

## **“UR OF THE CHALDEANS” (GEN 11:28-31): A MODEL FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TEXTS**

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*Scholars are still puzzled over the appearance of “Ur of the Chaldeans” in Gen 11:28 and 31. Proposed solutions to the problem have either called it an anachronism or an example of post-Mosaic textual updating, or else they hold that Moses wrote the text just as it stands because he knew about the Chaldeans in his day. This article offers linguistic, genealogical, and historical evidence in supporting the last of these options. Linguistically, “Chaldeans” could be a later spelling of the term Kašdīm in Gen 11:28, 31, according to this option. This solution is consistent with Moses’ knowing the Aramean origins of Abraham and his family as reflected in Gen 10:22; 31:47; and Deut 26:5, but such origins have been issues that have been open to debate. Genealogically, certain connections raise the possibility that the Chaldeans were relatives of Abraham. Historically, the problem is that extrabiblical references to the Chaldeans do not occur until the times of Ashurnasirpal II or III (883-859 B.C.). Yet such is a problem only if one subjugates the early biblical (i.e., Mosaic) references to later secular texts. Secular sources need not have greater authority than the Bible. Extrabiblical evidence itself has some hints that the Chaldeans’ rise to power may have preceded the time of Moses. Though it is impossible at this point to resolve the problem fully, the option supported by linguistic, genealogical, and historical evidence best accords with one’s adherence to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.*

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### **Introduction**

In 1973 James Kelso observed that a few puzzles still remain in the archaeological examination of the history of Abraham.<sup>1</sup> One of those puzzles is the

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<sup>1</sup>James L. Kelso, “Abraham as Archaeology Knows Him: Part II—Abraham the Spiritual Genius,” *Bible and Spade* 2/2 (Spring 1973):40. Kelso taught archaeology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, an institution at which the Bible Lands Museum is named for him.

reference to “Ur of the Chaldeans” in Gen 11:28 and 31, whose solution is still elusive in 2009. Suggesting how the solution might play out, Kelso asked, “Is Chaldeans a later editorial supplement, or will the term actually turn up in a cuneiform document?”<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have already opted for the former. This essay will champion the latter solution.

### The Problem

The Hebrew text in Gen 11:28 and 31 contains the phrase אֹר כַּשְׁדִּי (“Ur of the Chaldeans”).<sup>3</sup> Some scholars treat “Chaldeans” as either an anachronism or an example of post-Mosaic textual updating. Gordon Wenham argues for the former, but allows for the latter, when he writes that the “epithet ‘of the Chaldaeans’ is probably anachronistic in Abram’s day, since the Chaldaeans (Assyrian *Kaldu*) did not penetrate Babylonia till about 1000 B.C. It therefore most likely represents a gloss on the old tradition.”<sup>4</sup> C. J. Gadd also concluded that the term is an anachronism.<sup>5</sup>

The second approach, post-Mosaic textual updating, takes two forms. In one, Arnold chooses to explain “Ur of the Chaldeans” as a case in which

A later editor or scribe was aware of more than one city called “Ur” in the ancient Near East. Since the Chaldeans did not exist in the ancient world until nearly a thousand years after Abram’s day, the designation “of the Chaldeans” was without question added by a later scribe in order to distinguish *which* Ur was meant.<sup>6</sup>

Holding essentially to this explanation for textual updating, Grisanti offered an approach he describes as “inspired textual updating.”<sup>7</sup> His approach is not new. In fact, Augustine of Hippo (fl. A.D. 387–430) beat him to it by proposing prophetic updating under the Holy Spirit’s superintendence in the later history of the biblical text.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>3</sup>These are not the only biblical texts providing this designation. Cf. Gen 15:7 and Neh 9:7.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987) 272. See also Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1946) 57 n. 28. Norman K. Gottwald explains the usual reasoning: “The fact that Ur is explained as a city of the Chaldeans would not have been a way of identifying that ancient Sumerian city until at least the tenth century and more likely in the eighth century when a strong Chaldean = Neo-Babylonian dynasty arose there” (*The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985] 168).

<sup>5</sup>C. J. Gadd, “Ur,” in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, ed. D. Winton Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 94.

<sup>6</sup>Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 78. See also Merrill F. Unger, “The Patriarchs and Contemporary History: Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110/438 (April 1953):125: “[I]t was, of course, quite natural for the Hebrew scribe to define the then incomprehensible foreign name by an appellation customary in his own day.”

<sup>7</sup>Michael A. Grisanti, “Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the OT Canon: The Place of Textual Updating in an Inerrant View of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/4 (Dec 2001):577-98 (esp. 584-85, regarding Gen 11:28, 31).

In regard to the problem of chronology presented in the Septuagint version of Genesis 5 (viz., Methuselah living until 14 years after the Flood), Augustine wrote,

Moreover, the difference in numbers that we find between the Hebrew text and our own<sup>8</sup> constitutes no disagreement about this longevity of the ancients; and if any discrepancy is such that the two versions cannot both be true, we must seek the authentic account of events in that language from which our text was translated.<sup>9</sup>

Thus far, Augustine chooses to focus upon a greater problem, the longevity of the antediluvians. Having deployed a slight misdirection, he returns to the problem of the text that must be resolved by appealing directly to the Hebrew original behind the old Greek translation. Then comes the part of his argument that sounds much like “inspired textual updating”:

Though this opportunity is universally available to those who wish to take it, yet, significantly enough, no one has ventured to correct the Septuagint version from the Hebrew text in the very many places where it seems to offer something different. The reason is that those differences were not considered falsifications,<sup>10</sup> nor do I think that they should be in any way. Rather, where no scribal error<sup>11</sup> is involved, and where the sense would be harmonious with the truth and would proclaim the truth, *we should believe that they were moved by the divine Spirit<sup>12</sup> to say something differently, not as part of the service that they did as translators, but exercising the freedom that they enjoyed as prophets.*<sup>13</sup>

In another form of textual updating, Sailhamer argues that the editor desired to make “Abraham prefigure all those future exiles who, in faith, wait for the return to the Promised Land.”<sup>14</sup> The alleged post-exilic editor, therefore, was harmonizing the text of Genesis with the texts of later prophets to make the association with Babylon. Such an approach to textual updating is more than just a minor addition to

<sup>8</sup>Viz., the Septuagint.

<sup>9</sup>Philip Levine, trans., *Saint Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans: Books XII-XV*, Loeb Classical Library 414 (1966; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1988) 491 (xv.14).

<sup>10</sup>Or, “corruption of the text” as represented by a more recent translation in Henry Bettenson, trans., *Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (1972; reprint, Hammondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1976) 620. The Latin is *mendositas* for “errors, inaccuracies, mistakes.”

<sup>11</sup>Latin, *error* for “error, mistake, deception.” Whereas *mendositas* is related to *mendum* (“bodily defect or blemish”), *error* is related to *erro* (“to wander, stray, or rove”). The two words are virtual synonyms. Augustine does not appear to be making a technical distinction in this context.

<sup>12</sup>Latin, *divino spiritu*. It is translated “Holy Spirit” in Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1–11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 1, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001) 122.

<sup>13</sup>Levine, *The City of God* 491 [emphasis added].

<sup>14</sup>John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebel (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library/Zondervan, 1990) 2:110.

clarify Ur's identity for later readers.

Appealing to the Assyrian historical records as the determining factor for one's view of the reference to Chaldeans in Genesis is more than just a theological issue (viz., elevating extrabiblical literature to a higher position of authority than Scripture). It is also a matter of properly interpreting the available history. Kenneth Kitchen cautions against over-dependence on the Assyrian materials with the following reminder: "If Assyrian mentions are the *sine qua non* (the absolute criterion) for a king's existence, then Egypt and her kings could not have existed before the specific naming of (U)shilkanni, Shapataka, and Ta(ha)rqa in 716-679!"<sup>15</sup> Dependence upon the Assyrian records tends to ignore the partial and prejudiced contents of those records. Grayson likewise warns against too much trust in the Assyrian historical records: "One must always be skeptical of Assyrian claims."<sup>16</sup> A prime example involves Assyrian claims of victory at the battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.).

On the other hand, Scripture consistently mentions the Chaldeans in a patriarchal setting. For evangelicals with a high view of Scripture, inner biblical materials always out-trump incomplete extrabiblical evidence. Archer cites Albright and Pope in support of viewing the prologue to Job as an authentic patriarchal narrative—even in the mention of the Chaldeans. His reasoning for the authentic and original patriarchal mention of the Chaldeans is due to the text representing them "as nomadic raiders with no hint of their later political or economic importance (Job 1:15, 17)."<sup>17</sup>

### A Potential Solution

Is there any viable option other than anachronism or textual updating? Does evidence exist that might indicate that Moses himself could have written the text as it is? In other words, could Moses have known of the existence of Chaldeans and could he be accurate in identifying Chaldeans with ancient Ur prior to or contemporary with Abraham? Three different types of evidence are available that support the authenticity of "Chaldeans" as an original Mosaic reading in Genesis: linguistic, genealogical, and historical.

**Linguistic Evidence.** "Chaldeans" (note the *l*) is a later spelling than the Genesis *Kašdīm* (note the *ś*). Akkadian scholars have long recognized a peculiarity of the Akkadian language: the phenomenon of a phonetic shift of the sibilant ( $\Psi/\acute{s}$ ) to a *lamed* when the sibilant is followed by a dental ( $\text{ʾ}/d$ ). The shift (*s* to *l*) appeared in the second millennium B.C. and continued until the Neo-Babylonian era (ca. 600-

<sup>15</sup>K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 12.

<sup>16</sup>A. K. Grayson, "Assyria, Assyrians," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005) 100.

<sup>17</sup>Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Old Testament History and Recent Archaeology from Solomon to Zedekiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127/507 (July 1970):196.

550 B.C.).<sup>18</sup> This places the phenomenon at least as early as Middle Babylonian (1500-1000 B.C.).<sup>19</sup> That means that the form in a Moses-authored Genesis (ca. 1400 B.C.) falls within the range of time that *Kašdim* occurs. Therefore, the linguistic shift cannot be employed to deny Mosaic authorship and argue for some form of textual updating.

2000-1500 B.C.	1500-1000 B.C.	1000-600 B.C.	600-550 B.C.
Old Babylonian	Middle Babylonian	Late Babylonian	Late Babylonian
GAL.DU, <i>Kaldu</i>	Kas.du, <i>Kašdim</i>		<i>Kaldu, Kaldim</i>

The name “Chaldean” appears to have its origin in the “Sumerian title, GAL.DU (‘master builder’), which later became altered to the pronunciation Kas.du (the singular of *Kasdim*) through a sound-shift well known in the development of the Babylonian language.”<sup>20</sup> In a footnote Archer explains this phenomenon more fully:

W. von Soden points out that in the later stages of the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, the sibilants *s*, *š*, and *ś* often shifted to *l* before dental consonants like *t* and *d*. For example, the earlier *aštur* (“I wrote”) became *altur*; the preposition *ištu* (“out of”) became *ultu*. On this analogy, the original ethnic designation *Kasdu* or *Kasdim* later became *Kaldu* or *Kaldim*. At that stage, then, *Kasdim* (“Chaldeans”) became a homonym of *Kasdim* (plural of the *Kaldu* derived from the Sumerian GAL.DU) (*Grundriss der Akkadischen Grammatik* [Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1969] 31). The latest stage of the Babylonian language, that of the Neo-babylonian, contemporary with Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, then adopted a policy of archaizing, in an effort to revive the older, classical dialect. Thus it came about that both *Kaldu*’s became *Kasdu* and the homonym resemblance continued. (The name *Chaldean* is derived from the Greek form, *Caldai/oi* which in turn came from *Kaldim*. The Greeks apparently came to know the Chaldeans before the elimination of the secondary *l* in favor of *s* or *š* before dentals had taken place.)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Anson Rainey, “Chaldea, Chaldeans,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) 5:330. Ungnad notes this phonetic phenomenon, dating the shift of all four sibilants (*z*, *s*, *ś*, and *š*) from the Middle Assyrian period onward (Arthur Ungnad, *Akkadian Grammar*, 5th ed., rev. by Lubor Matouš, trans. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., SBL Resources for Biblical Study 30 [Atlanta: Scholars, 1992] 25; *JJS* 21/1-2 (1976):1-14; *JNSL* 1 [1971]:32-38; *EQ* 49 [1977]:67-73). “This form remained frozen in Biblical literature in its archaic form and did not develop into *kaldu*, *kaldim*, *kaldaya* because it was no longer in its proper linguistic setting, i.e., the Akkadian language” (Jonathan D. Safren, Jan 5, 2000, “SV: Re[2]: Ur Kasdim II” Biblical Hebrew Forum, <http://lists.ibiblio.org/pipermail/b-hebrew/2000-January/005929.html> [accessed Jan 2008]).

<sup>19</sup>John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 2nd ed., Harvard Semitic Studies (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005) xxiii.

<sup>20</sup>Gleason L. Archer, Jr., “Modern Rationalism and the Book of Daniel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136/542 (April 1979):137.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, n. 19.

Rainey offers the suggestion that the “Aramaic dialect of the Chaldeans no doubt preserved the original sibilant, and the biblical form evidently came from an Aramaic source, probably by direct contact with the Chaldeans.”<sup>22</sup> This suggestion is consistent with Moses’ familiarity with the Aramean origins of Abraham and his family (unless, of course, one were to deny him authorship of Gen 10:22; 31:47; and Deut 26:5).

A problem arises here regarding Aramaic connections. Merrill’s proposal for an Aramean origin of the Chaldeans<sup>23</sup> draws fire from Sprinkle, who argues that “the two seem clearly distinguished in the cuneiform literature.”<sup>24</sup> Oppenheim associates the Chaldeans with an Aramaic dialect, but recognizes that, “For reasons not yet clear, the Chaldeans are in the texts always differentiated from the Aramean tribes settled in the higher terrain upstream along the Euphrates and especially along the Tigris.”<sup>25</sup> Could Sprinkle’s and Oppenheim’s objections arise from a failure to recognize two different groups of Arameans (northern and southern) and the tendency of the cuneiform texts (at least thus far) to speak only of the northern group as such? According to Arnold, “differences in tribal organization, the dates of their respective appearances in history, and contrasting levels of Babylonization”<sup>26</sup> also indicate the distinction between Arameans and Chaldeans. However, the date for the appearance of the Chaldeans in history is mainly an argument from silence<sup>27</sup> in the archaeological record and a corresponding rejection of the originality of the references in the patriarchal narratives.

Others like Pitard deem the biblical material concerning the origins of the

<sup>22</sup>Rainey, “Chaldea, Chaldeans” 5:330.

<sup>23</sup>Eugene A. Merrill, *The Kingdom of Priests: A History of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 393. Merrill bases his conclusion on the thorough documentation of J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia, 1158-722 B.C.*, *Analecta Orientalia* 43 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1968).

<sup>24</sup>J. M. Sprinkle, “Review of *The Kingdom of Priests: A History of the Old Testament*, by Eugene A. Merrill,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33/2 (June 1990):236.

<sup>25</sup>A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977) 160.

<sup>26</sup>Bill T. Arnold, “Babylonians,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 57 n. 45.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia 1158-722 B.C.*, *Analecta Orientalia* 43 (Roma: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1968) 284-85: “These three theories regarding the origins of the eastern Arameans all revolve around a single point, the silence of the documents, and how that silence is to be interpreted. Depending on whether the silence is seen as indicating the presence, absence, or movement of the Arameans, one may opt for any of the three theories or some modification of them. My purpose here has been simply to emphasize that we do not have sufficient evidence now to do more than speculate vaguely on the origins of the Arameans in eastern Babylonia. With further discoveries, we may some day have better materials with which to work and be able to reach more definite conclusions.” Interestingly, Brinkman does not mention Deut 26:5 in his treatment of biblical references. Robert North published an insightful review of Brinkman’s volume in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31/3 (July 1969):403-4.

Arameans (or any other peoples) to be nothing more than legends that “provide little historical insight into the origins of the various ethnic groups of Syria-Palestine.”<sup>28</sup> Of greater interest, though, is his summary statement regarding the nature of the cuneiform evidence: “The preserved documentary evidence is simply too ambiguous at this point to draw conclusions about the origins of the Arameans in Babylonia.”<sup>29</sup> Schniedewind affirms this state of affairs in the following words: “The rise of the Aramean states is shrouded in darkness. The deafening silence in our sources continues to make it difficult to penetrate this darkness.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, if one applied the same arguments concerning the Chaldeans to the Arameans, the mention of Arameans in the Pentateuch<sup>31</sup> could also be identified as either anachronistic<sup>32</sup> or an example of textual updating. The earliest clear reference to the Arameans in extrabiblical sources is in the cuneiform annals of Tiglath-pileser I (1116-1076 B.C.).<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the matter of the origins and dates of both Arameans and Chaldeans should be left in the darkness and the silence, rather than wielding the absence of evidence as support for a theory of textual updating. The old maxim still holds: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer writes that the biblical record “does have an important kernel of truth, including Abraham’s birth in Ur of the Chaldees.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, in his observation that much of the biblical saga of Abraham is “legendary and fanciful,”<sup>35</sup> he sets this biblical identification above the realm of fiction. He could have taken the opportunity to impugn the accuracy of Scripture at this point as well—but he did not. In addition, he argues strongly and convincingly for an association of Shem with Sumer.<sup>36</sup> More recently, Bodine classifies Kramer’s

<sup>28</sup>Wayne T. Pitard, “Arameans,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World* 208.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 210. See also P.-A. Beaulieu, “Babylonia, Babylonians,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005) 110, “[D]ocumentation is so sparse between around 1100 and 750 BCE that almost nothing is known of the early history of their [Aramean and Chaldean] settlement.”

<sup>30</sup>William M. Schniedewind, “The Rise of the Aramean States,” in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 276. Nonetheless, Schniedewind pursues “an exercise in groping in through the darkness, trying to find a few touch points to guide by, while trying to move carefully so as not to stumble and fall completely” (*ibid.*). This present writer identifies with that procedure in this current study of the Chaldeans.

<sup>31</sup>Gen 24:10, אַרַם וְהָרָם אֲרָם; 25:20, הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדֵן אֲרָם; 28:5, פְּדֹנָה אֲרָם; 31:20, הָאֲרָמִי, 24, הָאֲרָמִי, 47, Laban’s use of Aramaic; Num 23:7, מֶרְאָרָם; Deut 26:5, אֲרָמִי.

<sup>32</sup>Thus Abraham Malamat, “Aram, Arameans,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) 3:253.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:254; Pitard, “Arameans” 210.

<sup>34</sup>Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (1963; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972) 292.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 298.

conclusion on this matter as “doubtful.”<sup>37</sup> Averbeck, on the other hand, urges caution lest we too quickly throw out Kramer’s suggestion.<sup>38</sup>

***Genealogical Evidence.*** Adolfo Roitman concludes that the Chaldeans “were seen as the offspring of Chesed (כשד), son of Nahor, Abraham’s brother (Gen 22:22),”<sup>39</sup> making the Chaldeans relatives of Abraham. Even Anson Rainey accepts the possibility that Abraham’s nephew Kesed was the ancestor of the Chaldeans.<sup>40</sup> There is adequate time for the descendants of Kesed to have returned to their family’s ancestral home in Ur and to have established their own reputation long before the time of Moses. Moses’s reference to the Chaldeans in Gen 11:28 and 31 could be nothing more than identifying Ur as the home or sphere of influence for the descendants of Kesed.

It is also possible that the Chaldeans (*Kasdim*) antedate Kesed. Some scholars propose that Arpachshad (Gen 10:22, son of Shem, ancestor of Abraham) was the ancestor of the Chaldeans—the last three letters of Arpachshad are the same as for Kesed and the *Kasdim*.<sup>41</sup> Josephus was among the earliest to make this

<sup>37</sup>Walter R. Bodine, “Sumerians,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World* 19 n. 1.

<sup>38</sup>Richard E. Averbeck, “Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method: Historiography and Temple Building,” in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 88, 93-94.

<sup>39</sup>Adolfo D. Roitman, “‘This People Are Descendants of Chaldeans’ (Judith 5:6): Its Literary Form and Historical Setting,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113/2 (Summer 1994):246. Arpachshad = Arpachshad; English transliteration of כ (k) varies between *k* and *ch* in various biblical names from one translation to another. A similar confusion accompanies the transliteration of ח (h) as either *h* or *ch*.

<sup>40</sup>Rainey, “Chaldea, Chaldeans” 5:330.

<sup>41</sup>“[T]he first part of the name could reflect Hurrian *Arip-*, which is a common element in personal names; but the rest would not be a demonstrably Hurrian component. The best that one can say today is that Arpachshad, if correctly transmitted, has to be regarded as non-Semitic. This would fit well enough with what we know today about the composite ethnic background of the Hebrews” (E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964] 70). Cf. also J. Simons, “The ‘Table of Nations’ (Genesis 10): Its General Structure and Meaning,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, Ind.: 1994) 246 (reprinted from *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 10 (1954):155-84; and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 512, who writes, “H. Gunkel and others had already assumed that the name must stand for Babylon, and J. Skinner supported this very strongly. Babylon, he says, cannot be missing from the list. He also alleges in its favor that the three last consonants correspond to the Bab. *kashdu*, the Hebr. *Kasdim* (= Chaldeans). This is but a conjecture and does not explain the name fully. However, it is certainly correct that Arpachshad stands for Babylon here.” See also Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1996) 461. Allen P. Ross, “Studies in the Book of Genesis, Part 3: The Table of Nations in Genesis 10—Its Content,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138/549 (Jan 1981):29 n.50, concludes that “Arpachshad’s meaning and location have caused considerable speculation, but he can only be generally listed as residing northeast of Nineveh.”

identification of Arpachshad with Chaldea.<sup>42</sup> Skinner discusses the various options for the identification of Arpachshad and concludes that association with the Chaldeans is difficult.<sup>43</sup> The identity of Arpachshad has yet to be resolved by the experts.

**Historical Evidence.** The primary problem is that the earliest extrabiblical reference to the Chaldeans does not occur until Ashurnasirpal II or III (883-859 B.C.) mentions them.<sup>44</sup> A subtle implication involved in questioning the integrity of early biblical (viz., Mosaic) references to “the Chaldeans” is that the older biblical text is thereby subjugated to later secular texts. In other words, some scholars tend to grant greater authority and authenticity to the testimony of the secular texts than to the biblical text. This contradicts the principle of *prima facie* evidence as well as traditional Christian theology that has refused to consider extrabiblical evidences or proofs as having the greater authority. The priority of biblical text over extrabiblical texts is a principle that Averbeck emphasizes in his study of Sumer and the Bible.<sup>45</sup>

It is fascinating that Oppenheim felt compelled to note the correspondence between the rise of the Chaldeans to power in the 9th century B.C. and the earlier rise of the dynasty of Hammurapi—“one can hardly close one’s eyes to the similarities in events and personalities.”<sup>46</sup> The reign of Hammurapi (1792-1750 B.C.) preceded Moses by over 300 years. Could it be that earlier members of the *Kasdim* were involved in the rise of Babylon as well as having a sphere of influence in the vicinity of Ur? It is entirely possible—especially if there is evidence of Amorite<sup>47</sup> or Aramean connections in these two situations separated by approximately 900 years.

Extrabiblical evidence does point to the antiquity of the Chaldeans far earlier than the 9th century B.C. In his detailed examination of whether “Chaldeans” was a title employed of Babylonian priests as early as the 6th century B.C., Robert Dick Wilson found that a number of dependable classical historians referred to the existence of Chaldeans all the way back to the great deluge (a likely reference to the Noahic flood<sup>48</sup>). For example, “Alexander Polyhistor, who lived in the second century B.C. ... states, also, that after the deluge, Evixius held possession of the country of

<sup>42</sup>“Arphaxad named the Arphaxadites, who are now called Chaldeans” (William Whiston, trans., *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, rev. and expanded ed., commentary by Paul L. Maier [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999]58 [Antiq. i.144]).

<sup>43</sup>John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 205.

<sup>44</sup>Rainey, “Chaldea, Chaldeans” 5:330.

<sup>45</sup>Averbeck, “Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method” 95.

<sup>46</sup>Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 163.

<sup>47</sup>See Keith N. Schoville, “Canaanites and Amorites,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World* 165.

<sup>48</sup>Even if this Babylonian flood is not identical to the biblical flood, scholars generally recognize that it occurred in great antiquity, perhaps several millennia prior to the 9th century B.C. (see H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* [New York: New American Library, 1962] 54-55).

the Chaldeans.”<sup>49</sup> Berossus<sup>50</sup> (ca. 300 B.C.) speaks of a certain Chaldean who lived “in the tenth generation after the deluge who was renowned for his justice and great exploits and for his skill in the celestial sciences.”<sup>51</sup> How dependable is Berossus? Gadd recalls that the discovery of a Sumerian king-list confirmed that the “well-known names of these legendary kings, preserved by Berossus, were restored and confirmed as authentic by the recovery of their original forms.”<sup>52</sup> Another historian, Diodorus Siculus, “who lived in the time of Cæsar and Augustus,”<sup>53</sup> wrote that the Chaldeans were “the most ancient Babylonians.”<sup>54</sup>

According to Roy Zuck, “The Sabeans and Chaldeans (Job 1:15, 17) were nomads in Abraham’s time, but in later years they were not nomadic.”<sup>55</sup> He does not deny their existence in the patriarchal period, only a city of their own. On the basis of evidence from Ebla, some have suggested that Ur of the Chaldeans should actually be located in the north, in the vicinity of Haran.<sup>56</sup> Before the Ebla finds, Acomb suggested that locating Ur in the north from which the Chaldeans originated “before migrating to Southern Babylon at a date preceding Neo-Babylonian times, . . . would make unnecessary the anachronism” often attributed to Gen 11:28.<sup>57</sup> Alden, who adheres to a southern Ur, has a slightly different take: “While Chaldeans are best known from later OT history as the core of the neo-Babylonian Empire, in the early period they were nomads whose base was in southern Mesopotamia.”<sup>58</sup> André Parrot also holds to a southern Ur for Abraham’s birthplace.<sup>59</sup> As Beaulieu explains, evidence appears to locate the Chaldeans “from Babylon to the Persian Gulf.”<sup>60</sup>

According to Hess, the Chaldeans “are already well established when they

<sup>49</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, *Studies in the Book of Daniel*, 2 volumes in 1 (1917-18; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 1:329.

<sup>50</sup>Saggs questions the reliability of Berossus (*The Greatness That Was Babylon* 54), but still cites him as confirmation for certain details concerning the Chaldean Nabopolassar (*ibid.*, 142).

<sup>51</sup>Wilson, *Studies in the Book of Daniel* 1:333-34.

<sup>52</sup>Gadd, “Ur” 91.

<sup>53</sup>Wilson, *Studies in the Book of Daniel* 1:334.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:335.

<sup>55</sup>Roy B. Zuck, “Job,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary faculty (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1985) 1:717.

<sup>56</sup>Harold G. Stigers, “Review of *Harper’s Introduction to the Bible*, by Gerald Hughes and Stephen Travis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25/1 (March 1982):122.

<sup>57</sup>Dwight E. Acomb, “Review of *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation*, by John F. Walvoord,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15/1 (Winter 1972):55.

<sup>58</sup>Robert L. Alden, *Job*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993) 60.

<sup>59</sup>André Parrot, “Mari,” in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, ed. D. Winton Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 140.

<sup>60</sup>Beaulieu, “Babylonia, Babylonians” 110.

appear . . . , their earlier origins are uncertain.”<sup>61</sup> The most ancient of available references to the Chaldeans seem to identify them with “a wandering desert tribe of robbers.”<sup>62</sup> Roitman associates this nomadic group with “Chesed, the son of Nahor and father of the Chaldeans according to biblical ethnography.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, we come to the conclusion that the Chaldeans are more ancient than the Assyrian records. A more reasonable approach to the mention of Chaldeans in the patriarchal narratives would be to accept the biblical references as original, since the available cuneiform records are admittedly fragmentary and incomplete.

### Conclusion

Although the problem has not been fully resolved to date, a better option exists than either the anachronistic view or the textual updating view. Available evidence makes it possible that Moses himself specified that Abraham was from “Ur of the Chaldeans.” First, a Mosaic use of  $\text{𐤎} \text{𐤓} \text{𐤕}$  is consistent with the chronology of the phonetic shift.

Second, there is more than adequate time for the descendants of either Kesed or Arpachshad to establish themselves in the region of Ur prior to the time of Moses. Indeed, there is time for the descendants of the latter to be thus established prior even to the time of Abraham.

Third, silence in the realm of archaeology and secular history proves to be a notoriously weak argument. The fraction of surviving material evidence that has been located, excavated, identified, and published is so infinitesimally small<sup>64</sup> that it is not a sound practice to leap to the conclusion that extrabiblical evidence is sufficient to overturn a direct declaration of the biblical text or to put Mosaic authorship in question. The Hittites were unknown outside the OT until the late 1800s and the ultimate extrabiblical proofs were not unearthed until after 1906. Consider also the silence concerning the existence of King David until the discovery of the Tel Dan Stela in 1993.

Ultimately, this particular problem (and all others like it) boils down to the interpreter’s choice:

- (a) Seek to harmonize the *apparent* contradiction between the biblical text and the present state of obviously limited extrabiblical knowledge—if need be, by providing yet another hypothetical that lacks proof and may even go contrary to established evangelical doctrine; **or**,
- (b) accept the text as it stands, choosing to look for options that allow it to stand

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<sup>61</sup>Richard S. Hess, “Chaldea,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1:886.

<sup>62</sup>Roitman, ““This People Are Descendants of Chaldeans”” 254.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 254 n. 37, relating the Chaldeans to Gen 22:22.

<sup>64</sup>Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972) 146-57 (esp. 156).

without modification of either the declaration or the authorship—admitting that the real problem is the absence of extrabiblical confirmation and our ignorance rather than a need to reconsider established evangelical doctrine.

In seeking a resolution to the problem presented by the mention of the Chaldeans in the patriarchal narratives, we must realize that “commitment to inerrancy, even in its broader terms, doubtless requires faith in the *future* resolution of a number of problems in Scripture, through a deeper penetration of the text itself and of the realities to which it refers.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, I prefer the stance of Kelso, with which this paper began. I prefer to wait for the Chaldeans to actually turn up in some cuneiform document that is either contemporary with the biblical patriarchs or at least pre-Mosaic. Until that time, I prefer to accept the Scriptural account as original and accurate, without resorting to anachronism or textual updating.

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<sup>65</sup>Douglas Farrow, *The Word of Truth and Disputes About Words* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Carpenter, 1987) 207.