

The Geography of Genesis 8:4

by

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In this passage of Scripture the author not only gives us a precise date for the landing of the Ark, but an actual geographic locale for its final berth.¹ Given this attention to detail it would seem expedient to assume he wants us to see this event as one occurring in space-time history. The author, in the most important voyage in history, one that transports a remnant of human and animal life from the antediluvian to the post-diluvial world, give a fairly precise location as to where the voyage ended: *the mountains of Ararat*.² Layman, Ark hunters, and even some scholars and commentators, often misinterpret this passage to refer to the singular and spectacular 17,000 ft. peak of this name in northeastern Turkey near the Armenian and Iranian borders. The biblical passage does not designate a specific mountain.

In this paper we will attempt to show through linguistic and geographic studies that the inspired text is indicating a mountainous region that was historically north of the Kingdom of Assyria in southeastern Turkey, in and around Lake Van.

If we assume that Genesis was written by its presumed author, Moses, then it would

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- 1 Tishri 17 corresponds roughly to our Sept-Oct 17. It was the most sacred month in the Jewish calendar as it included the Day of Atonement. This would seem fitting to the typology and theology of the Flood and the Ark. See: Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 385.
 - 2 The precise date given in this verse and in verse 5 for this event makes us want to take the landing place in the same vein.

have to have been composed sometime in the second millennium BC, and more specifically, around 1400-1410 BC.³ If this is the case, the biblical mention of *Urartu* in this passage is the earliest known mention of this geographical term. About two hundred years later during the reign of Shalmaneser I (1263-1234 BC), a region of *Uruatri* is mentioned in Assyrian literature where it almost certainly refers to a geographical region, for it is not until the ninth century BC that Urartu becomes a united kingdom and a regional power.⁴ It is Zimansky's opinion that *Urartu* is an Assyrian word as the Urartians never refer to themselves by that designation. He writes:

Even for the Assyrians who coined the term, “Urartu” had more than one meaning. It was originally a geographical designation of a land that contained several independent political entities. Later it became the name of a unified state which covered a much larger expanse.⁵

Piotrovsky also believes it is an Assyrian word. He believes it “had no ethnic significance but was most probably a descriptive term (perhaps meaning ‘the mountainous country’).”⁶

In their own literature, they refer to themselves as the *Biainili*, and *Nairi* as the designation for their kingdom. Zimansky, again argues:

The mountainous areas north of Assyria were of little consequence to the urban societies in the greater Mesopotamian sphere before the ninth century, except as a source of raw materials such as obsidian, and as the place from which various peoples migrated. Whatever polities existed there in the late second millennium were so inconsequential as to leave few archaeological traces.⁷

3 For a discussion about the date Genesis was written see: Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 14ff.

4 Paul E. Zimansky, *Ecology and Empire: The Structure of the Urartian State* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1982), 4.

5 Zimansky, *Ecology and Empire*, 9.

6 Borus B. Piotrovsky, *The Ancient Civilization of Urartu*, trans. James Hogarth (Cowles Book Company, 1969), 43.

7 Paul E. Zimansky, “The Kingdom of Urartu in Eastern Anatolia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* Vol. II., ed Jack M. Sasson. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1136.

The great linguist, Sayce, postulates that

Urardhu, therefore, contracted into Urdhu, would have been the designation of the highlands of Armenia among the Babylonians as early as the 16th or 17th century B.C. Possibly it was then applied only to the mountainous country immediately to the north of Assyria, and was not extended to the districts further north until the Assyrians had become better acquainted with this region, and the native names of its several states.⁸

Again, assuming Mosaic authorship, could the author, living in Egypt, have known about this region in the middle of the second millennium living about 800-1000 miles from Urartu? The answer seems certain that the area was known in Egypt as it was the primary source for the importation of obsidian.⁹ So, unless this passage was redacted, or updated by a scribe to reflect a name change later during the time of Urartian Empire, it is highly unlikely that it could be referring to the area of present-day Mt. Ararat/Agri Dagh, a post-flood volcanic mountain that stands out by itself on the Araxis Plain.¹⁰ Therefore, to make *the mountains of Ararat* of Genesis 8:4 refer to the boundaries of the greater Kingdom of Urartu at the time of the composition of Genesis is unwarranted. On the other hand, the mountainous area south of Lake Van was notorious in antiquity because it acted as a formidable barrier between Assyria and the regions to the north. It was this area that Xenophen and the retreating Greeks found so difficult to traverse during the *anabasis* at the beginning of the fourth century.¹¹ Sayce goes on to say:

However, this may be, it is plain that Bitanu was the name given by the Assyrians to the country which stretched away from the southern shore of Lake Van to Diarbekir and the

8 A. H. Sayce, "The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Van, Deciphered and Translated," in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. (New Series), 392.

9 Charles Burney, and David Marshall Lang, *The Peoples of the Hills* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 16.

10 That there was an editor who made changes after Moses' death is agreed upon. However, in this case, assuming a scribe updated a place name to "Urartu:" what would have been the previous toponym?

11 See: John Prevas, *Xenophon's March: Into The Lair Of The Persian Lion* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).

eastern bank of the Euphrates, and when Assur-natsir-pal makes it synonymous with Urardhu, it is of the southern part of Urardhu that he is thinking.¹²

To summarize this point: it does not appear that the writer of Genesis was referring to a *country* or a *state* of Urartu since it did not exist when Genesis was written. The weight of the evidence seems to indicate that the term was referring to a geographical area only.

The term *Urartu* is found three more times in the Old Testament and once in the Apocrypha. In three of these passages, a state could possibly be in view because the later date of composition allows it to be so. II Kings 19:37; Isaiah 37:38; and Tobit 1:21, chronicle the same event: the assassination of Sennacherib by his two sons. After the patricide these sources inform us they fled to *the land* (ארֶרְא) *of Urartu*, a fitting place of refuge as it was an enemy country (state) to their native Assyria. According to Jewish tradition these two sons of Sennacherib lived out their lives in the city of Jazri (now the city of Cizre) a city with a large population of Jews from northern Israel who had been previously deported by Tiglath Pileser III and Shalmaneser V.¹³ Ginzberg notes that two “famous scholars Shemiah and Abtalion were descendants of these two sons of Sennacherib.”¹⁴ In the other passage in Jer. 51: 27, the prophet is challenging three kingdoms, Ararat/Urartu, Minni, and Ashkenaz, to form a coalition to fight against Babylon. It is obvious here that a kingdom is in view.

In the Tobit (1:21) passage the writer reiterates the same account of Sennacherib’s assassination by his two sons, but he uses the same wording as Genesis 8:4: *the mountains of*

12 A. H. Sayce, “The Kingdom of Urartu,” 396.

13 See: Jacob Neusner, “The Jews in Pagan Armenia” in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 84, No. 3, (1964), 230-240.

14 Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Phila.: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 270.

Urartu instead of *the land of Urartu* as in Isaiah and II Kings. One would have expected the latter, since by this time Urartu had become a formidable empire. We speculate that he uses *mountains* because as noted above, it was notorious in antiquity as a place to flee if you didn't want to be found!

The Aramaic Targums

The targums were paraphrases of the OT Hebrew in Aramaic which were made for the Jews after they returned from the captivity in Babylon (See Nehemiah 8:8). After their long captivity many of the Jews forgot their native tongue (Hebrew) only understanding the language (Aramaic) of their former captors. These paraphrases were originally oral. They were rather loose paraphrases, and in some instances, were like running commentaries. These targums later attained a fixed form around the first century AD and were written down and preserved.¹⁵ They give Bible scholars a valuable tool for textual criticism and interpretation. One of these Targums, Onkelos, puts the landing place of the Ark in the Qardu (Kurdish) mountains. Two others, Neofiti, and pseudo-Jonathan, put the Ark in *Qardon*, presumably a variant in spelling. It should be remembered that some of the Israelites from the Northern Kingdom were taken by their captors to these very mountains as well as in the vicinity of northern Mesopotamia. They probably did not know of the kingdom of Urartu/Ararat since by that time the kingdom had ceased to exist around the seventh century BC. In addition, at Isa. 37:38 these targums also update the place the sons of Sennacherib escaped to: *the mountains of Kardu*. Several centuries

15 F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, revised ed. (Westwood, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1963), 134.

later, an entire translation of the Hebrew OT was made into Syriac (an Aramaic dialect).¹⁶ It follows the Aramaic tradition and updates *Urartu* to *Qardu*.

The Pseudepigrapha

The *Pseudepigrapha* are a body of Jewish literature from about 200 BC to 200 AD.¹⁷ Portions and fragments of this material were found in Qumran and several books are quoted in the New Testament. This body of literature is notorious for the details it adds to the Flood story. The book of *Jubilees*, known as *little Genesis*, has been dated as early as the second century BC and was undoubtedly originally written in Hebrew.¹⁸ It has the Ark landing on *Lubar*, one of the mountains of *Ararat*.¹⁹ It also notes that Noah planted a vine on this mountain and each of his sons built cities there, naming them after their wives.²⁰ The mystery is the location of this mountain named *Lubar*. It seems to originate with *Jubilees*. Christian writer, Epiphanius, and others, along with Midrashic literature, copy this tradition. Cassuto thinks the possibility ought to be considered that *Lubar* is identical to *Baris* (βαρις) in the Nicholas of Damascus account.²¹ Sayce is more certain that they are one and the same.²² *The Genesis Apocryphon*, another book from this same body of literature shows a great deal of similarity to *Jubilees* but is fragmentary at a crucial spot. It mentions that Noah planted a vine and was buried on Mt. Lubar. The

16 This Syriac version is known as the Peshitto, or Peshitta.

17 There is some definite Christian influence in the texts of later date.

18 James H. Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 43-44.

19 *Jubilees* 5:29;7:1, in Charlesworth, 66,68.

20 *Jubilees* 7:17, in Charlesworth, 69.

21 U. Cassuto, *A Commentary On The Book of Genesis*, Part One (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1964), 105.

22 Sayce, 389, n.1.

assumption is that it also would have the Ark landing on the same Mt. Lubar.

The Sibylline Oracles has the Ark landing on a

“certain tall lofty mountain on the dark mainland of Phrygia. It is called Ararat. When all were about to be saved on it, thereupon there was a great heartfelt longing. There the springs of the great river Marsyos had sprung up. In this place the Ark remained on lofty summits when the waters had subsided.”²³

The reference to Phrygia is certainly problematic for the view being presented here.

There are so many unknowns. Interestingly enough, Julius Africanus, a Christian writer of the second and third centuries may have been influenced by the Sibylline Oracles. He notes that “the Ark settled on the mountains of Ararat, which we know to be in Parthia; but some say that they are at Celanene of Phrygia.”²⁴ He gives the view he knows to be true, but wants his readers to know that there is another opinion out there. Indeed, in the second and third centuries the mountains of Ararat, that range of mountains just north of the old kingdom of Assyria, were under Parthian rule; it would have been proper to say that the Ark landed in Parthia at that time. The author has personally visited this area and has seen the archaeological evidence of the previous Parthian dominance.²⁵

23 Sibylline Oracles 1:261-266, in Charlesworth, 341.

24 Julius Africanus, *Fragments of the Chronology*, IV; Bailey believes the Phrygia reference comes from the influence of Greek Flood Stories. See: Bailey, *Noah*, 68.

25 I am referring to a rock carving in Kasrik Canyon. Algaze identifies it as Parthian. See Guillermo Algaze, “A New Frontier: First Results of the Tigris-Euphrates Archaeological Reconnaissance Project, 1988.” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4 (Oct. 1989), 250

Josephus

Josephus, the important first century Jewish historian, mentions the landing site of Noah's Ark on five different occasions.²⁶ In his first mention of the ark, and what is first noticeable, is that he updates the *Urartu* of Genesis 8:4 with *Armenia*. He also makes the landing place very specific as being *in Armenia on a Kurdish mountain* (note singular).²⁷ Josephus was a very learned man in his day, and as we know, he had access to some of the great libraries that existed in the Near East at that time. In his account of the flood he was obviously acquainted with the biblical account, but he also quotes a number of what he calls *barbarian* or *pagan* sources (*βαρβαρικά*).²⁸ On his second mention of the ark he quotes Berossus, a Babylonian high priest of Bel, who wrote a history of the world in Greek in the early third century BC. His work, *Babyloniaca*, has only survived as it has been quoted from several sources, the most important of these, the late first century writer, Polyhistor.²⁹ While Berossus wrote his history in Greek, the *lingua franca* of his time, there is evidence that he was also competent in reading the cuneiform of both Akkadian and Sumerian.³⁰ His account of the Flood draws heavily on the Babylonian flood account as one would expect. In the important quote about the ark he says that:

26 *Antiquities*: I:90-92; I93-94; I:95; 20:24-25; *Against Apion*: I:130.

27 *Antiquities*, I:5, 90.

28 Josephus says others who corroborate Berossus' testimony are: Hieronymus the Egyptian, Mnaseas, Nicholas of Damascus and many others (his words), *Antiquities*, I:94.

29 Many of the people who quote Berossus did not have an original copy either, but quote sources who themselves are no longer extant. For example, Eusebius quotes from Polyhistor whose writings are lost. See also: Stanley Mayer Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Bersossus* (Malibu, CA: Udena Publications, 1978), 21. This Burstein work represents the most complete effort to restore *The Babyloniaca*.

30 G. Kormoroczy, "Bersossus and The Mesopotamian Literature;," in *Acta Antiqua* 22, (1973), 127-128.

“A portion of the ship which came to rest in Armenia still remains in the mountains of the Korduaians of Armenia, and some of the people, scraping off pieces of bitumen from the ship, bring them back and use them as talismans.”³¹

It is obvious that Berossus, when he wrote about the flood, had a copy of the Babylonian flood story before him. His account contains all the pagan elements and the hero of the story is Xisuthros (Ziusudra) as in the Babylonian tradition. What I find fascinating is that though the Babylonian flood account clearly states that the ark's landing place was on *Mt. Nimush* (formerly written as *Niser*), Berossus, in his account, has the ark landing on *the mountains of the Cordyaeans in Armenia* which is more in agreement with the Hebrew sources! This *Mt Nimus* has been positively identified by Speiser as the *Pir Omar Gudrun* in the Zagros Mountains in present-day Iraq and close to the border of Iran.³² It can be said that Pir Omar Gudrun is a mountain in Kurdistan, but it cannot be said that it is a Kurdish mountain in Armenia, since historic Armenia never extended that far southeast. The question we must then ask is why? Why does Berossus change what he sees written on his clay tablets? Is it because he is a historian and he is trying to correct what he knows to be true from other sources? We can only speculate. Urartu, at the time this document was written had ceased to exist being replaced by the Kingdom of Armenia. Consequently, we can exclude Mt. Ararat as a possibility from this Bersossus/Josephus quote, because from this time period (Berossus to Josephus) the Kurdish people did not live there (at Mt. Ararat). It was not until the tenth and eleventh centuries AD that the Kurdish people migrated there from the northern parts of Mesopotamia.³³

31 This quote is from Polyhistor, but when Josephus quotes Berossus he makes a subtle change: he switches to the singular “mountain of the Korduaians.” Whether this was a mistake, or whether he is narrowing it down, is just conjecture.

32 Ephraim A. Speiser, “Southern Kurdistan in the Annals of Ashurnasipal and Today.” in *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, VII: 18.

33 Sargis Haroutyunian, “Armenian Epic Tradition and Kurdish Folklore,” in *Iran & the Caucasus* (1997), 88

Some believe that Josephus was hopelessly contradictory about his account of the flood and the landing place of the ark.³⁴ For example, in his third mention of the ark he quotes Nicholas of Damascus, a first century historian and philosopher, who was a consort of Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus, and was the tutor of the children of Anthony and Cleopatra. His history of Assyria has largely been discounted by Assyriologists as totally unreliable.³⁵ Josephus quotes him several times in his works, and where he quotes him about the flood and the landing place of the ark, we are presented with some problems. First, Nicholas obviously does not believe in a universal flood as he has a large number of people surviving the flood on a large or great (μεγα) mountain, presumably the same mountain where the ark landed. Secondly, he gives a name for this mountain we do not encounter anywhere else in literature. According to Nicholas, the ark landed on a mountain in Armenia named *Baris* (noted earlier). Here is the quote:

“There is above the country of Minyas in Armenia a great mountain call Baris, whereas the story goes, many refugees found safety at the time of the flood, and one man, transported upon an ark, grounded upon the summit, and relics of the timber were for long preserved...³⁶

Where does Nicholas obtain this variant of the flood story about survivors outside of the ark? At present we do not know his source. Likewise, where does he come up with the name *Baris* for the name of the mountain? So far in extent literature this is unique with Nicholas. Both Cassuto and Sayce believe *Baris* is just a variant of *Lubar*. We agree that their suggestion is a good one,

34 Bailey, *Noah*, 66

35 Robert Drews, “Sargon; Cyrus and Mesopotamian Folk History,” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (Oct., 1974), 387-393.

36 1:94-98. The big question mark here is how to translate the “upere”. It can certainly be translated “above” but it can also be translated “beyond,” “about,” or “over.”

but it just lacks certainty. Nicholas puts the ark's landing on a *great* (μεγα) *mountain* above the country of Minyas in Armenia. Minyas, we know, is one of the three kingdoms mentioned in Jer. 51, and is usually located south of Lake Urmia in what is now Iran. It is certainly possible that Nicholas here may have the 17,000 foot Mt. Ararat in mind, or he may just be in error. Since Minyas is not that distant from the Ararat mountains he may be in the ballpark so to speak. It is entirely normal for geographers in antiquity who have never visited the actual site to be a little off on the boundaries.³⁷ Another consideration here is how you translate the Greek word *ωπερ* *owpere*. It can also be translated *beyond, about, or over*. This could presumably make Mt. Ararat less certain. Mt. Ararat lies to the north and slightly to the west of Minyas. It is also interesting that he speaks in the past tense about the ark's existence while Josephus in his other quote seems to indicate remains in his day.

On his fourth mention of the ark's landing place, Josephus puts it in a country called *Carrown* (Καρρων) which was in the kingdom of Adiabene. Scholars of the original text of Josephus believe the *Carrown* here is a corruption and should read *Kardu* (Καρδου). If we assume he was reading some Hebrew text about the kingdom of Adiabene it would have been very easy to confuse the Hebrew letter *daleth* (ד) and the *resh* (ר). Note how easy it would have been to be confused: English: *Kardu-Carron*; Greek: Καρδου-Καρρων; Hebrew: קרדו-קררו . The kingdom of Adiabene was concentrated to the southeast of the mountains of Urartu with a center in Arbela (present-day Irbil). As is well-known, borders in antiquity were not precise. Since it is a known fact that Jews populated the Cizre plain in the first century it is highly likely that the

37 Bailey, 66.

kingdom of Adiabene did extend that far northwest. We know it included Nisibis which is even further west.³⁸ It also totally rules out Mt Ararat as a possibility. Josephus here adds a little caveat that the ark landed in a land where much amomum grows. This is apparently a plant from which a spice is derived that is known elsewhere in classical literature as *cardomum* and in latin as *cardamomum*.³⁹ It was native to Media and grows in mountainous areas.

In the fifth reference, Josephus has the ark landing on *the highest mountain in Armenia* in Whiston's translation. Again, as it stands, this very well could be a reference to the 17,000 ft. Mt Ararat. The Kingdom of Armenia by this time did indeed include that northern area. However, it is far from certain that he had that mountain in mind. Why? Because of translation ambiguity. Thackeray, translated this passage: *it landed on the heights of the mountains of Armenia.* (ταις ακρωρεισαις των Αρμενιων ορων)⁴⁰ This is a big difference, and it would again make it an un-designated mountain.

The Problem of Genesis 11:2

The Genesis 11:1 and 2 passage states: *And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there* (KJV). The argument goes like this: If you translate the Hebrew: מִקְדֵּם *miqqedem* as: *from the east*, as the KJV does, it would clearly seem to indicate that the Ark must have landed somewhere to the east of historic Shinar (Mesopotamia) in

38 Pliny, *Natural History*, 6:16.

39 Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 102ff. See also: Pliny, *Natural History*, 49ff.

40 *Josephus in Nine Volumes*, H. St. J. Thackeray, Harvard University Press, MCMLXXVI, 214-215.

modern-day Iran since it is that country that is directly east of Shinar. However, if you translate the *miqqedem* as *eastward*, as the NIV does, then you have the migration coming from the west toward Shinar. Elsewhere the *miqqedem* is translated *in the east* (NEB), that is: men moved in the east, then, the directional point is much more indefinite.

Given that this migration occurred several hundred years after the disembarking from the Ark from the previous context of chapter 10, it seems best not to push this passage too much. Wenham favors *in the east* when the *miqqedem* is used adverbially as in 2:8; 12:8; and Isa. 9:12.

⁴¹ In addition, Matthews believes *miqqedem* marks events of separation, so it can also have a metaphorical sense. ⁴² If you do select the more specific, directional interpretation as relic hunter and explorer, Robert Cornuke does (as in the KJV), and you believe the Ark landed in northern Iran, or northeast Turkey, it would have certainly been more accurate for the writer to say *they migrated from the north, or northeast*. Neither the Elburz Mountains, nor Mount Ararat are directly east of Shinar. The Biblical mountains of Ararat (Urartu) are directly north of the plain of Shinar.

The apparent conflict between 8:4 and 11:2 is more easily resolved with a more indefinite interpretation in our opinion. It should also be pointed out that there is least a 100-300 year period between the landing of the Ark after the Flood (Gen. 8), and the Tower of Babel event (Gen. 11). The peoples could have easily moved from where the Ark landed to other locations east or west of Shinar [Babylonia] before the Tower of Babel story took place.

41 Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 238.

42 Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 478.

Conclusion

In conclusion: we barely scratched the surface on this subject. We believe there is ample material for several more papers. It is our opinion that early Armenian, the Syriac Church, and Islamic historians, also support the thesis of this paper. We also predict that some great and exciting discoveries await this area in future excavations. To our knowledge, no major excavations have, or are occurring in this area on the southern end of the Urartian Mountains.⁴³ Surveys have been done, however, that indicate that the area shows great possibilities for future archaeological excavations.⁴⁴

43 We are aware of one exception in the city of Cizre.

44 Bradley Parker, *The Northern Frontier of Assyria: An Archaeological Perspective*, in *Assyria 1995*, edited by S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting. (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), and Guillermo Algaze, *A New Frontier: First Results of the Tigris-Euphrates Archaeological Reconnaissance Project*, 1988 *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 48, no 4 (Oct, 1989)