

# BEFORE ABRAHAM:

## The Near East before 2000 BC

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The world of the Bible is also the world in which civilization first developed. True “civilization,” by most definitions, is not found until the Chalcolithic Period (about 4300-3200 BC), but the archaeological record goes much further back. While the earlier “prehistoric” periods<sup>1</sup> have a more limited interest for students of the Bible than the later ages, they do provide a foundation for the cultures which follow as well as some fascinating details.

### To the Rise of Civilization

#### *The Paleolithic Age*

The earliest periods with evidence of human culture are referred to as the **Paleolithic** (meaning “old stone”) Age. Generally, cultural distinctions during this period are based on stone and flint tool typology, while the chronology has been assigned radiometrically. The dates for many sites are uncertain due to the inadequacy of Carbon 14 for remains older than about 40,000 years. At the same time, many Paleolithic sites are not old enough for the effective use of the Potassium-Argon method. Nevertheless, the period is generally divided into the following: Lower Paleolithic (before 120,000 BC); Middle Paleolithic (120,000-40,000 BC); Upper Paleolithic (40,000-17,000 BC); and Epi-Paleolithic (17,000-8300 BC). Archaeological evidence comes mainly from caves and demonstrates an economy based on hunting and gathering.

As it happens, some of the earliest and most significant Paleolithic sites are found in the land which produced the Bible, Palestine. The most notable of these are Ubeidiya, the Tabun and Kebara caves in the Carmel mountain range, and the Qafzah Cave near Nazareth. The caves have produced long stratigraphical sequences. One issue revolving around the evidence from these sites is the relationship between modern man and Neanderthal man.<sup>2</sup>

The last portion of the Epi-Paleolithic—formerly known by the term **Mesolithic** (“middle stone”) Age—(about 10,000-8300 BC) provides the earliest evidence for agriculture, the establishment of settled communities, and specific local cultures. An example of the latter is the **Natufian** culture in Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Natufians lived in semi-permanent dwellings, consisting of circular huts as well as caves. Stone tools were typically **microliths**, small points and blades made to be attached to handles of wood or bone. Bone was used for a variety of artifacts and shells were strung together to form jewelry. Hunting and fishing appear to have remained important, but the presence of sickles and other objects for the processing of grains suggest organized harvesting.

#### *Neolithic Age (about 8300-4300 BC)*

The **Neolithic** (“new stone”) Age (dated in Palestine about 8300-4300 BC) saw sweeping changes in human existence throughout the Near East. Primary among these is the domestication of plants and animals with a resulting transition from a hunter-gatherer to herdsman-farmer economic base. This economic shift—sometimes referred to as the **Neolithic Revolution**—was accompanied by permanent settlements, an increasingly complex social structure, and further diversification of local culture. Artistic expression developed, while religious artifacts and burial customs

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<sup>1</sup>For cautions on the use of the term “prehistory,” see Walter E. Rast, *Through the Ages in Palestinian Archaeology: An Introductory Handbook* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 49.

<sup>2</sup>Rast, *Through the Ages in Palestinian Archaeology*, 47-53; for a skeptical view of how the evidence has been interpreted, see Neil Asher Silberman, *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 209-27.

<sup>3</sup>Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 36-37.

seem to demonstrate spiritual concerns. Technological advances were made in many areas, including the invention of fired pottery around 6000 BC.

The Neolithic in Palestine is generally divided into Pre-pottery and Pottery Neolithic, each being subdivided into two (A and B) phases. This scheme is based on Kenyon's work at Jericho, easily the best known Neolithic site.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest remains at Jericho, sometimes called "the oldest city in the world," are of the Epi-Paleolithic **Natufian Culture**. In the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA), the settlement expanded to become a walled settlement—the earliest known thus far. The wall was supplemented by a thirty-foot stone tower with an internal staircase. The fortifications are datable (by uncalibrated Carbon 14 readings) to the late ninth or early eighth millennium BC and thus attest to a high degree of organization by Jericho's inhabitants at this early stage. Toward the end of the PPNA period, a macabre burial custom was introduced. Bodies were interred beneath the floors of dwellings or in open courtyards while the skulls were kept in groups within houses. During the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) this practice continued, but in some cases the skulls were modeled with plaster, apparently to reproduce the facial features of the deceased. Painted highlights, shells imbedded in the plaster to represent eyes, and the delicate plaster rendering of the cheeks, eyebrows, and lips give an eerie lifelike appearance. The relationship between this practice and some kind of belief in an afterlife certainly seems probable but, of course, cannot be proven. It is often inferred that the plastered skulls give evidence of some kind of ancestor cult.<sup>5</sup>

Finds similar to those at Jericho have been made at other sites in Palestine. Ain Ghazal, a Pre-pottery site in Jordan, has also produced severed and plastered skulls. More imposing are two large caches of human statues and busts also made from plaster. The bodies are generally without detail, squat, and flat, having elongated necks. The flattened heads have detailed and individualized faces which share some features of the plastered skulls. The excavator interprets the statues as having a cultic function, perhaps involving ancestor worship.<sup>6</sup> Fragments of such statues were found by Kenyon at Jericho (assigned by her to the Pottery Neolithic) and complete heads were recovered in the earlier work there by Garstang.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary finds from a Judean Desert cave include skulls coated with asphalt on the top and back, apparently so as to represent hair. A stone mask at the cave and another found near Hebron add to the mystery of Pre-pottery Neolithic beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup>

The invention of pottery is the high mark of the following Pottery Neolithic periods. Neolithic pottery is crude in comparison to that from later periods; handmade, fired at low temperatures, with lug-like protrusions or ledges for handles. Common decorations included zig zag and herringbone patterns, either by incision or paint. Because each group developed its own distinctive style, pottery becomes one of the major cultural indicators for archaeologists from this period onward. Despite the advance of pottery, the Pottery Neolithic culture in Palestine is not as rich as the PPN. Settlements appear to be smaller and sometimes non-existent on the fringes of the desert. In the north of the country the **Yarmukian** culture appears. A notable find (from Munhata) is a clay figurine of a seated woman with eyes resembling kernels of grain, perhaps a fertility goddess. Incised pebbles in the same style represent another Yarmukian art form perhaps related to a fertility cult. At the end of the Neolithic Age, the Wadi Rabah culture is the first to build rectangular structures with stone foundations.<sup>9</sup>

Brief mention should be made of the largest Neolithic site in the Near East—the seventh millennium BC village of Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia. Excavations uncovered a large number of mudbrick and wood structures, entered from above by ladder. Many of these were found to contain wall paintings, sometimes combined with molded decorations—some of which included skulls or horns of animals—apparently as some sort of shrine. The economy at

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<sup>4</sup>For a full description, see Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (London: Benn, 1957); idem, "Jericho: Tell es-Sultan," in *NEAEHL*, 675-78.

<sup>5</sup>Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 47; Walter Rast, *Through the Ages in Palestinian Archaeology*, 56.

<sup>6</sup>The statues are described and illustrated in "1986 Annual Meeting," *BAR* 18 (March/April 1987): 50-51.

<sup>7</sup>Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho*, 84.

<sup>8</sup>Ofer Bar-Yosef, Tamar Schick, David Alon, "Nahal Hemer Cave," in *NEAEHL*, 1082-84; Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 46-48.

<sup>9</sup>Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 49-54.

Çatal Hüyük was agriculture based, but the trade of obsidian from nearby sources was important as well. The site demonstrates a cultural sophistication unexpected in such early village life.<sup>10</sup>

In Mesopotamia, Neolithic cultures—named by archaeologists for the sites where they were first identified—were concentrated along the northern “hilly flanks.” The spread of irrigation techniques to the southern plains of Mesopotamia provided a catalyst for the rise of civilization in that region.

### *The Chalcolithic Age (about 4300-3150 BC)*

The **Chalcolithic** Period (about 4300 to 3150 BC in Palestine) is distinguished from the Neolithic by the introduction of metal technology and thus begins at different dates in various parts of the Near East. In addition, there is no continuity of terminology between the various geographical areas and chronological correlation becomes quite confusing.

The Chalcolithic Age saw the origins of true “civilization” as opposed to the “cultures” of the earlier periods. Exactly what constitutes “civilization” is a matter of debate, but most definitions include the following characteristics: (1) subsistence by agriculture; (2) cities; (3) social organization; and (4) writing.<sup>11</sup>

**Mesopotamia.** Although northern Mesopotamia was permanently settled long before, it was the southern area which would produce the first great city states and, with them, the flowering of civilization. The earliest permanent settlements in southern Mesopotamia represent the beginning of the **Ubaid** Period (about 5000-4000 BC), which is followed by the **Uruk** (about 4000-3200 BC), and the **Jemdet Nasr** (3200-3000 BC) Periods.<sup>12</sup>

Eridu, remembered in Sumerian tradition as the first city ruled by a king, contains the earliest identifiable religious building in Mesopotamia (about 4900 BC). Constructed of mud brick, it was the first in a long series of temples at Eridu, continuing throughout the Ubaid and into the Uruk period. The temples became increasingly monumental and, standing impressively on the filled-in ruins of their predecessors, served as prototypes for later Mesopotamian temples on **ziggurats**.<sup>13</sup> Many features of the Eridu temples, including the characteristic buttressed facade, are found at other sites in the Uruk Period, notably Tepe Gawra and Uruk. These early temples indicate a commonality in South Mesopotamia and suggest that the temple assumed the dominant role in organizing and directing the emerging urban society.<sup>14</sup>

The Uruk Period saw significant development in art, best illustrated by the appearance of the **cylinder seal**, a barrel with carved designs which left an impression when rolled on wet clay. This device was used to establish ownership or record an agreement. The exquisite artwork of these early seals is of more than esthetic interest. Scenes of kneeling captives, massacres, naked priests performing mysterious ceremonies, and cattle herding provide glimpses into the life of the period.

The most significant innovation of the Uruk Period is writing. It has been recently and convincingly shown that writing developed from the use of tokens which signified debts or ownership of certain commodities such as sheep or grain. Such tokens were sealed inside a clay ball or “envelope.” At a later period, the envelopes came to have marks impressed on the outside, indicating the number of tokens contained within. Eventually, it was realized that the

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<sup>10</sup>James Mellart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); idem, *The Neolithic of the Near East* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 98-111.

<sup>11</sup>A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 14. Other historians differ, however, on the requirements for civilization; see William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1971), 27.

<sup>12</sup>J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 22. The dates and terminology differ among scholars, however; see, for example, Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, 42.

<sup>13</sup>Seton Lloyd, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 41-43; James Mellaart, “The Earliest Settlements in Western Asia from the Ninth to the End of the Fifth Millennium B.C.,” in *CAH*, Vol. 1, part 1, *Prolegomena and Prehistory* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 286-87.

<sup>14</sup>Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, 40-41.