A CRITICAL NOTE ON GENESIS VI 16α

Gen. vi 16α יָהָרָה תְּשֵׁמוֹת לְתֹלֻדֵה יָהָרָה אֵפוֹת יְהוָה מָלְסֵסֶה ("a sōbar you shall make for the ark, and unto a cubit upward you shall finish it") has proved to be a particularly troublesome sentence, and commentators frequently have termed it unintelligible. A brief summary of critical opinion may be found in Skinner’s Genesis (I.C.C.), pp. 161f; see also Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament, I, (H. Holzinger), p. 70. This note will seek to set forth and support an interpretation for the passage which the present writer has not found elsewhere and which may serve to clarify the meaning.

1. This word, a hapax legomenon in the Old Testament, on the basis of יָהָרָה ("noon, midday") has commonly been interpreted as having some connection with light and has accordingly been translated “light” (ASV, JV), “window” (AV), “course of windows” (Knox), “casement” (Driver, Genesis, p. 88). The root seldom appears outside the Old Testament. In Talmudic sources יָהָרָה is occasionally found, usually with the meaning “be clear, shine”, perhaps through association with the very common verb יָהָר, “shine”. Also in Arabic there exists the word גַּבָּרָה, meaning “be clear, appear”.

Many scholars of late have been abandoning the translation just suggested, turning instead to the meaning “roof, top deck”. The principal philological support for this definition may be found in the Arabic גַּבָּר, meaning “back, back (of a beast), deck (of a ship)”. In this connection, cf. BDB, KB; marginal notes in some of the English translations. Clearly the selection of a meaning for יָהָר will depend upon a careful examination of the passage itself.

2. It may reasonably be assumed that underlying the Biblical account of Noah and the flood is the ancient legend of Ut-napishtim. The Old Testament materials have departed in many ways, both technical and theological, from the older tradition; nevertheless, the basic structure of the story remains the same. A study of the construc-

1) The Arabic combination גַּבָּר thus has two meanings: (a) “be clear” and (b) “back”. Very likely two different, homographic roots are involved.
tion of Noah’s ark, therefore, should be prefaced with some observations about the Babylonian vessel.

Nothing of importance can be determined about Ut-napishtim’s vessel through an analysis of Babylonian navigation and ship-building. Although he was told, according to the present form of the account, to construct a ship (elippu, XI, 24), the finished product more closely resembled a building or large house.

As one might expect, the story seems to have undergone considerable modification through the centuries. The dimensions of the ship are given as 120 cubits in each direction (58f), yielding a cube of at least 180 feet. Earlier in the account, however, Ut-napishtim is directed to tear down his house (bitu, 24) of reeds (kikkišu, 21f) in order to build the ship, suggesting that the original vessel was intended to be of much more modest proportions. The reed hut would hardly have furnished enough material for the elaborate structure outlined in the present form of the narrative. Probably an older tradition, in which Ut-napishtim built a small boat 1) for his own safety and that of his family and possessions, was revised with the passing of time until the cube of 120 cubits found acceptance. Although the plan of the interior is still very advanced (seven stories with nine compartments on each level, 61f), the existence of houses of at least two stories is well confirmed 2).

The type of roof construction used by Ut-napishtim remains an area for conjecture. Contenau has pointed out that the early reed huts appear to have been round with “vaulted” roofs. The “vault” was formed by fastening together the tops of the reeds used for the wall, the joint being supported by a center pole 3). It may be inferred, therefore, that the original vessel was conceived as having a vaulted roof. It would have been particularly suitable for the intended pur-

1) G. Contenau, Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria, London, E. Arnold, 1954, p. 46 describes the small reed boats that were and still are used in the area.
2) Ibid., p. 30.
3) Ibid., p. 26. Contenau describes modern examples of the primitive type of house (except that the present specimens are tunnel-shaped) as follows:

“The method of construction consists of tying in bundles the stems of tall reeds and fixing them in the earth at regular intervals and in a straight line. Parallel to and on either side of this central line two more lines of reeds are then firmly fixed in the ground, their tops being bent over to form a kind of tunnel, and fastened to the central line, along which a pole has been tied, to form the roof of the edifice. The result is a shelter with a barrel-vaulted roof. It can be extended as far as may be wanted, but its width is limited by the height to which the reeds grow in the district. The walls may be made from branches, from dried mud, from matting or possibly even from thatch”.