



Type: Magazine Article

There Were Jaredites - The Babylonian Background, Part I

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 59, No. 7 (July 1956), pp. 509–511, 514, 516

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

There Were Jaredites

The Babylonian Background

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

I

TWO WEEKS later the three friends met again in Dr. Schwulst's office. No orientalist worthy of the name confines his studies to one culture, and Schwulst was as good at Babylonian as he was at Egyptian. Grateful for a captive audience, he had prepared for the event by piling the texts of a dozen Mesopotamian epics on his table. And now working rapidly through the pile from top to bottom, he virtually monopolized the rest of the evening. The reader must always bear in mind that what we have here is merely academic chit-chat, a setting forth of issues and areas of investigation without any attempt to exhaust anything.

"It has been maintained," Professor Schwulst began in his best lecture manner, "that Babylonia is actually the home of all epic literature, and that 'the true forerunners of the *Iliad* and the *Divina Commedia* were not Genesis and Exodus but the legends of Etana and Gilgamesh."¹ Epic stuff is always breaking out in Babylonian texts, even in the ritual literature. The great New Year's hymn called the *Enuma Elish*, for example, is 'a mixture of heroic epic and dogmatic poetry. . . .'² So in order not to be here all night, let us just look at the purest and oldest epics.

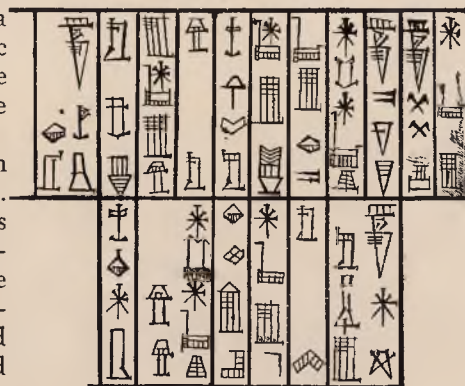
"Here, gentlemen, is the epic poem of *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*. In it, the first of these two great lords sends a message to the other demanding his homage, only to receive the haughty answer that the Lord Enmerkar is not the vassal of the Lord of Aratta. A showdown follows, and Enmerkar is beaten, but the victor allows him to continue to remain in power in Uruk as his liegeman. But

later Enmerkar refuses tribute to his new lord because Aratta's overlord, one Ensukhkeshdanna, has spoken disrespectfully of a certain great lady to whom Enmerkar has always owed fealty.³ Do you follow?"

"No," said F.

"It doesn't make much difference," the professor laughed, "because there are conflicting interpretations of the story. I merely give this to you to show you that we begin with the complicated system of feudal alliances which is characteristic of heroic ages everywhere. Aratta's lord is described as sitting grandly enthroned and unassailably secure in his splendid mountain castle; and 'the Lady of heroes' sits in an exalted castle that shines like the sun.⁴ Aratta declares that he is 'the properly appointed and sole Ruler of the Steppes, there is none like him!' and he sends out great mule trains moving to flute music and bearing rich gifts 'as a bait' to increase his power by buying support. A messenger comes to him from another great lord to beg humbly for the privilege of buying building materials from him, for his mountains produce timber, stone, and metals; the messenger comes before the great lord with fear and trembling. 'This is the lord of Aratta's message to the lord of Uruk (often called the oldest city in the world): 'Say to Uruk's king, he must submit to me, he must pay me feudal dues and services . . . then he may continue to live in his Ishtar temple while I live in mine.' Note that both these men are vassals of the great lady. If Enmerkar submits, he will be allowed 'to shine as Lord of the city, as Prince of the City, as Lord of the Storm, as Prince in the Storm, as the Lord who rages, as the Prince who rages.'⁵

Ubung 36



An archaic Sumerian text which depicts the feudal composition of the earliest Mesopotamian states.

"Those are certainly not the epithets of peaceful peasant magistrates," Blank observed.

"Not at all," said Schwulst, "and all this is thoroughly typical. Enmerkar thus challenges his rival: 'Since you do not respect my lady, I will destroy your house.' As in all heroic ages, the center of everything is the great house; and these great houses are proud and touchy about their honor and constantly trying to overreach each other. Moreover, they are all related by ties of blood and bound by terrible oaths to each other. In this case when the lord of Aratta is beaten in turn, his subjects promptly and loyally submit to the victor, whom they hail as having proved his superiority by winning 'the jewel of heaven,' that is, the preference of the Lady Ishtar over his rival."

"How medieval it all sounds," mused F.—"the castles, the challenges, the faithful messengers, the vassals, and oaths, the cult of the lady. . . ."

"With echoes of the *Pyramid Texts*," Blank added.

"Even more like the *Pyramid Texts* is the constant Sumerian harping on the nature of gods, heroes, and kings as invaders and cattle raiders. The king is 'the exalted bull, glorious is thy name to the ends of heaven . . . twin brother of the lord of the divine ox of heaven and earth, Father Iskur, lord that ridest the storm, thy name is to the ends of heaven . . . thy name covereth the land. . . .'⁶

"Right out of the cannibal hymn!" Blank cried, and the Professor continued:

" . . . the exalted herdsman, I am the holy cow (confusing genders in the best Egyptian fashion) and the woman who beareth issue.⁷ The king is 'the righteous herdsman,' but no gentle shepherd; he claims to rule the world by force and demands submission of his inhabitants; he sends his arrow-messengers out to exercise vigilance and control, and he himself moves about from place to place with his warlike host: 'Let thy good Utuku proceed me on my way, let thy good Lmassu travel along with me as I travel.'⁸ On the famous stele of the vultures, Ningirsu is hailed as 'Lord of the crown of abundance, beast of prey from the steppes!'⁹ Reference to the sun and his course and to the horizons, 'the ends of heaven' are common: 'From the rising sun to the setting sun I have subdued

(Continued on following page)

THERE WERE JAREDITES

(Continued from preceding page)

them into him, at that time from the lower sea . . . unto the upper sea his way he made straight for him. From the rising sun to the setting sun Enlil a rival caused him not to have."¹⁰ Without the name of Enlil as a clue, who would not guess that we were reading from the *Pyramid Texts*? Well, there are volumes of this stuff. But it is more than literary invention. Here, for example, a Sumerian king says that Enlil, king of the lands, has given him a mission, which is to take vengeance on the Guti, who have 'carried off the sovranity of Sumer to the mountains.'¹¹ Incidentally, if you are interested in the genealogy of the epic milieu, there have been first-rate scholars who have insisted on identifying these Guti with our own Gothic ancestors!¹² At any rate, the Guti King Tirigan had in the best heroic manner sent a formal challenge to the chiefs and boasted that no man could stand up to him; he was beaten, however, and fled to one of his castles where, in the best saga manner, he was betrayed and captured."

"How old is all this heroic and feudal stuff?" F. inquired.

"It goes back to the beginning and earlier," was the reply. "It is particularly in the archaic texts that everyone is bound to everyone else by oaths and family ties and given careful heraldic rating in the aristocratic hierarchy. Here, for example, in what Deimel calls 'the oldest known royal inscription,' the king is described as receiving his office from Enlil the king of the lands, who makes him king of Uruk, king of the land, priest of Anu, prophet of Nisaba, son of Ukush (the Patesi of Gish-khu and prophet of Nisba), approved by Anu king of the lands, great-patesi of Enlil, endowed with understanding by Enki, whose name is mentioned by Babbar, prime minister of En-zu, *shakkanakku* (vassal) of Babbar, agent of Innina, child of Nisaba, nourished with holy milk by Nin-har-sag . . . foster-child of Nin-a-bu-kha-du, the lady of Uruk, etc. etc."¹³ Family ties, personal qualification, formal recognition—it is all very elaborate and exacting. Here in another archaic text Gimil-Sin, in his capacity of priest of Anu whom Enlil has chosen as the beloved of his heart, makes a dedication to Shara, lord of heaven (that is also Anu's title)

who is the beloved of Ninni.¹⁴ Or again, Dungi, the mighty man of Ur . . . serves his lord Ningirsu, who in turn is 'the mighty warrior of Enlil.'¹⁵ In this hierarchy of allegiance you will always find the heroic combination of personal loyalty and warlike valor. As in Egypt, the favored one is accepted into the noble house, given all the due marks of recognitions, and provided with an adequate income."

"High life in high places all over again," F. observed. "What about the feasts?"

"The *Epic of Nergal and Erishkegal* will tell you all about them," said the professor, opening the appropriate text. The story opens as the gods meet for one of their usual high feasts; they send a messenger to Lady Erishkegal, a strong-minded damsel who from her grim castle rules the largest but most distant domains of all the family. Since she never leaves her castle to visit the other gods, the messenger is instructed to invite her to send one of her own people to fetch a portion for her from the festive board. Well, when the lady's runner duly arrived and entered the banquet hall to get the promised portion, the merry gods made him the butt of their joking. When she heard of this disrespect shown her emissary, the great lady flew into a passion and demanded the life of the individual who had dared treat her messenger so lightly: it was an insult to a grand dame, and it was not to be borne. The injured messenger was asked to identify the culprit, but again the gods treated the whole matter as a huge joke and got him hopelessly confused. That was the last straw: Lady Erishkegal denied henceforward all access to the water of life that flowed only in her underworld palace, and she built mighty walls around it to see that none of the gods got through to it. This meant death for all, and it was urgent for some hero to deliver the race of gods from their predicament. That hero was the youthful Nergal, son of Ea, the chief of the gods. With a band of fourteen trusted retainers he entered the castle by a ruse, surprised the lady, and threatened to cut off her head, whereupon she offered him her hand in marriage and 'kingship over the wide Netherworld,' along with the Tablets of Wisdom by

which he could rule over the universe."¹⁵

"Shades of a dozen fairy-tales!" cried F. "I thought all that stuff was strictly European—King Arthur, and all that."

"It is," said Blank, "and it is classic, too, because it is right out of the epic milieu: the feasting and rollicking heroes having fun at their elder sister's expense, the constant sending of messengers back and forth with invitations, challenges, and complaints, the visiting of each other's castles, the offended fairy who spoils the party, or if you will, the sinister lady in her dark castle, the young romantic hero with his adventurous band who makes his point with the fatal lady exactly as Odysseus does with Circe. This is certainly no peasant culture, but the ways of great lords and ladies."

Dr. Schwulst took another text from the pile before him. "The *Epic of Irra*," he said, "is more of the same. Like the *Pyramid Texts*, it tells of the invasion and pacification of the land, and it is very old. But the most remarkable thing about it is the fact that it seems to have been composed and sung by a minstrel who went from castle to castle exactly like the minstrels of the middle ages! It divides society into 'gods, kings, warrior, bards, and scholars,' with never a mention of the poor peasant:

"May the god who honors this song accumulate riches in his storehouse. . . . May the king who makes my name (the poet's) famous rule as far as the four rims of the earth. May the warrior (or noble—*rubu*) who recites the praise of my valor find no match in battle. The bard who sings it shall not die in a *shiptu*, may his words be pleasing to kings and nobles.

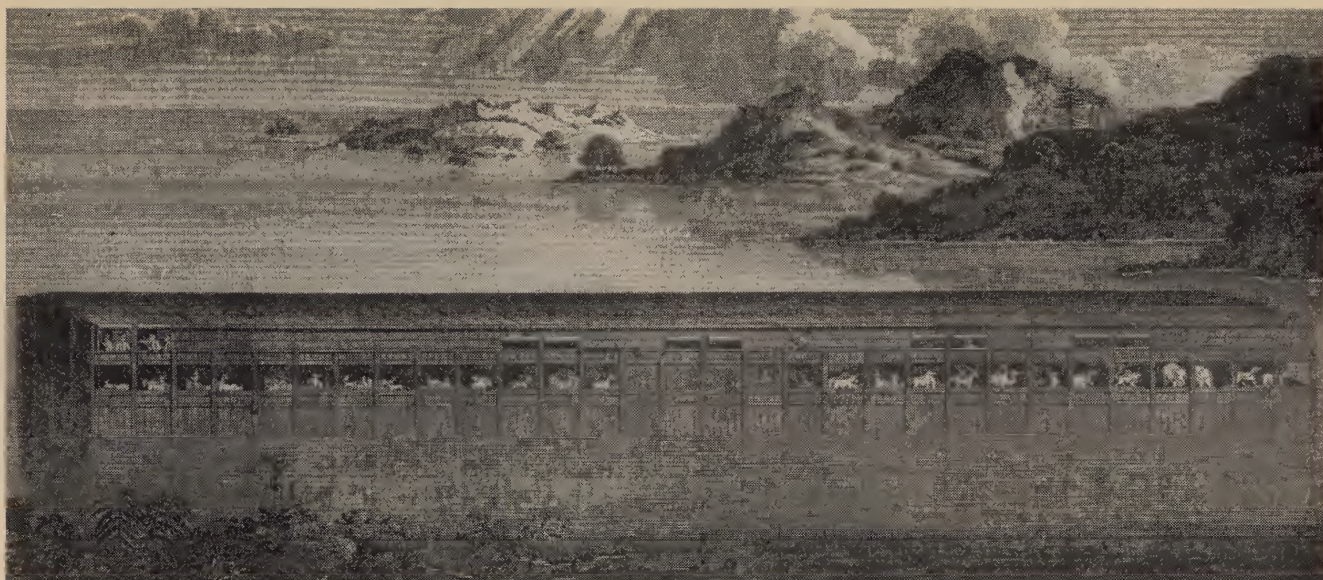
Could you ask for a more 'heroic' statement of values than that?"¹⁶

"What is a *shiptu*?" Blank asked.

"When there was treason or rebellion against a great lord instead of punishing individuals, the rulers would take revenge on whole communities; such mass punishment was called a *shiptu*. It reflects a rather desperate state of things."

"No love lost between the princes and their subjects, eh?"

"Rebellion, underground opposition, and savage reprisals are the order of the day. Here is a king who says that his god 'pays no heed to the afflictions of the common peo-



A scholarly attempt by the Reverend Thomas Brown to depict a vessel which is both an "ark" or box and a boat. The solution of the problem is given in the book of Ether and confined by early Babylonian accounts.

ple.' And when one great lord curses another he says: 'May the people of his city, having risen in rebellion, strike him down in the midst of his city.'¹⁷ The lords have their 'watchers' busy everywhere.¹⁸ Here is an epic poem which furnishes a good commentary on the way things were run. It is called the *Epic of Ninib*, and according to its editor 'must have been composed soon after the subjugation of, and victory over, all those mountains which yielded the several stones here mentioned.'¹⁹ The high lord sits down to call the roll of his followers and reward them for their services by giving them lands and domains. 'Dolerite!' he cries, calling up one—and that reminds one of the 'mentioning of the name' the 'calling forth' and the honoring in high places that we read of in so many Sumerian and Egyptian texts—Dolerite, of course, is a stone, but as the editor observes, 'actions and deeds like these are not those of stones but of living persons.' The chief speaks warmly in Dolerite's praise: 'thou who in my battles forever hast been a hero . . . who during rebellions hast proclaimed 'the lord, he alone a hero is! . . . I the lord will greatly adorn thee, the arm of my heroship.' He calls him his right-hand man who has remained true when others rebelled, and adorns him with rich presents.²⁰ Rough, feudal times indeed; the king is called 'The royal lord, the fearfulness of whose storm is awe-inspiring. . . .' To another supporter he says: 'Eliel stone! wise one, overpowerer of the mountain,

thou with my awe inspiring fear shalt be clothed . . . in the conflict of weapons, warrior, thou who killest, gloriously shall be adorned . . . the people shall gladly look upon thee and reverence thee. . . .'²¹ This epic gives us also the point of view of the underdog: 'When ravaging enemies as if with darkness the land with destruction had filled . . . when the pick and shovel they had made us carry, when but taxes they had made to be our reward (or wages). . . .'²² Further comment on the social order is unnecessary."

"So Babylonian civilization was not the normal outgrowth of a primitive hoe-culture?" F. asked.

"The common description of Mesopotamia as a river valley is liable to give rise to images of its inhabitants as a race of villagers and truck gardeners. Somebody raised the vegetables, to be sure, but it was not the people who counted. A rereading of Hugo Winckler's classic essay on the essentially nomadic nature of Babylonian civilization at all times should correct such notions, as Kramer's work is doing at present. Recently Delaporte has described the population of the valley as 'sedentary inhabitants of the towns and nomads encamped along the fringe of the desert.'²³ But as in Egypt there was a constant going and coming between the two. After all from the beginning the important people of Sumer belonged to two classes, the military and the merchants—the priests were merely secretaries of a campaigning and acquisitive priest-king who kept the

home office and watched over things generally. Now what Winckler pointed out and others have now confirmed is that a prehistoric net of merchant communications of vast extent actually involved the whole ancient world in a sort of chronic nomadism. The goods were not passed from hand to hand, farm to farm, village to village, as was once thought, but from the remotest times were actually carried immense distances by caravan and ship for specific purposes of trade. 'It is a fundamental error,' Winckler writes, 'to think of the non-sedentary tribes of the ancient East as unaffected by the civilized point of view and way of life. . . . We must abandon entirely, for example, the concept that the Arabs live and lived in a world of their own. . . . The Bedouins still move among ancient cities that preserve to this day the plan and skyline of Babylonian towns—showing how completely at home they were in the Babylonian world.' On the other hand, he reminds us, it is equally false to imagine the ancient city dwellers as stay-at-homes.²⁴ The ancient Babylonians always pictured their gods as engaged in two main activities, 1) tending cattle, and 2) riding about in wagons.²⁵ Recently Oppenheim has pointed to 'the existence of migrant scholars in Mesopotamia' in the earliest times, and many have noted that at all times Asia has been overrun with pilgrims, scholars, missionaries—that is, religious as well as commercial and

(Continued on page 514)

NEAT

... because he's a
professional painter



NEAT is the word for any painting job done by your professional Painting Contractor. He makes it his business to carefully protect your furnishings, floors or shrubbery—and without annoying fuss or bother.

He has the tools and equipment necessary to do a *fast, thorough* job on any painting problem you may have—inside or outside your home.

And his long experience assures you of *beautiful* results that will give complete and lasting satisfaction. For names of reliable Painting Contractors, call your Fuller Paint Dealer.

W. P. FULLER & CO.

The West's leader
in paint and glass

**FULLER
PAINTS
& GLASS**

Be sure to ask your Painting Contractor to use Fuller latex wall and woodwork paint—FUL-COLOR.

He'll be glad to, because FUL-COLOR goes on smoothly, evenly, easily. It has no "painty" odor, so you can re-occupy a room only one hour after he's finished. Choose your favorite paint colors from the famous Fuller Jewel Case at your Fuller Paint Dealer.

THERE WERE JAREDITES

(Continued from page 511)

military travelers, who fondly believe that they are imitating the wandering ways of the gods in the beginning as they move from shrine to shrine."²⁶

"Like the wandering Gilgamesh?" Blank asked.

"Thank you for getting us back to the subject so tactfully. The *Gilgamesh Epic* as you know is the greatest Babylonian epic, but it is full of ritual and not so conspicuously 'heroic' as many others. Still, Gilgamesh is undeniably identical with the prototype of all knight-errants and migrating heroes following the course of the sun—Schweitzer, Farnell, Cook, and others have shown that he is our own Herakles."

"I mention this epic with a purpose," said Blank. "Everybody knows how in his wanderings the hero Gilgamesh visited Ut-Napishtim, the Babylonian Noah, who told him the story of the flood."

"The original story of the flood, by the way," F. commented with devastating emphasis. But Professor Schwulst shook his head.

"For forty years," he said, "scholars were convinced that the Babylonian flood story found by Layard in the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh was just what you say—the original version of the Genesis flood story. But they were very wrong. Many of the texts found in that seventh-century library contained statements to the effect that they were merely copies of much older originals reposing in a far older temple library at Nippur. When the University of Pennsylvania finally got around to digging at Nippur, they immediately discovered a version of the flood story some fifteen hundred years older than the Assurbanipal text, and this Nippur version 'differs fundamentally from the two Nineveh versions, and agrees most remarkably with the Biblical story in very essential details both as to contents and language.'²⁷ For a generation the educated had proclaimed in loud and strident voices that the Nineveh finds had debunked the flood story once for all, but when the later discoveries debunked them in turn, everyone was expected to preserve a polite silence. I cannot blame you for leaping to conclusions, my friend, since all the experts did the same."²⁸

In the next issue Professor Blank places side by side two descriptions of a remarkable type of boat; the one from the book of Ether, the other from Professor Hilprecht's study of the "ark" as depicted in three versions of the Babylonian flood story to which the author adds a fourth text (No. xvi in Gadd's *Reader*).

(To be continued)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹Peet, *Compar. Study of the Lit. of Egypt, Palest. and Mesop.*, p. 26. Whether Prof. Schwulst was quoting from memory or reading from the text cannot be determined at the present time.

²R. Labat, *Le Poeme Babylonien de la Creation* (Paris, 1935), p. 2.

³M. Witzel, "Zu den Enmerkar-Dichtungen," *Orientalia* 18 (1949), p. 273.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 265, 268; the whole text is translated on pp. 275-280.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 271-3.

⁶C. J. Gadd, *A Sumerian Reading book* (Oxford, 1924), p. 145. Rather than loading our notes with references to texts we have never read, we shall lean heavily on Gadd and Deimel for our illustrations.

⁷A. Deimel, *Sumerische Grammatik der archaischen Texte* (Rome, 1924), p. 151. Deimel reproduces all the archaic texts in full.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 159; cf. Gadd, *op. cit.*, p. 147. ". . . let the lightning, thy messenger, go before thee. . . ." References to the kings as shepherds and herdsmen are extremely numerous, cf. Deimel pp. 243, 246, 243, 144, 151, etc., Gadd, pp. 55, 109, 111.

⁹Deimel, *op. cit.*, p. 143; he is also "the lion of the Desert," *ib.*, p. 324.

¹⁰Gadd, *op. cit.*, p. 105; entirely indistinguishable from the Pyramid Texts is the Sumerian Hymn to the Sun, No. xxi in Gadd, pp. 148-9; it is the most perfect literary parallel imaginable.

¹¹Deimel, *op. cit.*, p. 278; Gadd, *op. cit.*, pp. 65, 71.

¹²H. V. Hilprecht, *The Earliest Version of the Babylonian Deluge Story*, being Vol. V, Fasc. i, of *The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1910), p. 32, n. 4. These Guti had no regular kings but only migratory chieftains, Deimel, p. 271.

¹³Deimel, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 234f.

¹⁵A. Leo Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II" *Orientalia* 19 (1950), pp. 147-154. The full text in P. Jensen, *Assyrisch-Babylonische Mythen und Epen* (Berlin, 1900), pp. 74 ff.

¹⁶Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-8.

¹⁷Deimel, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

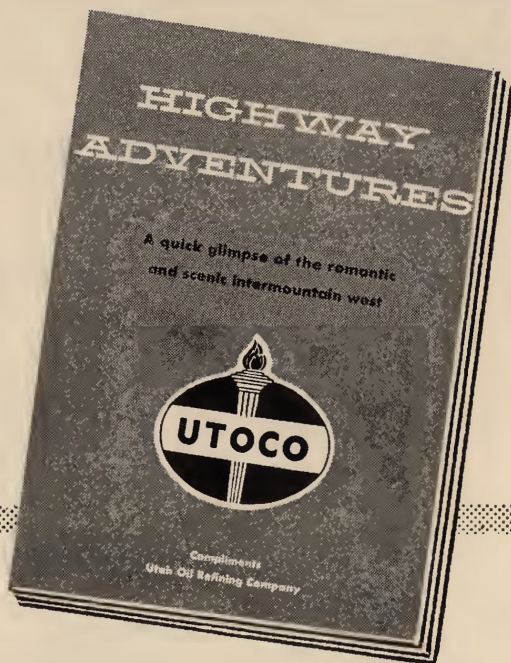
¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 238. Exactly like the conqueror in the Pyramid Texts, the Sumerian lord "lets no sleep come to his eye," (*ib.*, 161); he is "the one with the far-seeing eye." (*Id.*, 162). In the *Enuma Elish* the four eyes and four ears of Marduk tell him all that goes on in the four directions (Labat, *op. cit.*, p. 30, n. 43).

(Continued on page 516)

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

Get this NEW Travel Booklet

FREE
at any
Utoco
Dealer



It's a handy pocket-size illustrated booklet of travel hints and scenic attractions, full of tips on where to go, how to get there, and what to see in Utah, Idaho, and parts of Washington, Oregon, Wyoming and Nevada.

Let's GO
with



Give your car the care it deserves
at Utoco Dealers

where you expect more and you get it!

SALT LAKE'S NEWEST HOTEL

HOTEL TEMPLE SQUARE

The place to stay
The place to eat



There Were Jaredites

(Continued from page 514)

¹⁹Hugo Radau, *Nin-ib the Determiner of Fates, according to the Great Sumerian Epic Lugal-e Ug . . . etc.*, (Univ. of Penna., 1910), p. 28.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 27, 36.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 42, 44, 48, 52.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 24, where the king appears as the 'Savior' of his people from bondage, (p. 26).

²³L. Delaporte, *Les Peuples d'Orient Meditteraneen* (Paris: Presses Unisitariies, 1948), p. 11.

²⁴Hugo Winckler, in E. Schrader, *Die Keilschriften und das Alte Testament*, 3rd Ed. (Berlin, 1903), pp. 169f, 22f. More recently Sir Leonard Woolley has written: ". . . at once there is called up the astonishing picture of antediluvian man engaged in a commerce which sent its caravans across a thousand miles of mountain and desert from the Mesopotamian valley into the heart of India." (*Digging up the Past* (Penguin Books, 1950), p. 116; cf. A. L. Oppenheim, in *Jnl. of the Am. Or. Soc.*, 74 (1954), p. 6; S. N. Kramer, *Is. Expl. Jnl.*, III, 228f; A. Parrot, *Mari une Ville Perdue* (Paris, 1945), p. 36.

²⁵Bruno Meissner, *Die Babylonisch-Assyrische Literatur* (Wildpark-Potsdam, 1927), pp. 34f.

²⁶A. L. Oppenheim, in *Orientalia* 19, 158.

²⁷Hilprecht, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²⁸As recently as our own decade the journalist M. Ceram could say of the Assyrian version in his immensely popular book *Gods, Graves, and Scholars* (N. Y.: Knopf, 1952), p. 278, "Impossible to question the fact that the primal version of the Biblical legend of the Deluge had been found." Nothing could be further from the truth!

Missionary Spirit Dominates Era Campaign

(Continued from page 507)

totals to duplicate their superior accomplishment of last year. Many of their branches—even entire districts—qualified for the Hall of Fame.

Southern States Mission again, as it has for many years, led all missions in total subscriptions. The only Church unit to send in more subscriptions was South Los Angeles. This is even more outstanding in light of recent divisions and reorganizations within the mission.

Moapa Stake, with a membership of fewer than 2,000, had the honor of placing second in percent among stakes and third in the entire Church. The New England Mission and South Los Angeles Stake were the only units with a higher percent. The stake ERA director for Moapa reported that as far as she knew there were

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA