

Only one people, the Jews, have preserved prose records of an earlier date than the time of Cyrus.

That part of the Old Testament called the Pentateuch exists, in its original state, at least since the dispersion of the ten tribes under Jeroboam; for the Samaritans had it as well as the Jews; and its antiquity may be confidently reckoned at more than two thousand eight hundred years.

There is no reason to doubt but that the book of Genesis was composed by Moses himself, which would give it a still farther antiquity of five hundred years, namely, thirty-three centuries: and it is sufficient to read it to perceive that it was composed partly of fragments of former works. There is, however, no doubt of its being the most ancient writing which the world is in possession of.

But this work, and all those written subsequently, however unacquainted their authors were with Moses and his people, describe the nations of the banks of the Mediterranean as newly formed; they mention them as half savages some centuries after; moreover, they all allude to a universal catastrophe, of an irruption of the waters, which occasioned an almost entire regeneration of the human race; and they do not go very remotely into antiquity to decide the epoch of this event.

The texts of the Pentateuch, which place this catastrophe the farthest back, do not go more remotely than twenty centuries before Moses, nor consequently more than five thousand four hundred years before our time. (1)

The poetical traditions of the Greeks, the source

(1) The Septuagint, 5345 years: the Samaritan text, 4869: the Hebrew text, 4174.