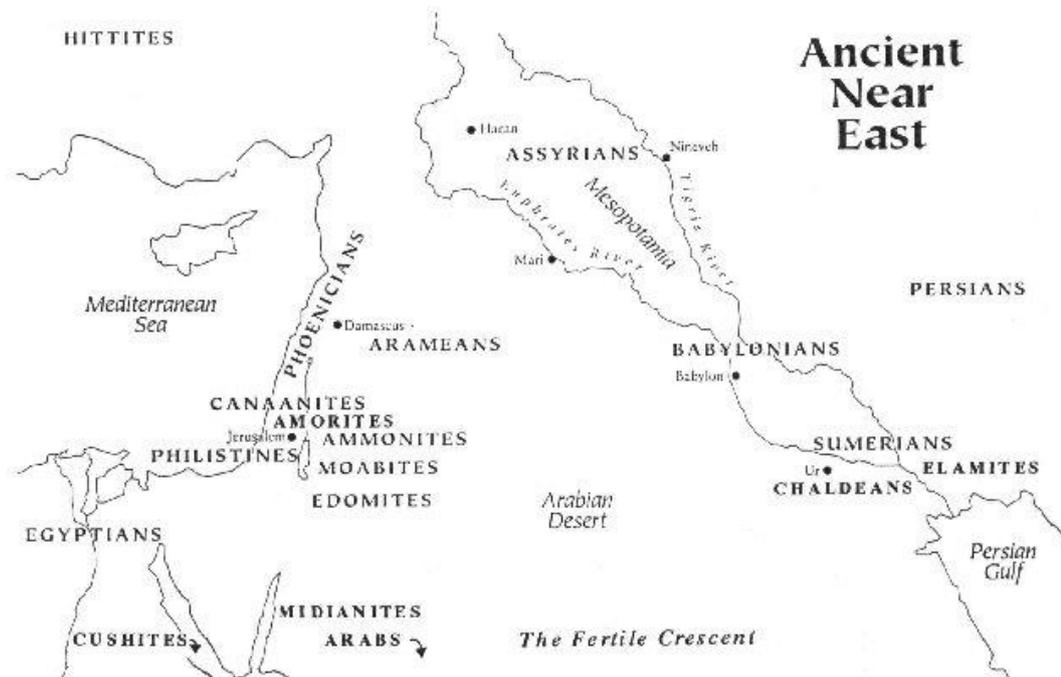
SESSION TWO

SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN HISTORY IN RELATION TO THE PATRIARCHS

INTRODUCTION

The following information is meant to provide a setting for God's call of Abraham in light of the Ancient Near East of his day. Abraham's lifespan is approximately 2166-1991 BC.¹ I will try to survey the major developments and religious climate related to his life.

The Fertile Crescent:



I. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

A. Prior to 3000 BC

1. We have very little accurate history from records before 3000 BC.

¹Based on date used in Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 31. Most of the dates for this session are based on *The Cambridge Ancient History* wherever possible.

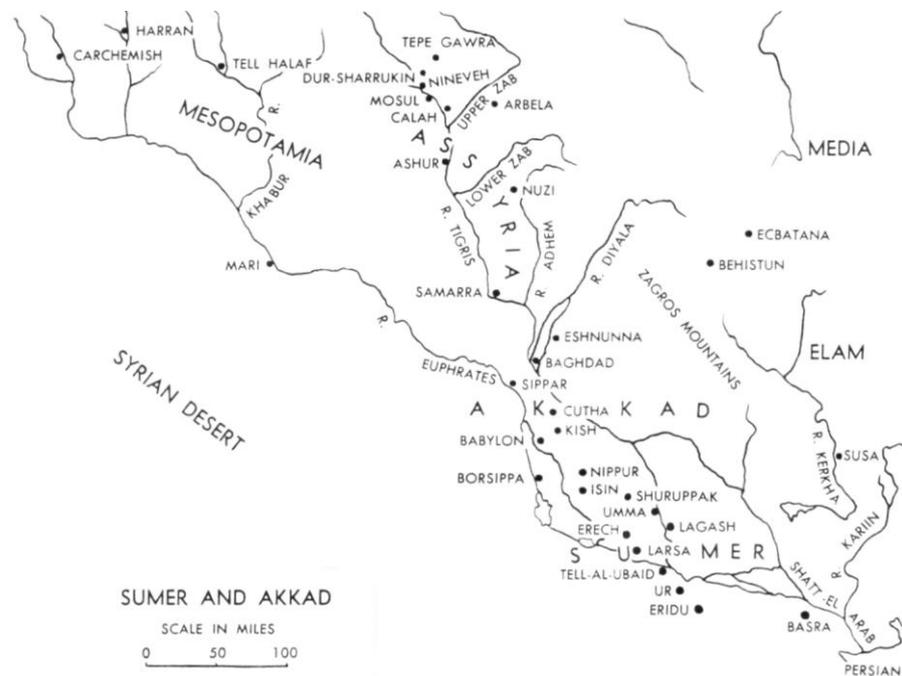
Merrill notes, "The period from 3000 to 2500 is largely a blank page, historically speaking. The Ebla texts throw some light on the scene from 2500 to 2200, but mainly on the vicinity of Ebla itself and the Mesopotamian world to the east."² The lack of verifiable historical records prior to 2500 is of interest. Based on a literal understanding of the biblical data, the flood event would be dated approximately 2550 BC.

Apparently, villages gave way to the "temple-city" in which life is organized around a deity. Schwantes notes,

The village eventually gives place to the temple-city. The state is organized under the assumption that everything, land, people, animals and plants, is the property of the deity. His representative is the *Lugal*, the "great man." His abode is the temple, in the stores of which the produce of the land and of the work of men is kept. The *Lugal* gives to each one his work and his reward. The artisans, priests, scribes, and soldiers settle around the temple forming the city proper. Sumerian society is a typical theocratic society.³

2. Sumerian Civilization

- a. The Sumerians are one of the earliest civilizations that we have record of.⁴ In the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley area, they developed what is generally regarded as the earliest known high civilization.



² Merrill, *The World and the Word*, 21.

³ Siegfried J. Schwantes, *A Short History of The Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965), 22.

⁴ The standard work on Sumer is Samuel N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1963). Cf. D. Schmandt-Besserat and S. M. Alexander, *The First Civilization: The Legacy of Sumer* (Austin, TX: Univ of Texas Press, 1975).

- b. They are important to the discussion since Ur (Abraham's home) was a Sumerian city.
- c. Although Abraham was from Ur, he was not of Sumerian descent but rather a Semite. The Sumerians were a distinct ethnic group from the Semites.⁵
- d. Contribution to "writing"
The Sumerians were apparently the inventors of writing during the period 3500-3200 BC. Their script was initially "pictographic," with circular marks used for numerals. From the Sumerians we have our earliest known historical records. We might observe that writing was in existence at least a 1000 years prior to God's call of Abraham.⁶
- e. From their historical records:
 - 1) Rulers of extreme longevity
 - 2) Division of time into antediluvian and postdiluvian periods.

B. The Early Bronze Age (3000-2000 BC)

1. The Sumerians, the primary power in the period prior to 3000 BC, continued their dominance throughout much of the Early Bronze Age period as well.
2. Ur was a Sumerian city (= Tell el-Muqayyar)
 - a. That Abraham was from Ur is quite significant. Ur was a major city of that day, and the focal point of the Sumerian empire. Ur was quite cosmopolitan and thoroughly polytheistic.
 - b. Ancient Ur was excavated by C. L. Woolley during the years AD 1922-1934.
 - c. A number of temples have been excavated at Ur. The chief deity of the city was Nannar, the Sumerian moon-god (known in Akkadian as "Sin"). Several temples and a great ziggurat were built to Nannar. Interestingly, at Harran (to which Abraham eventually moved), the chief deity worshiped was the Semitic moon-god "Sin."
 - d. Abraham's religious background
"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.'" - Joshua 24:2
 - e. Ziggurats
The ziggurats were large terraced structures with a shrine on top dedicated to the local deity. These have been found across Mesopotamia, with the one at Ur being one of the best preserved. Supposedly, the deity would visit on certain occasions.

⁵ Furthermore, their language systems differ. W. von Soden notes, "Semitic languages are inflected languages—that is, they alter the roots of their words. The Semitic languages share this property with only the Hamitic languages of Africa and the Indo-Germanic or Indo-European languages of Europe and Asia" (*The Ancient Orient*, 18). In contrast, Sumerian is agglutinative (i.e., not changing the root words).

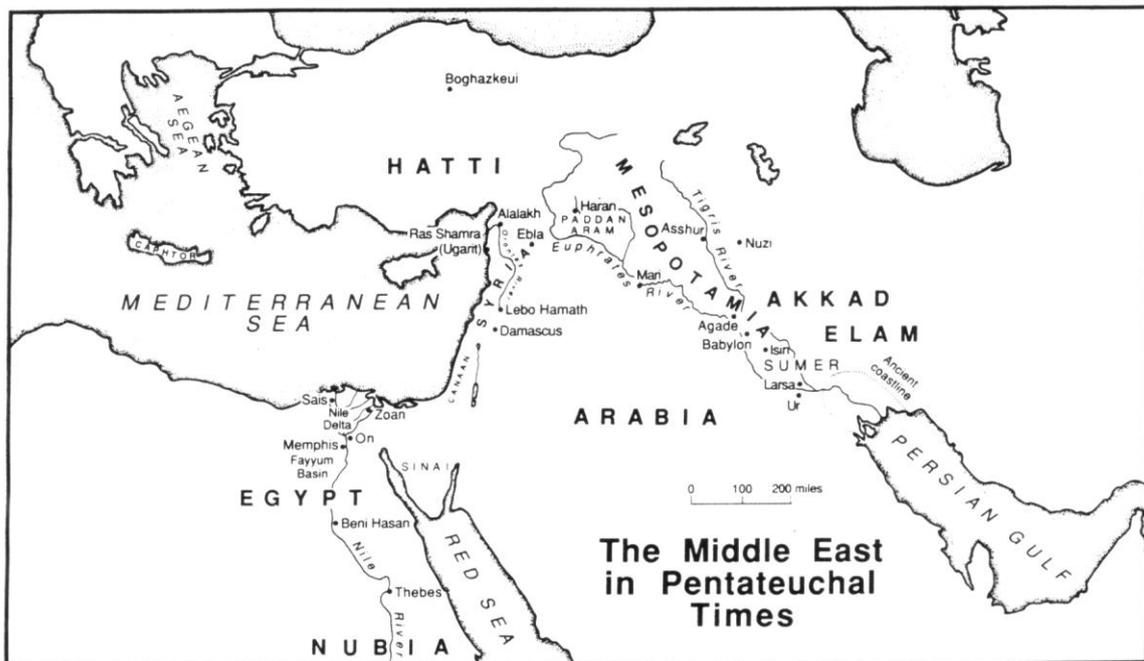
⁶ From about 2500 BC, cuneiform writing (with its characteristic wedge-shapes imprinted on clay tablets by means of a stylus) became the standard medium of writing in the Babylonian-Assyrian world (generally referred to as Akkadian). Because this system had to employ many "signs," it was primarily used by a special scribal caste or those who were highly trained. It would not be until about 1200 BC that Phoenician alphabetic writing would appear in Syria-Palestine. This economic system, employing 22 letters, greatly promoted literacy. From the Phoenician script came the Hebrew alphabetic system. Cf. Joseph Naveh, *Origins of the Alphabets; Introduction to Archaeology* (Jerusalem, Israel: The Jerusalem Publishing House, Ltd., n.d.).

The ziggurat from Ur which is still standing today is from the Ur III period, finished about 2100 BC. This would have been in the midst of Abraham's life (he left Haran for Canaan about 2091 BC).



The Remains of the Ziggurat at Ur of the Chaldees

3. The Akkadian Empire (2371 - ca. 2200 BC)
 - a. There was a gradual infiltration of Semites into Sumer from areas of upper Mesopotamia (the upper area of the Tigris-Euphrates river).⁷



⁷Mesopotamia means "between the two rivers."

- b. Sargon "the Great" of Akkad (2371-2316)⁸
Sargon the Great is probably to be equated with the biblical figure Nimrod (Gen 10:8-12).⁹
- 1) Prior to Sargon, the Semites and Sumerians had been living together in the land. The Semite advance to power under Sargon would have taken place not long before the time of Abraham.
 - 2) Sargon built his new capital at Akkad (= Agade). The exact location is not known, but it is thought to be in the vicinity of Babylon in southern Mesopotamia. Very little is known of Assyria to the north during the 3rd millennium BC.
 - 3) With the conquest of the Sumerian rulers in the lower Tigris-Euphrates area, this became the first Semitic dynasty.
 - 4) The Akkadian Empire can be said to be the first "world empire." Akkadian culture spread across the Fertile Crescent.
 - 5) Akkadian (a Semitic language) was put in writing using cuneiform, a technique of making "wedge shapes" on clay tablets which was borrowed from the Sumerians. The other great civilization in the Nile valley area of Egypt used hieroglyphic writing.
 - 6) Akkadian religion focused on Shamash, the Akkadian sun god. The religious system was astral in character.
4. The Gutu Invasion
About 2200 BC, a people of Gutu (to the east and north of Babylon) invaded the southern Tigris-Euphrates and defeated the powerful dynasty of Akkad. They in turn were eventually defeated by Utu-hegal of Uruk and driven out (ca. 2115 BC). This political upheaval would have occurred during Abraham's time in Ur and Harran.
5. Ur III Period (2115 BC - ca. 2000 BC)
Abraham's home in Ur was destroyed during this period.

⁸P. van der Meer gives the dates as 2242-2186 (*Chronology of Western Asia and Egypt*, 1955). W. von Soden, however, gives the dates for Sargon as 2330-2274 (*The Ancient Orient*, 48).

⁹ So Waltke, *Genesis*, 169; and D. J. Wiseman, *NBD*, 888). More recently Douglas Petrovich has argued that Nimrod is Sargon the Great. See "Identifying Nimrod of Genesis 10 with Sargon of Akkad by Exegetical and Archaeological Means," *JETS* 56:2 (June 2013), 273-305. The name Nimrod is probably not a throne name, but a name given him in the Bible to mark his character and intentions (Nimrod means "we shall rebel" [so Wenham, *Genesis*, 222]).

C. Hammurabi of Babylon (1792-1750 BC)¹⁰

Note: Joseph died in 1806 BC. The period of roughly 1950-1530 is known as the Old Babylonian Period. Hammurabi is the most noted king of this period in Mesopotamia.

1. Hammurabi is most noted for his famous law code (discovered in AD 1902 at Susa).
2. Earlier Ancient Near Eastern law codes have been discovered, but this one is the most complete. The upper part depicts the king standing before his god to receive the law from his hand.
3. This law code was not an entirely new creation, but the codification of current Mesopotamian jurisprudence.
4. The law code is written in "casuistic style," with hypothetical cases followed by the appropriate penalty.



II. RELIGIOUS LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS¹¹

The two most noteworthy literary accounts are the Enuma Elish and the Gilgamesh Epic. One is an account of creation and the other involves a universal flood. They differ considerably from the biblical accounts, though it is interesting to have a parallel account of the flood from extrabiblical literature. Though both of these accounts date far back in history, they found their classic expression in the Akkadian language in the time of Hammurabi. In these Akkadian versions, the accounts are made to elevate Babylon. The old god Enlil of Nippur surrenders the place of honor to Marduk, the local god of Babylon.

Significance: This represents the worldview out of which God began his redemptive program with Abraham, and in which the Patriarchs lived. What a contrast they make with the biblical accounts.

A. Enuma Elish (Epic of Creation)

In this account, we do not have creation coming from the spoken will of a single loving God, but rather from a struggle between numerous deities.

The account begins with the relationship of Apsu (the god of fresh water) and Tiamat (the goddess of marine waters). These two beget numerous gods. Apsu is killed by Ea, the "all wise," an act which leads to the creation of Marduk. Tiamat, the consort of Apsu, seeks revenge against Ea for the death of Apsu. Marduk (created by Ea) is chosen to be the champion for Ea, and in the course of the story Marduk slays Tiamat.

¹⁰ W. von Soden dates Hammurabi at 1729-1686 BC.

¹¹ For a helpful introduction to the comparative literature from the Ancient Near East, see Michael A. Grisanti, "Ancient Near Eastern Literature and the Old Testament," in *The World and the Word*, 53-78. The standard resource of texts is J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press, 1969). Helpful tools assessing ANE literature include Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Reading from the Ancient Near East; Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); and Victor H. Matthews and D. C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (NJ: Paulist Press, 2007).

Eventually Kingu (Tiamat's commander-in-chief) is slain, and out of his blood mankind is fashioned by Ea for "the service of the gods." Because Marduk rescued the gods from wicked Tiamat, they build for him the city of Babylon, the great capital city. This, then, becomes the favored city of the gods. The point is clear: Babylon is to be exalted as the mistress of the nations, and Marduk as the chief god of its pantheon.

B. Gilgamesh Epic (with elements of a flood account; see Grissanti, 58-59)

This poem-story revolves around a person known as King Gilgamesh. The king has a friend known as Enkidu, but Enkidu is killed for offending the gods. As a result, Gilgamesh is deeply hurt and goes on a search for immortality. One of the lines in the poem depicts the dilemma of mankind:

When the gods created mankind, death for mankind they set aside, life in their own hands retaining.

Gilgamesh's plan is to find one known as Utnapishtim who can possibly help him. [In some versions, Ut-Napishtim ("he found life") is called Atrahasis]. Utnapishtim is something of a counterpart to the biblical Noah. Utnapishtim survived the flood with the help of Ea, and is the only one to have attained immortality. Schwantes summarizes how Utnapishtim helps Gilgamesh:

Utnapishtim recounts to Gilgamesh the instructions he received for the preparation of a boat, the awful storm which brought about the flood, how after seven days the boat came to rest upon Mount Nisir, and how he sent out first a dove, then a swallow, and finally a raven which did not return. . . . Reproached by the gods for bringing about the deluge and destroying all mankind, Enlil went aboard the ship and bestowed upon Utnapishtim and his wife immortal life.¹²

Unfortunately for Gilgamesh, he does not get back to his home with the secret for immortality. So mankind must submit to death.

¹²Siegfried J. Schwantes, 40.