Those who were responsible for the composition of the Hebrew Bible believed that what they uttered and wrote derived from the God who had entered into a mutual Covenant with Israel. According to the terms of the Covenant, God loved and protected Israel and no other people, and Israel worshiped no other god but Him. The modern historian, however, cannot accept such an interpretation, but must seek—behind the religious terminology—the same kind of documented human story, with an examination of its underlying dynamics, that would be his proper objective in any other field. Otherwise he would achieve no more than a compilation of myths, chronicles, annals, oracles, autobiographies, court histories, personal apologia.

The historian cannot regard any human activity or statement, be it religious or secular, sacred or profane, as beyond his domain. His competence is limited only by the nature and adequacy of his sources. The limitations inherent in the Biblical sources thus militate against an historical reconstruction which will be clear in every respect; in spite of these inherent difficulties, scholarly researches have been supplying flashes of light where none existed before. So the work of interpretation goes on, some results of which form the basis of this essay.
CHAPTER I

The Fertile Crescent:

Hebrew Origins

THE Near East, that quadrangle of land lying between the Mediterranean, the Caspian and Red Seas, and the Persian Gulf, and connecting Asia with Africa, is in general a barren and uninviting area. Running across it, however, from the alluvial flatlands of the Tigris and Euphrates in the southeast through Syria in the northwest, and then curving down along the coast of Palestine to the Nile Delta, lies a crescent-shaped region of rich, well-watered land (see Map I). It was in this Fertile Crescent that the first great civilizations appeared and that man first made the transition from hunting, fishing, and cave dwelling to systematic farming within an organized community. From this focus, the new mode of civilization extended to lower Mesopotamia, and from there to the Syro-Palestinian coast, to Egypt, to the Anatolian plateau, to the Indus Valley in Pakistan, to Crete, and to Greece.

The Ancient Near East

This change began during the latter stages of the Neolithic or Late Stone Age, about 5500–4000 B.C. In ever-
I. The ancient Near East in the patriarchal period (second millennium B.C.).
increasing numbers people learned to cultivate cereal grasses and prepare more grain than was immediately needed. Once there were food surpluses, latent human energies were released. The art of animal husbandry, of making wattle huts from mud smeared on sticks—these and other advances occurred in this period. The first crude villages appeared, sometimes, as at Jericho, in association with a shrine.

A series of metallurgical discoveries accelerated this process of social organization. During the Chalcolithic, or Copper-Stone Age, about 4000–3300 B.C., man learned how to smelt copper for use in tools, weapons, and ornaments, and gradually this malleable, if none-too-plentiful, substance superseded stone. Silver and lead came into use in several parts of the Near East, and tin (in bronze) had been discovered, though it was only rarely used, before 3000 B.C. Other technical advances followed. The wheel and the plough were invented, and a rudimentary division of labor was introduced. Houses made of mud brick replaced mud-walled huts, and in the manufacture of the bricks themselves fine-stone aggregate eventually replaced chopped straw. Houses came to have wooden roofs and even smoothly plastered walls sometimes decorated with geometric patterns in several colors.

During the Early Bronze Age, about 3300–2000 B.C., Sumer, Akkad, Egypt, and other dynastic civilizations emerged. Villages grew into cities, canals were dug to irrigate the land, men labored in organized groups. The early Egyptian dynasts built pyramid tombs, and the rulers of Mesopotamia erected structures in the form of tiered brick mounds, the ziggurats. Pictographic and cuneiform writing were invented, enabling the priestly and ruling classes to keep records and other professional data, such as magical
formulae. Henceforth, too, knowledge could be stored for the use of posterity.

_Growth of Cities_

By this time man had become in every sense a thinking, planning, and articulate human being, with a clear idea of hierarchy in respect of class and occupation. As we have noted, villages which once had consisted of patriarchal family groups coalesced into cities, and these cities merged into "city-states," that is, urban centers controlling satellite territory. The family commune was replaced by a governing assembly of adult freemen, usually headed by a council of elders. Women, children, slaves, and the unpropertied were excluded from the assemblies. Slavery had become an economic institution, the first known instance of human chattels. These early slaves were foreign captives of war.

As the population increased, the elders began to assume the right, particularly in times of crisis, of electing a king, while retaining at all times the legal right to depose him. But with still further increase in the size and complexity of human settlements, kings became a permanent feature of the prevailing social order. The idea of a dynasty, or kingly line, followed in due course. Fixed rules for adjudicating anarchic private differences appeared, and legal codes began to be compiled, of which three dating from about 2000 B.C., from about two to three centuries before the great code of Hammurabi (or Hammurapi), have now been excavated.

_Mythology, Religion, and Science_

When not warring, building, tilling the soil, and tending his flocks, man began to inquire about the nature of the universe and his place in it. Literary masterpieces were created
in Sumerian, Akkadian (the cuneiform Semitic language of the Babylonians and Assyrians), and Egyptian. They represented an effort to determine the origin and to evaluate the activity of the sun, the moon, the planets, the other heavenly bodies; of the rain, wind, storm, and similar phenomena; of farming and shepherding; of human life and death, of the relationships among men, of the career of man on earth and thereafter; of justice, of good and evil, of reward and punishment. In brief, as today, so then too, man attempted to learn who really ruled the universe, and how to get the most out of it for himself during his relatively brief stay in this world.

In this early period, belief in the existence of the gods in the upper and nether worlds and their intervention in human affairs on earth played a dominant role in the thinking of the people. They knew little or nothing of the why and how of natural phenomena. The all-important cycle of the growth, death, and rebirth of vegetation upon which their agricultural economy depended was attributed to supernatural powers of different gradations, to higher gods and lower gods. Men explained the origin of the gods and of their functions to the best of their rather meager knowledge in the light of their geographical environment and social experience.

Mythology and religion came to be important factors in the personal and social life of men, and myths, like religions, were seized upon by those in power, as well as by those who sought to attain power, in their own interests. Kings, priests, government and military officials, landowners, merchants—all strove to make the religious and mythological thinking of the people serve their own ends. Eventually, a self-perpetuating priestly class took shape, an intelligentsia which devoted all its time to exploring and exploiting divinity.
Pantheons of gods, with appropriate mythologies and rituals of appeasement and propitiation, crystallized out of the primitive animism of prehistory, or that kind of subreligion in which all natural forces and objects are indiscriminately endowed with demonic power. Deity, like humanity, became organized.

An agricultural society needed a way of measuring time, in order to prepare for flood, drought, heat, cold, and other seasonal fluctuations. The obvious clock was the sun, moon, and the conspicuous stars, which never vary, as shepherds since time immemorial must have observed during the watches of the night. The empirical data derived from the observation of the heavenly bodies were utilized for omens. Star watching as a regular occupation naturally fell to the priests, the superior ones who could read, write, and use numbers. Thus astronomy was incorporated into the religious apparatus, and acquired ceremonial significance, both in Egypt and Mesopotamia. A knowledge of time measurement also sharpened the chronological, or historical, sense.

Hebrew Beginnings: Habiru

The Fertile Crescent, producing as it did unprecedented wealth, frequently attracted the more primitive peoples living in the grasslands and in the highlands. The archaeological work accomplished recently in this area has produced a generally clear picture of the situation. The first identifiable people to settle permanently in Mesopotamia were the Sumerians, about 3000 B.C. In the earlier part of the third millennium, many Sumerian city-states were overrun by groups of Semites, and about 2300 B.C. the first empire in history was established by King Sargon of Akkad. About a century later a number of groups of people north and east of Akkad formed a coalition and destroyed this Semitic
empire. From about 2070 until 1960 B.C. the Sumerians succeeded in recapturing a goodly portion of their former glory, only to disappear forever as a sovereign people before the onslaughts of several new peoples who arrived from different directions. Chief among these were the Semitic Amorites from western Asia and the Elamites from the region southeast of Mesopotamia. The Amorites increasingly dominated much of western Asia, including Syria and Palestine, and reached the peak of their influence first in Mari on the Middle Euphrates (near the modern Iraq-Syria border) and then in Babylon in the days of Hammurabi (about 1728–1686).

Another important ethnic element in the Fertile Crescent in the first half of the second millennium was the Hurrians (Biblical Horites). Shortly before 2000 B.C. they began to come down in ever-increasing numbers from the mountainous regions northeast of Mesopotamia, and by the end of the fifteenth century they were to be found in every part of western Asia, including Syria and Palestine, in many instances alongside the Amorites. The Hurrians attained their greatest prominence in the Mitanni Kingdom (about 1470–1350 B.C.), which extended from the region east of the upper part of the Tigris to the Mediterranean coast of Syria.

In this period and area, the ethnic group from which the Hebrews of the Bible finally emerged took its place in documented history. The fragmentary data available seems to suggest that various nomadic groups, both Semitic and non-Semitic, but generally known as Habiru, began to appear about 2000 B.C. They wandered from one area to another, sometimes with their own flocks or as skilled craftsmen, smiths, musicians, and the like. At other times they hired themselves out for specific functions and periods of time,
for example, as mercenaries and as private or government slaves. Not infrequently they made sudden raids on caravans and on weak, outlying communities, and according to their success either became prisoners of war and state slaves or settled down permanently in conquered towns and regions.

There appears to be good reason for associating the Biblical Hebrews with these far-flung Habiru. Not only does the Biblical account place the career of the Hebrews within the general orbit of the activities of some of the Habiru groups in the different lands of the Near East and in the different epochs of the second millennium B.C., but the term Habiru ceased to occur in extra-Biblical sources at about the same time that the term Hebrew ceased to be used in the Bible. Before the end of the second millennium, those of the Habiru groups which had conquered and become associated with specific territories acquired new, national names, e.g., Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites; the rest of the Habiru had become absorbed by the various settled communities in which they found themselves.

The story of the name “Hebrews” is much the same. Originally associated with some of these widely scattered Habiru groups, the Hebrews of the Bible came in time to lead a career of their own in a specific region, namely Canaan; and the name Hebrews gave way to the name Israelites (literally, “Children of Israel”) when the nation came into being. Thus the Biblical term Hebrew was never employed for the nation any more than the term Habiru was.

The Patriarchs in Canaan

Abraham and his immediate descendants and relatives, including his nephew Lot, led a career which was character-
istic of those days. They constituted a seminomadic group which settled for a while in a convenient region among the Semitic and non-Semitic (especially Hurrian and Hittite) people of the land, and then, as shepherds, artisans, and merchants, went on to another region. The land of the Canaanites, southern Syria and Palestine, was eminently suited to such free movement at that time. About 1800 B.C. western Palestine and southern Syria were generally occupied by city-states, largely under Egyptian control. Because the lowlands had the best soil and water supply, the cities of Palestine were located mostly along the Mediterranean coastal plain, in the valley of Jezreel (Esdraelon), and in the valley of the Jordan.

Central Palestine, the hilly region between the Jordan Valley and the coastal plain, was only sporadically settled. Though ill suited for agriculture, it was inviting enough to nomads with sheep and goats to graze. And so it was to this hill country, and to the even emptier and drier Negeb below, that Abraham and his family tended. In the Hill Country the patriarchs were associated with such places as Mamre, Bethel, Shechem, and Dothan (Map II). It is now known archaeologically that the last three places existed in this period; and Mamre, it would seem, was employed as the place name in Abraham's time only because the better-known Hebron was not yet founded (about 1700 B.C.).

In the Negeb, Beersheba was the focal point, as it has remained ever since. In Abraham's time Sodom and Gomorrah and other towns in the Vale of Siddim, at the southern end of the Dead Sea, were flourishing, and archaeology supports the Biblical story of their catastrophic end.

The patriarchal seminomadic mode of life required a
relatively simple social structure. The father was the head of the family. The sons and daughters, with their spouses and children, were all subject to the authority of the patriarch. By tribal law, the oldest son succeeded the father upon his death. The tribe lived from its herds and flocks and from the itinerant labor of its craftsmen members—for example, the smiths and musicians.

Two Egyptian sources reproduce extraordinarily well the social atmosphere breathed in Genesis. An Egyptian by the name of Sinuhe tells of his experiences in southern Syria and northern Palestine during the latter half of the twentieth century B.C. He relates, in the "Tale of Sinuhe," how an important Amorite ruler in Syria took him in and married him to his oldest daughter:

He set me at the head of his children. He married me to his eldest daughter. . . . He made me ruler of a tribe of the choicest of the country. Bread was made for me as daily fare, wine as daily provision, cooked meat and roast fowl, beside the wild beasts of the desert, for they hunted for me. . . . I spent many years [there], and my children grew up to be strong men, each man as the chief of his own tribe. The messenger who went north or who went south to the Residence City tarried with me, for I used to make everybody stop over. I gave water to the thirsty. I put him who strayed, [back] on the road. I rescued him who had been robbed. . . . Every foreign country against which I went forth, when I had made my attack on it, was driven away from its pasturage and its wells. I plundered its cattle, carried off its inhabitants, took away their food, and slew people in it.¹

The other Egyptian source is pictorial. A scene painted about 1900 B.C. on the wall of a noble's tomb at Beni Hasan, on the Nile in Middle Egypt, depicts a family of thirty-seven Semites from western Asia, seminomads come to Egypt to sell stibium, the popular black eye cosmetic. Several elements in the scene are common to the Biblical material. One is reminded of the families of the patriarchs; Jacob's family which went down to Egypt numbered seventy persons, including the children and grandchildren. The clothes are striped lengthwise and very colorful, and recall Joseph's so-called "coat of many colors." The lyre, the javelins, the bows and arrows, and the portable bellows are all characteristic of the occupations of the seminomadic groups. The little donkeys in the scene were the principal means of travel before the domestication of the camel.

The Biblical Cosmogony

All religions have a cosmogony, an explanation of how the world and mankind came to be. The Biblical cosmogony in the Book of Genesis (Chapters 1-11), dealing with Creation, the Garden of Eden (Paradise), the Fall of Man, the antediluvian (pre-Flood) patriarchs, the Flood and Noah's Ark, the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of man over the earth—all these came from the earlier part of the second millennium, when the Hebrews had direct contact with Mesopotamian society. A relationship between the most important Babylonian story of creation, now popularly designated from its first two words, Enuma Elish ("When Above"), and the Biblical Genesis has long been recognized. Thus the two share in common the concept of a primeval watery chaos and the subsequent creation of the heaven and
the earth. Both accounts speak of the existence of light prior to the creation of the sun, the moon, and the other heavenly bodies, which, in turn, made possible the regulation of time.

The Babylonian and the Hebrew versions both regard man as the final and most important act of creation, after which the creators rested. The Bible (Genesis 5) records ten patriarchs from Adam through Noah, who lived a total of 8,575 years, although the actual elapsed time was just over 1,000 years. Methuselah died at the ripest old age of them all, in his 969th year. Yet even these high numbers pale into insignificance in the light of one Sumerian list, which tells of eight antediluvian kings who reigned a total of 241,200 years, and a Babylonian list, compiled in the third century B.C. from much older sources, which records ten such rulers who reigned a total of 432,000 years.

The Biblical account of the Flood, with which God destroyed a world grown wicked, saving only enough of it to make a fresh start, is powerfully foreshadowed in the famous Gilgamesh Epic, which came down to the Babylonians from the earlier Sumerian civilization. Warned by the god Ea, Utnapishtim, the tenth antediluvian king in Babylonia, builds an ark in the shape of a cube, 120 cubits on each side. Into this ship he loads his family, his possessions, and "the seed of all living creatures." The epic relates how

Six days and nights
The wind blew, the downpour, the tempest, the flood overwhelmed the land,
When the seventh day arrived, the tempest, the flood,
Which had fought like an army, subsided in its onslaught.
The sea grew quiet, the storm abated, the flood ceased.
I opened a window, and light fell upon my face.
Ancient Israel

I looked upon the sea, (all) was silence,
And all mankind had turned to clay.

On Mount Nisir (or Nimush) the ship landed.
Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let it move.

When the seventh day arrived,
I sent forth a dove and let her go.
The dove went away and came back to me;
There was no resting-place, and so she returned.
I sent forth a swallow and let her go.
The swallow went away and came back to me;
There was no resting-place, and so she returned.
I sent forth a raven and let her go.
The raven went away, and when she saw that the waters had abated,
She ate, she flew about, she cawed, and did not return.
I sent forth (everything) to the four winds and offered a sacrifice.
I poured out a libation on the peak of the mountain.²

Although the resemblances between the Gilgamesh Epic and the Biblical account of Noah—who is also the tenth antediluvian patriarch—are numerous and varied, including such details as the Ark, the Flood, and the like, the differences are no less notable. It is frequently difficult to determine precisely what concepts the Hebrews derived from the various milieus in which they found themselves before about 1500 B.C. What is fundamental, however, is that the Hebrews infused whatever concepts they did borrow with their

own spirit and thinking, thus endowing them with a content of ethics and morals which lifted the primitive mythology of their Asiatic neighbors to a wholly new spiritual level.

The moral emphasis achieved in the Biblical cosmogony, as contrasted with the naturalism of the prototypes, is sharply illustrated by yet another Babylonian flood legend, the Attrakhasis Epic. Here we are told how

The god [Enlil] became disturbed by their gatherings.
The god heard their noise
And said to the great gods:
“Great has become the noise of mankind;
With their tumult they make sleep impossible.”

In other words, the gods are moved to reprisal by simple personal annoyance, whereas in Genesis God’s anger is stirred by man’s moral decline. As the Bible says: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).8

The Patriarchal Conception of God and the Covenant

Some features in the patriarchal stage of Israelite history stand out with especial significance. While the picture in detail is still far from clear, the Biblical and the newer archaeological data combine to indicate that the patriarchs practiced a religion which, while not monotheistic in our sense of the term, was yet not polytheistic either.

Its basic concept, later to develop into national significance, was the “covenant.” This was the tribal practice of

entering into an agreement with one particular god, so that the deity would devote himself entirely to the covenanters, in return for their exclusive obedience and loyal trust. Abraham entered into a mutually exclusive agreement with God, “the God of Abraham,” whereby Abraham was to recognize and worship no other deity and God was to protect and seek the welfare of Abraham and his family exclusively. In this regard, the Hebrews went far beyond their Mesopotamian counterparts, where the contractual relationship remained on a purely economic quid pro quo basis and the magic element played a most important role.

When Isaac renewed Abraham’s covenant, God became “the Kinsman of Isaac.” For Jacob, God was “the Champion of Jacob.” Abraham’s brother, Nahor, the one left behind in Haran, likewise adopted a personal god. When Abraham’s grandson Jacob and Nahor’s grandson Laban settled a dispute between themselves, Jacob said to Laban, “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Kinsman of Isaac, had not been with me, you would have sent me away empty” (Genesis 31:42). Whereupon Laban answered, “Let the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us” (verse 53).

It would be going too far to attribute to the patriarchal Hebrews a belief in the existence of one and only one God. In a sense they may be said to have practiced—but without defining—monotheism. While they probably did not think of denying the existence of other gods, and some mighty ones among them at that, the patriarchs attached themselves to one God, and Him alone they worshiped. With Him, they entered voluntarily into a covenant which was binding forever, never to be broken under penalty of severe punishment and, theoretically at least, even complete rejection. It
is not possible to understand the subsequent career of Israel without understanding these two inseparable concepts which arose in patriarchal times: practical monotheism and the personal covenant between the patriarchal families and their God.

**The Questioning Spirit**

Another phenomenon which apparently struck root in the patriarchal period is the fundamentally questioning and antidogmatic character and outlook of ancient Israel. Within the patriarchal structure, it is true, the patriarch was the chief figure, and no one was free from his final authority. In actual life, however, the matriarch too was a dominant figure, for example, Abraham's wife Sarah and Isaac's wife Rebekkah. And within the household at large there was considerable freedom of action. In the domestic sphere, the woman's ameliorative counsels and her motherly feelings were taken seriously. An important check on patriarchal authority was economically grounded. By custom, the land was regarded as ultimately inalienable, so that family and tribal rather than private rights were the norm.

God, too, was conceived in patriarchal terms, theoretically omnipotent but actually subject to considerable questioning. He was not regarded as a faraway, impersonal deity. The very notion of a covenant implies the equality of the covenanters, and the devotion exacted from God by the patriarchs was no less thorough than that exacted from them by Him. He was near at hand whenever needed, a member of the patriarchal household and available for extended question-and-answer periods. Beginning with the seminomadic family structure of patriarchal society, and down to the time of the composition of the latest books in the Bible,
there runs through Hebrew literature the characteristic and persistent feature of questioning authority. The Hebrew mind expressed its deepest self in its opposition to the absolute rule of any one man or tribe, be it kinsman or alien. This attitude extended even to the rule of God. Thus, in the famous dialogue between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:16–33, Abraham flatly objected when God proposed to obliterate Sodom, on the grounds that it was not fair to punish good men along with the bad. And Abraham would not rest content until God promised not to vent His anger, so long as there were as few as ten righteous men left. Which, however, seems not to have been the case.

In this respect, the patriarchal narratives reflected the pattern of contemporaneous Near Eastern saga in which the heroes talked back to the gods.

The Book of Job provides an even more famous example of putting God to the question. But it is worth noting that neither Abraham nor Job partook of the character of a Promethean rebel. They were not insurrectionaries against God; they wanted only to see justice done, to understand God’s powers, to have the contract properly drawn up and fulfilled on both sides.