Chapter 6
THE ORIGINS OF GENESIS RECONSIDERED

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Genesis, we are frequently reminded, is the book of origins. It sets before us the beginnings of the world and of humankind, of life and death, sin and the first promises of salvation, the Sabbath and marriage, society, civilization and, through the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the beginnings of God's chosen people, Israel. Genesis is the foundation upon which the rest of the Bible is built and, as many have correctly claimed, it is an essential cornerstone of historic Christian theology. There is, as one Genesis specialist remarks, "No work known to us from the ancient Near East that is remotely comparable in scope."[1]

But what of the origins of Genesis itself? Where did it come from? Who wrote it? When was it written? Is it the work of one author or many? Is the Genesis text reliable? Is it to be understood literally and historically or, as many would claim today, is it largely a myth that must be "demythologized" in order to be understood? And are the first eleven chapters of an entirely different genre from the rest of the book, resulting in a dichotomy rather than a unity? These are all important questions, not only for the book of Genesis itself, but also for the rest of the Bible, and few more crucial than those of origin and historicity.

For most of the last three and a half thousand years of Judeo-Christian history it has been held that Moses wrote Genesis, together with the other four books of the Pentateuch. While this view prevailed virtually unchallenged for so many centuries, nowhere in the Bible is the Mosaic authorship of Genesis actually asserted, although as we shall see, there may be good reason for this. Many competent Jewish and Christian scholars still hold that Moses did write Genesis, either just before or just after the Exodus, that is, at some point *c.* 1445 BC.[2] It means that events outlined in the early chapters of Genesis were as ancient to Moses as he is to us, even older by a further three or four thousand years if we accept the chronology of many conservative scholars, and it raises the legitimate question of the source, or sources, of Moses' information. Is it really feasible to think that all the information in Genesis – extensive, detailed genealogies and names of cities and places that had already been lost for centuries by Moses' time – had been handed down orally without loss or corruption through countless generations? Or is it more reasonable to think, without in any way compromising an informed understanding of inspiration, that Moses worked from written sources? The main purpose of this essay is to attempt to provide a coherent, credible answer to these latter questions.

Meanwhile, in the critical atmosphere that arose following the Enlightenment, another theory concerning the origins of Genesis was conceived, a theory seriously at variance with the traditional

view of Mosaic authorship. Known either as the Graf-Wellhausen theory, after the two German scholars who articulated it in its classic form in the 1860s and 1870s, or the documentary hypothesis (DH), since it postulated that Genesis as we now have it was actually composed of various earlier fragmentary documents much later than Moses, this theory quickly came to dominate Old Testament scholarship and has remained a major influence in biblical scholarship ever since. It will be necessary to outline this theory in more detail shortly. Suffice it to say here that from its early days it has attracted a steady stream of well-informed and articulate critics, among them the archaeologist and biblical scholar P. J. Wiseman.

On the basis of considerable archaeological evidence and a careful analysis of the Genesis text, and reacting against the DH that he believed to be seriously flawed, Wiseman proposed that Genesis had originally been written on tablets, by the patriarchs themselves or their appointed scribes, and in the manner in which it was customary throughout the ancient Near East to record important events or to write literary compositions. Wiseman contended that Moses had then compiled Genesis from these ancient and original texts, arguing that the structure of Genesis proves this to be the case. As we shall see, Wiseman's tablet theory is supported at various points by an astonishing amount of archaeological evidence and is presented in a convincing manner and by a sequence of persuasive arguments.

Wiseman first published his views in 1936 as *New Discoveries in Babylonia About Genesis*. The book was reprinted six times by 1953 and was then revised before his death and reissued with a new title, *Clues to Creation in Genesis*, in 1977.[3] It was republished again in 1985 as *Ancient Records and the Structure of Genesis*. Of the 1977 edition the InterVarsity magazine wrote, "We can recollect few books so startlingly convincing or so helpful in clearing up many difficulties concerned with the Old Testament. . . . It is one of the best books we have seen."[4] Similar sentiments have been expressed by many who have read the book in any of its editions.

In this essay we shall attempt to explain the tablet theory with sufficient detail to convey the strength of its arguments and demonstrate how many of its main features are supported by archaeological evidence and by other biblical scholars and ancient Near Eastern specialists. We note here two prominent scholars who have endorsed the tablet proposal, D. J. Wiseman, the author's son and editor of later editions of the book, and R. K. Harrison, author of the impressive *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Wiseman, the son, was himself a distinguished Assyriologist at the British Museum and professor of Assyriology at London University, and general editor of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series. It need not be said that his conclusions were based on the arguments and the evidence rather than on any filial relationship. Harrison's *Introduction to the Old Testament* is clearly the work of an able and erudite scholar. Among several other works Harrison co-edited the *New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* and until 1993 served as the first general editor of the *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Conclusions reached by scholars of this caliber cannot lightly be dismissed or simply ignored.[5]

The Documentary Hypothesis

Wiseman's tablet theory originated in part from his own profound misgivings concerning the DH and at a time when that hypothesis dominated Old Testament scholarship in general and the origins of Genesis in particular. He regarded it as "misconceived," "unenlightened," "a series of

suggestions" already in his opinion obsolete on account of substantial archaeological discoveries in the ancient Near East.[6] In order to appreciate Wiseman's criticisms and reservations and perhaps also for the benefit of readers not well acquainted with the DH, we briefly recount its main features here.

The essence of the theory is that Genesis is not the work of a single author but consists of fragments of several earlier documents of different and unknown authorship and date of origin. These earlier sources were designated J, E and P and were said to reflect the different names for God used in the original text by various authors. Later versions of the theory claim to have discovered yet more sources for the Pentateuch with the consequent addition of D, L and R and the subsequent origin of Genesis, or parts of it, as late as the sixth century BC with the resulting conclusion that much of Genesis was myth rather than history. As one critic points out, "the stories of the patriarchs were sagas or legends," Genesis containing "no historical knowledge about the patriarchs," for they were "stories" that arose later among the Israelite people.[7] The theory is bluntly, but not unfairly, summarized by K. A. Kitchen:

> During the later 19th century, rationalistic Old Testament scholarship in Germany decided that the Old Testament accounts of Hebrew history did not fit "history" as it "*should*" have happened, according to their preconceived ideas. Therefore, its leading representatives rearranged the Old Testament writings . . . until Old Testament history, religion and literature had been suitably manipulated to fit in with their philosophical preconceptions.[8]

Yet up to now no one knows who J or E or P really were or even if they or their documents ever existed. Astonishing as it may seem, not one document or fragment has ever been discovered.

Although Wiseman and others protested vigorously against the DH, it remained the dominant influence in Old Testament scholarship for much of the twentieth century. Victor Hamilton's stimulating commentary on Genesis in the New International Commentary series recognizes the dominating influence of Wellhausen, stating that "Even to this day [1990] he remains one of the 'founding fathers' of biblical studies," being to modern biblical scholarship "what Abraham is to the Jew, the father of the faithful."[9] Derek Kidner, who wrote the commentary on Genesis in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series (with an introduction by D. J. Wiseman to the 2008 printing of the original 1967 edition), notes, "The old literary analysis of the Pentateuch is in fact still treated as substantially valid."[10] However, since the 1970s and 1980s opposition to the DH has grown, Rendsburg in his study of Genesis concluding that it is "untenable" and should be "discarded."[11] It will be helpful to note the reasons that have contributed to its decline, since they reflect many of the concerns that led P. J. Wiseman to first propose the tablet theory.

Fundamental to an understanding of the Graf-Wellhausen theory is the fact that its development coincided with the rise and spread of Darwinism. Many writers recognize the underlying evolutionary nature of the DH, but we note here only the representative comments of R. K. Harrison. Pointing out that Wellhausen himself held "evolutionary concepts characteristic of the philosophy of Hegel," Harrison reminds us that the intellectual climate of the time was dominated by theories of evolution and that Wellhausen's theory itself "bore all the marks of Hegelian evolutionism" and revealed a "completely unwarranted confidence in the evolutionary Zeitgeist."[12] Harrison also recorded that before his death in 1918 Wellhausen conceded that the critical rationalism he had embraced so

readily in earlier years "had made havoc of his own faith in the authority and authenticity of the Old Testament."[13]

In that sobering context a more specific criticism was that the theory lacked any objective basis. Harrison commented on the "conjurations" of those who "postulated the documentary and fragmentary theories of Pentateuchal origins,"[14] but it was another distinguished scholar, the Egyptologist and biblical scholar K. A. Kitchen, who stated plainly what he and many others recognized that even "the most ardent advocate of the documentary theory must admit that we have as yet *no single scrap* of external, objective evidence for either the existence or the history of 'J,' 'E' or any other alleged source document."[15] The strength of this argument should not be allowed to escape us. The DH was just that, a hypothesis, for which there was no documented, objective evidence whatsoever. It was all conjecture, "conjuration," as Harrison had put it.

An equally substantial criticism is that the theory was developed and promulgated in almost total ignorance of the ancient Near East and its long literary tradition and literary customs. Kitchen complained strenuously that the prevailing theories in Old Testament studies had been "mainly established in a vacuum with little or no reference to the ancient Near East" and went on to argue that the information available from the Mesopotamian and eastern Mediterranean region better fitted the existing "observable structure of Old Testament history, literature and religion" than the prevailing "theoretical reconstructions" inherent in the DH.[16] Wiseman himself was in no doubt that the DH "originated in an age of ignorance concerning the earliest patriarchal times" and believed that the theory would never have been conceived in the first place had the wealth of archaeological information now available been known at the time.[17] The wealth and weight of archaeological evidence is, in fact, a fundamental argument for Wiseman's tablet theory as a whole.

Convincing as are the criticisms of the DH mounted by Harrison, Kitchen and others – and they should be read in context and in whole in order to be fully appreciated – it is the careful work of an earlier scholar that perhaps remains the most impressive *exposé* of the theory. It would still be difficult to find a more scholarly and thorough demolition of the DH than that undertaken by the Hebrew scholar Umberto Cassuto, professor of Biblical Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Cassuto's work, written originally in Hebrew, did not come to the attention of the English speaking world until 1961, when it was translated as *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*. The book was a careful textual and linguistic analysis of the theory in its entirety, in which Cassuto examined the five pillars on which, in his view, the theory rested. He recognized that its builders had created "an imposing edifice," noting that in his day they were "still busy decorating its halls and completing its turrets." But upon examination, the kind of scrutiny to which he himself had subjected it, it would be found "there was nothing to support it." The DH was "founded on air." It was "null and void."[18] As his translator remarked in the introduction to the English edition, Cassuto "examines the basic arguments of the prevailing Higher Critical view one by one, and proceeds to rebut them with compelling logic supported by profound learning."[19] It was a masterpiece in literary deconstruction and set a course for the many who would follow – Harrison, Kitchen and Wiseman among them.

Cassuto's work precipitated the beginning of the end for the DH, and although the end may not yet have arrived, many contemporary Old Testament scholars admit that the DH is now *passé*. Indeed, with the decline of the DH one even speaks of the present "methodological crisis" in Genesis

studies.[20] Although it remains to be seen just how that "crisis" will be resolved, the tablet theory, with its recognition of the importance of both archaeological evidence and the Genesis text itself must at least merit consideration as a legitimate explanation of the book's origins. It will be prudent at the same time to remember that Wiseman's theory is rejected *a priori* by many modern scholars who still cling forlornly to the DH, including some who would otherwise be thought of as conservative.

The Tablet Theory

Wiseman was convinced that Genesis should be allowed to speak for itself in the light of archaeological discoveries that had revealed significant information concerning methods of writing used in ancient times. He thus proposed that

> The book of Genesis was originally written on tablets in the ancient script of the time by the Patriarchs who were intimately concerned with the events related, and whose names are clearly stated. Moreover, Moses, the compiler and editor of the book, as we now have it, plainly directs attention to the source of his information.[21]

This is the tablet theory in essence. Wiseman argued that the sheer amount of evidence demanded that Genesis be considered in the ancient environment in which it came into existence.[22]

The evidence came principally from the thousands of cuneiform tablets discovered at many sites all across the ancient Near East, beginning with the discovery of Ashurbanipal's famed library at Nineveh in the early 1850s. It is estimated that since archaeological excavations began in earnest in the mid-nineteenth century as many as five hundred thousand cuneiform tablets have been unearthed at many different sites, most of which are over four thousand years old.[23] They contain a wealth of information concerning virtually every aspect of ancient life and culture and are now scattered in museums all over the world, the majority located in Europe and the United States. Twenty-two thousand tablets from Nineveh alone are now housed in the British Museum.

Wiseman believed that lack of this knowledge had led to major errors in the DH and its underlying presuppositions, four of which he discusses at length:

1. That civilization had developed gradually and appeared late in history.
2. The late development and use of writing.
3. No understanding of ancient literary customs and procedures.
4. The imposition of unfounded theories on the Genesis text.[24]

As a corrective to these errors, Wiseman argued that the cuneiform literature revealed:

1. The antiquity of civilization.
2. The early development of writing.
3. The need to understand ancient literary customs.
4. That Genesis should be understood in the light of ancient literary practices that had prevailed in patriarchal times.

Many scholars now support all of the above propositions and the important corollary that Genesis as it now stands was probably based on earlier written material. Cyrus Gordon, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Brandeis University, stated that the sources for Genesis and possibly other Pentateuchal texts "were definitely in written form" before they were incorporated into the present biblical text, and with specific reference to Genesis 5:1 stated that it could only come from "a pre-biblical written source because sefer (or *sepher*)," the original word translated in the text as "book," designated "only an inscribed text."[25] Several other writers have followed Gordon at this point.

The Antiquity of Civilization. Working from the evolutionary assumption that human society developed slowly over long eras of time, proponents of the DH believed that civilization was a recent phenomenon and that any evidence of it, such as writing, was also of late origin. Wiseman was convinced that precisely the opposite was the case. As ground for his understanding of Genesis he refers repeatedly to the great age of civilization, "the high state of civilization in early times," stating:

> It was confidently expected that excavation would support the widely held view of a gradual development of civilisation. But the cumulative evidence to the contrary has grown to such substantial proportions . . . that it seems that soon after the Flood, civilisation reached a peak from which it was to recede. Instead of the infinitely slow development anticipated, it has become obvious that art, and we may say science, suddenly burst upon the world.[26]

In support of this assertion Wiseman cites other contemporary Near Eastern historians, including H. R. Hall, who wrote in his *History of the Near East*, "When civilisation appears it is already full grown," and "Sumerian culture springs into view readymade."[27] Kitchen succinctly confirms the foregoing, stating "By 2000 BC the civilized world was already ancient."[28] It is now widely recognized, at least by archaeologists, Assyriologists and other informed ancient Near Eastern authorities, if not by evolutionists, that civilization is considerably older than has been widely believed under the influence of evolutionary theory. As Wiseman himself put it, Sumerian civilization, the oldest now known, "had reached its zenith" centuries before Abraham lived.[29]

Few have attempted to bring this reality to the attention of a generally uninterested world more than Professor S. N. Kramer. In two books in particular, *History Begins at Sumer* and *The Sumerians, Their History, Culture and Character*, Kramer established beyond any possible doubt that the history of the Sumerian peoples proved that civilization existed much earlier than had been supposed previously and that it had spread widely. Kramer wrote:

> By the third millennium BC, there is good reason to believe that Sumerian culture and civilisation had penetrated, at least to some extent, as far east as India and as far west as the Mediterranean, as far south as ancient Ethiopia and as far north as the Caspian.[30]

Kitchen writes of "the brilliant third millennium BC," the period between 3200–2000 BC, stating that during this period "the civilisations of Egypt and Sumer reached their first peak of maturity and brilliant achievement," noting specifically "the emerging brilliance of Mesopotamian culture" as far back even as 5000 BC.[31] Sir Leonard Woolley wrote in *The Sumerians* that already *c*. 2000 BC, after

the fall of the third Sumerian dynasty at Ur, Sumerian scribes "took it in hand to record the glories of the great days that had passed away."[32] It appears that Wiseman's belief in the great antiquity of civilization was well founded.

The Early Development of Writing. It is not too much to claim that writing is the single most evident mark of civilization, the final indicator that civilization has arrived. Wiseman knew that writing had developed early and that its use was widespread long before the times of the patriarchs. He claims it as "one of the most remarkable facts that has emerged from archaeological research," noting specifically that although the general view has been to insist on the late appearance of writing, "now [*i.e.*, from the mid-twentieth century] the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, and the present tendency is to thrust back the period for which written records are claimed to about 3500 BC."[33] The early development and widespread use of writing in the ancient world is a crucial factor in Wiseman's tablet thesis since it opens up the possibility that Genesis 1-11 could be a transcript from a very old series of written records. It is helpful, then, to know that many other respected authorities testify to the antiquity of writing as well as to the antiquity of civilization itself.

Kramer stated that the Sumerians developed writing into "a vital and effective instrument of communication" pointing out that by the second half of the third millennium BC Sumerian writing techniques could "express without difficulty the most complicated historical and literary compositions."[34] Harrison also noted "the immense antiquity of writing," arguing that the composition of Genesis should be studied "against the background of ancient Near Eastern literary activity."[35] Kitchen correctly points out, "Throughout the ancient biblical world, not one but several systems of writing were in use, often at the same time," specifying that "a rich and considerable literature" has survived from Mesopotamia and that cuneiform tablets discovered in profusion in the ancient Hittite capital at Hattusas prove that at least seven different cuneiform languages were used by the Hittites in formulating their records.[36] W. G. Lambert confirmed that cuneiform writing was used widely "for international communication" throughout Mesopotamia.[37] There is, then, ample confirmation of Wiseman's claim that writing developed before the time of Abraham and for his assertion that in view of the prevailing literary customs of antiquity it would be surprising if the patriarchs had *not* caused the information now recorded in Genesis to be set down in writing.[38]

Ancient Literary Customs. Wiseman also understood that the cuneiform literature revealed that ancient scribes used certain literary devices, notably in connecting successive tablets in a series. There were two such practices, the use of catch-lines and colophons, which it is necessary to understand. A catch-line was a sentence or phrase from the last line of a tablet that was repeated at the beginning of the next tablet to insure continuity and, if a series of tablets became disordered, to enable the reader to rearrange them correctly. Sometimes the catch-line could be the title of the document, in this case usually the first few words of the opening tablet. Sometimes a numbering system was added. In his study *The Babylonian Genesis*, Alexander Heidel examined the contents of the now well-known Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, dating from the early second millennium BC, which had been written on a series of seven tablets, noting the catch-lines as they appeared on successive tablets.[39] It is one of many examples that could be cited. We can perhaps compare catch-lines to the running heads and page numbers of a modern book.

The other frequently used literary device in ancient literature was the colophon. A colophon was the concluding statement on a document and it normally included the name of the scribe or owner

of the tablet (not always the same person) and frequently a reference to the time of composition. Thus, the colophon took the place of the title page in a modern book, but appeared at the end of the document rather than at the beginning. Colophons did not always contain the same amount of information, and the cuneiform literature reveals that the content often varied from scribe to scribe. Occasionally no colophon was used at all. Heidel also referred to the use of colophons in the Assyrian recension of the *Atra-hasis* epic found in the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, as do Lambert and Millard in their study of the same story. They note that in this case a colophon appears at the end of each tablet "giving such details as we expect on a title-page."[40]

Wiseman recognzed the significance of catch-lines and colophons in ancient texts and referred to them frequently, claiming that a careful analysis of Genesis revealed their recurring presence in the Genesis text and concluding, "There can be little doubt that initially much of the book of Genesis would have been written on tablets [for] on examining the book of Genesis we find that some of these ancient literary usages are still embedded in the present English text." Referring to the scribes of Nineveh in the second millennium BC who copied tablets that had been written a thousand years earlier using these ancient literary techniques, he argued that the compiler of Genesis had done "precisely the same."[41] This writer is persuaded that Wiseman conclusively proved his case.

The Structure of Genesis

The foregoing is all necessary background to the central idea in Wiseman's tablet theory – that much of Genesis was originally written on tablets in ancient times, using the literary customs then current. In the foreword to the 1977 edition of Wiseman's book, D. J. Wiseman summarized his father's approach, "Taking his cue from the recurrent catch-lines or colophons in Genesis, he examines them as clues to the literary structure of Genesis and as indicative of its origin and transmission."[42] So the structure of Genesis, understood in the light of ancient scribal techniques, lies at the heart of the tablet theory. We must follow Wiseman closely at this point. He maintained that the phrase "These are the generations of . . ." (KJV), used eleven times in Genesis 1-36,[43] was "the master-key" to understanding its structure. These eleven uses of the *tôlĕdôt* phrase indicated eleven colophons in the text and thus eleven original tablets on which primeval and patriarchal history had been successively recorded.[44]

Perhaps the best way to grasp Wiseman's argument is to imagine that we have in front of us an original Genesis text as it might have appeared to those who first read it – without chapter or verse divisions and without subheadings in the text to alert us to a change of direction or subject matter – just pages of continuous Hebrew text. How would we know where such changes took place? How would we make sense of it all? Wiseman argued, and virtually all modern scholars now concur, that the phrase "These are the generations of . . ." was the point of transition or change throughout the book. Wiseman was working from the KJV, but most modern versions translate the phrase differently. Rather than confusing the issue these modern versions are actually helpful, as we shall note, since many of them clarify the meaning of the phrase while maintaining its overall structural significance.

This key phrase is now widely referred to as "the *tôlĕdôt* formula" since the Hebrew word translated "generations" in the KJV is the word *tôlĕdôt* (or *toledôth*). Harrison strongly supports Wiseman's assertion that the use of the *tôlĕdôt* phrase indicates the presence of a colophon and thus

constitutes "part of the concluding sentence of each section, thereby pointing back to a narrative already recorded." He therefore argues that it is "eminently possible to regard its incidence as indicating the presence of a genuine Biblical source in the text."[45] These sources, in the view of both Wiseman and Harrison, were the original tablets on which Genesis had been written. In a section entitled "*Toledot* and the Origins of Genesis" in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Harrison also asserts that it was "the clue to the underlying sources" of Genesis and therefore the key to understanding the book.[46] It is, perhaps, of more than passing interest that even advocates of the DH had long recognized that the *tôlĕdôt* phrase was a distinguishing feature of Genesis. S. R. Driver, the early twentieth-century Old Testament and Hebrew scholar, stated that Genesis was cast in a framework "marked by the recurring formula 'these are the generations of . . . ,' " and that the "entire narrative as we now have it is accommodated to it."[47] Harrison notes that many other earlier Genesis scholars believed similarly.

But what does *tôlĕdôt* actually mean? The KJV translates it as "generations," but many modern versions translate it differently. The NKJV, for example, translates it "history" or "genealogy" (in the usual sense of family history), and the NIV translates it "account of." Wiseman points out that *tôlĕdôt* is not the normal Hebrew word for "generations" which is "*dor*," so translated 123 times in the Old Testament, and frequently used in a future sense. Following the early Hebrew scholar Gesenius, Wiseman argues that the true meaning of *tôlĕdôt* is "history," especially "family history" or "origins of."[48] The equivalent phrase in English would then be "these are the historical origins of" or "these are the beginnings of," which leads us to Wiseman's fundamental point, "*it is therefore evident that the use of the phrase in Genesis is to point back to the origins of family history and not forward to a later development through a line of descendants*."[49] Harrison also insists that the term "is used to describe history" and particularly in Genesis "family history in its origins."[50] This history was initially recorded on tablets, and the transition between each tablet was marked by a colophon that contained the *tôlĕdôt* phrase. It points backwards to that which precedes it rather than forwards to that which follows.

Wiseman and Harrison both provided tables illustrating the structure of Genesis based on the *tôlĕdôt* colophons, and noting the eleven source tablets on which Genesis had originally been written. Harrison's table follows:

Tablet 1: Gen 1:1-2:4: The origins of the cosmos.
Tablet 2: Gen 2:5-5:2: The origins of mankind.
Tablet 3: Gen 5:3-6:9a: The history of Noah.
Tablet 4: Gen 6:9a-10:1: The history of Noah's sons.
Tablet 5: Gen 10:2-11:10a: The history of Shem.
Tablet 6: Gen 11:10b-11:27a: The history of Terah.
Tablet 7: Gen 11:27b-25:12: The history of Ishmael.
Tablet 8: Gen 25:13-25:19a: The history of Isaac.
Tablet 9: Gen 25:19b-36:1: The history of Esau.
Tablet 10: Gen 36:2-36:9: The history of Esau.
Tablet 11: Gen 36:10-37:2: The history of Jacob.[51]

These tablets were written successively as history unfolded, providing an accurate account "of primeval and patriarchal life written from the standpoint of a Mesopotamian cultural milieu."[52]

Most contemporary commentators do not follow Wiseman and Harrison, holding instead that the *tôlĕdôt* phrase introduces the section in the text which follows. Wiseman was aware of this view and drew attention to the first use of the phrase in Genesis 2:4a, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth," or as in the NKJV, "This is the history of the heavens and the earth," pointing out that in this instance the phrase could not possibly refer to the narrative which followed, but must summarize the Creation account that preceded it. Almost all modern authorities concede that this is so, as do many recent translations of the Bible (*e.g.*, NEB, NRSV, NLT). It would seem then more logical and consistent to think that the phrase would be used in the same way in succeeding instances and Wiseman comments:

> The phrase is only appropriate as a concluding sentence. So most commentators, notwithstanding their usual opposite interpretation of the words, make the story of the creation *end* with them. Had they seen that *all* sections of Genesis are *concluded* by the use of this formula they would have recognised the key to the composition of the book.[53]

This understanding of the *tôlĕdôt* phrase is vital to Wiseman's argument, and his detailed explanation of it deserves careful attention.

Wiseman makes one further important point regarding the *tôlĕdôt* phrase. He contends that the name recorded at the end of the phrase on each occasion it is used "refers to the owner or writer of the tablet rather than to the history of the person named."[54] This again is in harmony with the content of colophons in ancient usage. As already noted, many authorities recognize the widespread use of colophons in ancient literature, and the enlightening study by E. Leichty summarizes much of what we have, to this point, observed. Leichty states that a colophon was "frequently used in ancient Mesopotamian literature," that a tablet with a colophon was "often part of a series," and that in earlier documents the colophon tended to be simple, giving only a name, a date and sometimes, if part of a series, a catch-line.[55] Wiseman and Harrison both argue persuasively that the name could be either the name of the scribe or the owner of the original tablet. Thus, "These are the origins of Noah" (Genesis 6:9a), does not necessarily mean "this is the history about Noah," but the history written or possessed by Noah. Wiseman notes that when in chapter 11:27 we read, "These are the generations of Terah" we do not read much subsequently about Terah, for it simply records that he was the son of Nahor. Wiseman says, "The phrase is intended to indicate that Terah either wrote, or had written for him, the list of his ancestors found in verses 10 to 27."[56]

The colophon, then, concluded the tablet and it included the final *tôlĕdôt* phrase that referred to the history or origins of the preceding narrative and the name of the writer or the original owner of the tablet. The eleven tablets were written successively in accordance with the literary norms of the times and as patriarchal history developed, and were eventually edited or compiled by Moses shortly before or shortly after the Exodus, in order that the Israelites would never lose the knowledge of their history. Referring to the characteristics of ancient Near Eastern literature, Harrison remarks:

> As with all similar ancient literature, these tablets constituted highly valuable sources for the delineation of patriarchal origins, and it is testimony to their antiquity and to the esteem in which they were held that they have survived in the Hebrew text in something which in all probability approximates to their original form.[57]

Wiseman and Harrison agree that Moses did not compose Genesis, but that he compiled it from a series of ancient tablets recorded as primeval and patriarchal history developed. This is why nowhere in the Bible, let alone in Genesis itself, is it claimed that Moses was the author of the book. Wiseman's own summary fittingly concludes this brief survey of the tablet theory:

> The more rigid the tests applied to Genesis, the more minute the examination of its contents in general and the words in particular, the more it is read in the light of the newer facts of archaeology, the more irresistibly does it lead us to the conclusion that Moses . . . compiled the book, using the pre-existing records, which the Patriarchs had named, or he has named, at the end of each section of family histories.[58]

Internal Evidence for the Antiquity of Genesis

If the tablet theory is correct and the early chapters of Genesis were first written in antiquity, we would expect to find evidence of its great age in the text of those early chapters and evidence of subsequent history in later chapters. Wiseman presents several such lines of evidence, although limitations of space prevent us from exploring most of them in any detail.

1. The presence of Babylonian words in the first eleven chapters. Wiseman states "only definitely Babylonian words are to be found in the earlier chapters of Genesis" and claims that some linguistic experts believe that the entire atmosphere of these chapters is Babylonian. Harrison also mentions the "large number of Babylonian words that occur in the earlier part of the book."[59]

2. The use of Egyptian words and reference to Egyptian customs in the later chapters. The argument here is that when the narrative reaches the point at which Joseph arrives in Egypt "the whole environment changes." Wiseman cites several examples, then concludes, "the person who wrote these chapters was intimately acquainted with Egyptian life and though," emphasizing "the irresistible testimony" that these later chapters must have been written in Egypt.[60]

3. References to towns and places that either had ceased to exist or whose original names were already ancient by Moses' time. Wiseman explains that Moses, as editor/compiler of Genesis, was obliged to add new names to some ancient places so that they could be identified by the Hebrews living in his day. He lists several instances in Genesis 14 alone, a chapter that was part of tablet 7 and written in the time of Abraham. Even in the four hundred or so years between Abraham and Moses, some of these names had been lost, so Moses adds explanatory notes at the appropriate points:

vv. 2, 8: Bela ("the same is Zoar")
v. 3: The vale of Siddim ("which is the Salt Sea")
v. 7: Enmishpat ("which is Kadesh")
v. 15: Hobah ("which is on the left hand of Damascus")

Another instance is the reference to Hebron in Genesis 23:2 where it is recorded that Sarah died in Kirjath-arba with the explanation "the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan." Not only was the name by which the place was known in Moses' day recorded, but it was also necessary to state that Hebron was in Canaan. Wiseman comments, "this surely indicates that the note was added at a very early date, before the children of Israel had entered the land. No-one in later times would need to be told where Hebron was."[61]

4. Catch-lines in the text. We have previously noted the use of catch-lines as an ancient literary device to connect successive tablets in a series. Wiseman lists the catch-lines that are evident in the Genesis text, claiming the fact we still find them embedded in the text confirms "the purity with which the text has been transmitted to us." It is further confirmation that the text had originally been inscribed on tablets.

The catch-lines are as follows:

1:1 God created the heavens and the earth.
2:4 Lord God made the heavens and the earth.
2:4 When they were created.
5:2 When they were created.
6:10 Shem, Ham and Japheth.
10:1 Shem, Ham and Japheth.
10:32 After the Flood.
11:10 After the Flood.
11:26 Abram, Nahor and Haran.
11:27 Abram, Nahor and Haran.
25:12 Abraham's son.
25:19 Abraham's son.
36:1 Who is Edom.
36:8 Who is Edom.
36:9 Father of the Edomites (lit. father of Edom).
36:43 Father of the Edomites (lit. father of Edom).

Wiseman points to "the striking repetition of these phrases exactly where the tablets begin and end" and says that this repetition "cannot possibly be a mere co-incidence." The catch-lines had remained buried in the Genesis text, their "significance apparently unnoticed," until illuminated by the relatively recent understanding of the ancient cuneiform literary practices.[62]

External Evidence for the Antiquity of Genesis

The internal evidence of the antiquity of Genesis is complemented by a vast amount of external evidence, much of which has been summarized and documented in the works of Kitchen, Harrison and others, and also in the book *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood* (1994). This rather unique title is actually a quotation from the writings of Ashurbanipal, the seventh-century BC king of Assyria whose vast cuneiform library was discovered at Nineveh and was found to contain various early Mesopotamian Creation and Flood accounts, many of them copies of much older texts. The book is a collection of articles first published in scholarly journals in the latter half of the twentieth century, all of which focused on various aspects of Genesis 1-11 in the light of archaeological discovery, cuneiform literature and related ancient Near Eastern studies.

The book contains a paper by D. J. Wiseman entitled "Genesis 10: Some Archaeological Considerations," in which he examines aspects of the so-called Table of Nations in Genesis 10, a highly condensed account of the three sons of Noah – Shem, Ham and Japheth – their descendents and the repopulation of the earth after the Flood. Wiseman remarks that the text of Genesis 10 "is in

little doubt" since it is essentially confirmed in 1 Chronicles 1:4-23.[63]

We note here two of D. J. Wiseman's conclusions, the first concerning the descendents of Japheth. Recognizing the difficulties in attempting to establish precisely where the Japhethites eventually settled, Wiseman supports the view, based on a "comprehensive survey," that they inhabited Anatolia and the northeastern Mediterranean region.[64] He states, "Recent archaeological discoveries, especially the inscriptions found, support the view that the Japhetic list covers the north-eastern Mediterranean-Anatolian region." He then investigates the geographical boundaries within which the descendents of Ham and Shem eventually settled, as indicated initially in Genesis 10 by "the Hebrew historian." Reading this chapter, or indeed the preceding study on the Table of Nations, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the geographical, archaeological, ethnological and linguistic information under consideration collectively point to historical reality. Wiseman concludes the paper by stating that it is becoming "increasingly clear that the geographical information in Genesis 10 could have been available to the Egyptian court when Moses received his education there in the fifteenth or fourteenth century BC."[65]

Wiseman also draws attention to a significant aspect of Sumerian civilization. Using phrases such as "literary evidence," "an increasing number of cuneiform texts" and "contemporary documents" he discusses what may be regarded as the central feature of early postdiluvian civilization, outlined specifically in Genesis 10:10-12. Here are recorded the existence of a number of ancient cities, a reality not generally thought of as characteristic of the early "hunter-gatherers" in the evolutionary chain. It is that the earliest known peoples of the Mesopotamian region were city-dwellers, rather than nomadic tribesmen. Wiseman says:

> The predominant feature of Sumerian civilization is that men dwelt in large walled cities. Archaeological investigation has produced no proof for a gradual evolution from village to town and then city. This means that they were industrialists and exported their varied wares, while importing other things necessary for their economy.[66]

It is almost impossible in this context not to think of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Hamilton, in his commentary on Genesis, remarks that it was "the building of the city, and not the tower per se, that provoked the divine displeasure."[67] Be that as it may, there is accumulated evidence from at least 2000 BC of trading in sophisticated merchandise throughout Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, India and Egypt, evidence in itself of urban rather than agrarian life. In describing the archaeological evidence from early Mesopotamia, Harrison recounts excavations at Uruk, the biblical Erech of Genesis 10:10, noting that Mesopotamia "saw the development of an increasingly complex urban life" with corresponding widespread commercial activity.[68] Wiseman himself concludes that such diversified and widespread trading "is abundantly attested by contemporary documents and implies a knowledge of the very areas outlined in Genesis 10."[69] It becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the factual content of Genesis 1-11, however condensed and sometimes obscure these early records undoubtedly are.

One further piece of external evidence should also be noted: the Sumerian king list (SKL) as it has come to be known, and the light it throws on Genesis 5. The SKL is a list, part fact and part fiction, of rulers from very early Sumerian times. There are now at least fifteen different versions of the list discovered in several locations and of varying age, but it is generally agreed that the list

goes back to at least 2000 BC, and possibly earlier. This list has attracted the attention of many scholars, and features in at least nine of the studies included in *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood,* in addition to several other works. Later versions of the list divide these early kings into two categories, antediluvian and postdiluvian. It is the antediluvian list that is of most interest, since its earliest versions list ten successive rulers of the antediluvian world.

Two ancient tablets in particular, WB444 and WB62, both located in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, have given rise to much discussion, since WB444 lists only eight antediluvian kings, while the earlier WB62 lists ten. J. J. Finklestein, an acknowledged authority on the SKL, states that on the evidence of WB62 "a case can be made out for the existence already at a relatively early date of the ten-king tradition" and argues persuasively that "the scribe of WB62 would not have presumed" to list ten kings if in fact there was "no precedent for a ten-king antediluvian tradition."[70] That the ten-king tradition was of early date is confirmed by Lambert and Millard who argue that "the conclusion becomes inescapable that these ten kings were at first an independent tradition only secondarily prefixed to the king list."[71] It will have become apparent by now to the thoughtful reader that we are dealing here with an account that is in some respects parallel to that of Genesis 5, which lists ten generations between Creation and the Flood, giving the names of the heads of each generation. Ancient Near Eastern specialists have been studying these ancient texts since the early twentieth century, frequently observing the recurrence of "ten rulers" who reigned before the Flood. Wiseman himself states, "It is quite possible that the latter corresponds to the ten patriarchs mentioned in Genesis 5."[72] It is also quite possible, in the minds of some even probable, that the number of ten antediluvian kings is derived from the biblical account and thereby verifies its essential veracity and antiquity.

Umberto Cassuto wrote at great length on the topic, reminding us among much else and with much insight that a tradition regarding "*ten* heads of primeval generations" is to be found in many ancient Oriental cultures, including the Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian and Indian, among others, and that this tradition was reflected in the SKL.[73] He speaks of "the world's ten founding fathers," affirmed by the Genesis text but in contrast at many points with the SKL account. Commenting on the Genesis 5 record and the SKL, Cassuto said that there was between them "a similarity that cannot be fortuitous" and arguing that while the Sumerian accounts confirmed the biblical account, the latter "purified" and "refined" the diverse and often conflicting accounts of the Sumerian, Mesopotamian and Oriental traditions.[74] It is also worth noting that the third-century BC Babylonian historian Berossus recorded the ten-king antediluvian tradition in his *Babylonaica*, written in Greek *c.* 278 BC, Cassuto commenting that "even the late testimony of Berossus" is sufficient to make us aware of "remarkable parallels" between the biblical record and the Babylonian tradition.[75] It seems that of all the various lists that had proliferated in antiquity, the ten-king version was the earliest and the one that had prevailed by the time Berossus came to write his history or it was the one that he believed retained the most credibility. The antediluvian section of the SKL in its earliest form reminds us once again of the antiquity, integrity and historicity of the Genesis text.

In Conclusion

In *Clues to Creation in Genesis* P. J. Wiseman set out to demonstrate that:

1. Genesis had originally been written on tablets in ancient times by the patriarchs or their scribes,

2. in accordance with ancient literary customs.
3. Moses later compiled the book as it now stands and
4. that he clearly directs attention to his sources, evidence of which can still be seen in the Genesis text.

Wiseman believed that he had provided ample evidence in support of all the above. We have traced his arguments and observed that many of them and most, if not all, his various lines of evidence have been endorsed by respected scholars from many disciplines. He considered that the evidence *in sum* confirmed his proposal with such "strength and substance" that it required a decision in favor of the writing of Genesis in antiquity in harmony with the customs and techniques of ancient scribes.[76] If Wiseman was correct, then it clearly requires that the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis be treated with more respect than is frequently the case today.

D. J. Wiseman referred to a number of professionals from various disciplines who had been persuaded, as he himself was, that his father's approach to Genesis was "the most rational, the most true to the text of Scripture and the most free from difficulties."[77] As noted, R. K. Harrison also endorsed that view. The arguments, the reasoning, the evidence from archaeology and from the Genesis text itself, the gaping flaws in the discredited documentary hypothesis and the unity the proposal brings back to the frequently dissected book of Genesis, all combine to call for the careful reading and objective evaluation of Wiseman's tablet theory. It also illuminates our understanding of the processes of revelation and inspiration. While for various reasons, including the lingering influence of the DH,[78] the thesis has until now remained a minority viewpoint, it should not be forgotten that objectivity and the continuing quest for truth do not allow arbitrary rejection of any proposal if the arguments and the evidence are sufficiently compelling, or if they lead to greater understanding.

Notes and References

1. Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 15.
2. The *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary* takes the former view.
3. The 1977 edition also included Wiseman's other book, *Creation Revealed in Six Days*, first published in 1948. The present study focuses on Wiseman's first book with the subtitle "Ancient Records and the Structure of Genesis" in the 1977 *Clues to Creation in Genesis*.
4. P. J. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation in Genesis* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1977), back cover.
5. The French scholar Jean Astruc (1684-1760) was one of the first to propose that Moses compiled Genesis from original documents, but this cannot be regarded as anticipating the DH since Astruc regarded his thesis as supportive of the Mosaic authorship of Genesis.
6. *Ibid.*, 75-77.
7. J. Wellhausen and H. Gunkel, cited in K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 57.
8. Kitchen, *The Bible*, 56.
9. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 13.
10. Kidner, *Genesis*, 21.
11. G. A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986), cited in Hamilton, *Genesis*, 31.
12. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1970), 21-22, 41.
13. *Ibid.*, 26.
14. *Ibid.*, 94.
15. K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1966), 23.
16. *Ibid.*, 172.
17. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 5.
18. Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1961), 100-101.
19. I. Abrahams in Cassuto, *Documentary Hypothesis*, v.
20. James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 8.
21. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 4.
22. *Ibid.*, 5.
23. S. Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xv.
24. *Ibid., passim.*
25. C. H. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (London: Collins, 1962), 282.
26. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 21.
27. *Ibid.*, 19.

28. Kitchen, *The Bible*, 25.

29. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 102.

30. S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians, Their History, Culture and Character* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 5.

31. Kitchen, *The Bible*, 23.

32. C. L. Woolley, *The Sumerians*, cited in Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 21.

33. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 25.

34. S. N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 19.

35. Harrison, *Old Testament*, 58, 543.

36. Kitchen, *The Bible*, 17-18.

37. W. G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965), 300.

38. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 56.

39. A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd edn. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 18-20.

40. W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 5.

41. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 33. On the use of catch-lines and colophons in ancient texts, see also Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia*, 20, 29, 71, 77 etc.

42. D. J. Wiseman, in foreword to *Clues to Creation*, vi.

43. Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2. Unless otherwise indicated the KJV is cited in all biblical references since this was the version Wiseman worked from.

44. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 34-35.

45. Harrison, *Old Testament*, 547.

46. *Ibid.*, 543.

47. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1904), ii.

48. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 36. *Cf.* also L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), vol. 4, 1700.

49. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 37.

50. Harrison, *Old Testament*, 546.

51. *Ibid.*, 548.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 37.

54. *Ibid.*, 41.

55. E. Leichty, "The Colophon", in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 147-148.

56. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 41.

57. Harrison, *Old Testament*, 551.

58. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 74.

59. *Ibid.*, 46; Harrison, *Old Testament*, 552.

60. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 47, 103.

61. *Ibid.*, 48.

62. *Ibid.*, 51-52.

63. D. J. Wiseman, "Genesis 10: Some Archaeological Considerations", in R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura, eds., *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 255.

64. *Ibid.*, 258.

65. *Ibid.*, 265.

66. *Ibid.*, 263.

67. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 356.

68. Harrison, *Old Testament*, 97-8.

69. D. J. Wiseman, "Genesis 10," 264.

70. J. J. Finklestein, "The Antediluvian Kings: A University of California Tablet," *The Journal of Cuneiform Studies* XVII, no. 2, (1963), 50.

71. Lambert and Millard, *Atra-hasis*, 15.

72. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 17.

73. U. Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1961), 254, emphasis in the original.

74. *Ibid.*, 255, 263.

75. *Ibid.*, 254*ff.*

76. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation*, 101.

77. *Ibid.*, viii.

78. Hamilton does not support Wiseman's theory or the general view that the first use of the *tôlĕdôt* formula in Genesis 2:4a refers to the Creation account that precedes it. He argues that the formula here introduces what follows as it does in all other uses in the subsequent text, but his appeal to the DH in support of his view is as significant as it is surprising, *The Book of Genesis*, 4.