



The End of the Early Bronze Age

The Old Kingdom in Egypt, the period when the pyramids were built, a great and splendid age, came to its end in a natural disaster. “At the conclusion of the Sixth Dynasty . . . Egypt is suddenly blotted out from our sight as if some great catastrophe had overwhelmed it.”⁽¹⁾ The second city of Troy came to an end at the same time the Old Kingdom of Egypt fell; it was destroyed in a violent paroxysm of nature. The Early Bronze Age was simultaneously terminated in all the countries of the ancient East—a vast catastrophe spread ruin from Troy to the Valley of the Nile. This fact has been extensively documented by Claude F. A. Schaeffer, professor at College de France, excavator of Ras Shamra (Ugarit).

Schaeffer observed at Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast clear signs of great destruction that pointed to violent earthquakes and tidal waves, and other signs of a natural disaster. Among the greatest of these took place at the end of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. At the occasion of his visit to Troy, then under excavation by Carl Blegen, he became aware that Troy, too, had been repeatedly destroyed by natural catastrophes at the same times when Ras Shamra was destroyed. The distance from the Dardanelles near which the mound of Troy lies to Ras Shamra in Syria is about 600 miles on a straight line. In modern annals of seismology no earthquake is known to have occurred covering an area of such an extent. He then compared the findings of these two places with signs of earthquakes in numerous other localities of the ancient East. After painstaking work he came to the conclusion that more than once in historical times the entire region had been shaken by prodigious earthquakes. As to the destruction that ended the Early Bronze Age, Schaeffer wrote:

There is not for us the slightest doubt that the conflagration of Troy II corresponds to the catastrophe that made an end to the habitations of the Early Bronze Age of Alaca Huyuk, of Alisar, of Tarsus, of Tepe Hissar [in Asia Minor], and to the catastrophe that burned ancient Ugarit (II) in Syria, the city of Byblos that flourished under the Old Kingdom of Egypt, the contemporaneous cities of Palestine, and that was among the causes that terminated the Old Kingdom of Egypt.⁽²⁾

In the same catastrophe were destroyed the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Cyprus. What caused “the disappearance of so many cities and the upheaval of an entire civilization” ?⁽³⁾ “It was an all-encompassing catastrophe. Ethnic migrations were, no doubt, the consequence of the manifestation of nature. The initial and real causes must be looked for in some cataclysm over which man had no control.”⁽⁴⁾ Everywhere it was simultaneous and sudden.

The shortcoming in Schaeffer’s work was in not making the logical deduction that if catastrophes of such dimensions took place in historical times, there must be references to them in ancient literary sources. If a cataclysm terminated the Early Bronze Age, decimated the population, but left also survivors, then some memory of the events must have also found its way to be preserved in writing—if not by survivors, turned to vagrancy and having to take care for the first necessities of life, then by the descendants of the survivors.

In my scheme the end of the Early Bronze Age or Old Kingdom in Egypt is the time of the momentous events connected with the story of the patriarch Abraham, and described in the Book of Genesis as the overturning of the plain.⁽⁵⁾ The cause of the catastrophe could not have been entirely unknown to the ancients. We must therefore become attentive also to other traditions connected with these events.

References

1. G. A. Wainwright, *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 16 (1930), p. 43.
2. Claude F. A. Schaeffer, *Stratigraphie comparee et chronologie de l'Asie Occidentale* (IIIe et IIe millennaires) (Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 225.
3. R. de Vaux, "Palestine in the Early Bronze Age," *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Third ed., vol. I, pt. 2 (1971), ch. xv, p. 236. [According to J. Mellaart ("The Catastrophe at the End of the Early Bronze Age 2 Period," *The Cambridge Ancient History* third ed. [1971], Vol. I, pt. 2, p. 406) in the period after the catastrophe the number of settlements "is reduced to a quarter of the number in the previous period." Jacques Courtois, reporting the results of a survey in the valley of the Orontes, writes of the "extreme density of habitation of the plain in the Bronze Age, and particularly in the Early Bronze Age." (*Syria*, 50 [1973], p. 99). In eastern Arabia "a sharp downturn in settlements and activity becomes apparent" after ca. 2000 B.C. (Michael Rice, "The States of Archaeology in Eastern Arabia and the Persian Gulf," *Asian Affairs*, 64 [1977], p. 143). According to Kathleen Kenyon, "The final end of the Early Bronze Age civilization came with catastrophic completeness . . . Jericho . . . was probably completely destroyed. . . . Every town in Palestine that has so far been investigated shows the same break. . . . All traces of the Early Bronze Age civilization disappeared." (*Archaeology in the Holy Land* [London, 1960], p. 134). According to Ernest Wright, "one of the most striking facts about the Early Bronze civilization is its destruction, one so violent that scarcely a vestige of it survived. We do not know when the event took place; we only know that there is not an Early Bronze Age city excavated or explored in all Palestine which does not have a gap in its occupation between Early Bronze Age III and the Middle Bronze Age. To date this gap, we know that it must be approximately contemporary with a similar period in Egypt called the 'First Intermediate Period' between dynasties VI and XI (ca. 22nd and 21st centuries B.C.)." ("The Archaeology of Palestine" in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East, Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* [1961], p. 103).

The destruction can be traced also in Greece. "The destruction of the Early Helladic II town at Lerna in the eastern Peloponnese" is an example of "the widespread and violent destruction that occurred ca. 2300 B.C. in the Aegean and East Mediterranean" (Marija Gimbutas, "The Destruction of the Aegean and East Mediterranean Urban Civilization around 2300 B.C.," *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean*, ed. by R. A. Crossland and Ann Birchall [London, 1973], pp. 129f.) For Lerna, see also J. Caskey, "The Early Helladic Period in the Argolid," *Hesperia* 29 (1960), pp. 289-290. "The burning of the House of Tiles . . . was the end of an era at Lerna." The settlement "came to a violent end." Not only Lerna, but also "the tiled buildings at Tiryns and Asine were destroyed by fire."

It is quite probable that the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur occurred at the same time. Thorkild Jacobsen wonders about "the reasons for

the dire catastrophes that befell the city of Ur in the reign of Ibbi-Suen, the sudden collapse of its great empire, and the later utter destruction of the city itself at the hands of barbarian invaders. . . . How an empire like that of the Third Dynasty of Ur . . . could so quickly collapse is really quite puzzling.” (“The Reign of Ibbi-Suen,” *The Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 7 (1953), p. 36. Although Jacobsen refers to the text known as “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur,” he does not treat it seriously. Yet this poem provides specific information about the causes of the disaster. It speaks of a “storm’s cyclone-like destruction” (99), of a “storm that annihilates the land” (178), “in front of the storm fires burned; the people groan” (188). It tells of the sun being obscured: “In the land the bright sun rose not, like the evening star it shone” (191). It describes earthquakes that shook the land: “the destructive storm makes the land tremble and quake” (199). “In all the streets, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about” (217). “Mothers and fathers who did not leave their houses were overcome by fire; the young lying on their mothers’ laps like fish were carried off by the waters” (228-229). The city, prostrated by the storm “which overwhelmed the living creatures of heaven and earth,” fell prey to hostile tribes and was looted. See S. N. Kramer, “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur,” *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1950). Another lament, *Oh, Angry Sea*, transl. by R. Kutscher (Yale University Press, 1975), tells of the destruction of Ur, Larsa, Nippur, Sippar, Babylon and Isin by inundations sent by Enlil. I consider Enlil to be Jupiter.]

4. Schaeffer, *Stratigraphie comparee*, p. 537. In Alaca Huyuk there are unequivocal signs that an earthquake was responsible for the destruction (pp. 296f.). Cf. B. Bell, “The Dark Ages in Ancient History,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 75 (1971).
5. [The archaeological evidence uncovered in recent years strongly supports the conclusion that the cities of the plain flourished during the Early Bronze Age and that their destruction took place at the end of this period, more specifically at the end of EB III. See H. Shanks, “Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* VI:5 (Sept./Oct. 1980), p. 28. Cf. D. Cardona, “Jupiter—God of Abraham (Part III),” *KRONOS* Vol. VIII.1 (1982), pp. 69ff.]

