

LINGUISTIC STUDY OF SUMERIAN/AKKADIAN CUNEIFORM
AND WRITINGS

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Cuneiform: Signs of the Times

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"The conservative instinct which presides over cultural development precludes (except in rare instances) the absolute break between the old and the new. Instead we have a constant process of transition."¹ Indeed, there is no absolute break in the progression of Mesopotamian history. Rather, it is the process and method of change which have caused confusion for several decades. The cuneiform languages which have been uncovered over the last two centuries have been helping scholars reconstruct the changes and processes which shaped Mesopotamia's forgotten history. This history is of particular relevance to Biblical scholars and theologians as archaeologists discover many source materials for Biblical literature as well as documents which simply helped define the cultures which served as precursors to Biblical times.

I. Persia

Persepolis

The first discovery of cuneiform was made in the early 1700's at the Persian site of Persepolis. Persepolis, a prominent city of the Persian Empire, was conquered, destroyed, and largely forgotten during the campaigns of Alexander the Great. The site had prospered greatly under the reigns of Darius and Xerxes and had been the site of great platforms and splendid palaces.

In the years 1761-1767, Carsten Niebuhr, a Danish mathematician, copied the inscriptions at Persepolis. Then, in

¹Morris Jastrow, "A New Aspect of the Sumerian Question," Hebraica, 22 (Jan. 1906): 106.

1778, Jean Chardin published three meticulously copied tri-lingual inscriptions from Persepolis attempting to show that they were not merely ornamental and that evidence suggested that the lines should be read from left to right. Chardin believed though that these were three different representations of the same language rather than three unique version of one text.

There was still no way of translating the texts until Georg Friedrich Grotefend in 1802 made a significant breakthrough when he picked out the most frequent characters and labeled them as vowels. He was, of course, not entirely correct, but he had begun the process that would lead to the decipherment of the language.

The cuneiform was discovered in the ruins of the palaces in the forms of tablets and inscriptions on monuments and pillars. Also a source of writings were the 7 Achaemenid royal tombs carved into the mountainside near Persepolis². The palace tablets in particular, while unearthed at a much later time, are a primary source of knowledge on the social and economic structures existent in the Persian Empire.

The first cache of Persian tablets was excavated by Herzfeld in the 1933-34 season. They have been named the Fortification Tablets. The several thousand documents and fragments are roughly dated between 509-494 BCE and contain information on food rations and administrative procedures during the reign of Darius I.

²The Achaemenian dynasty was founded by Achaemenes around the year 700 BCE and included kings of Anzan (Elam) and Persia through Cyrus the Great and his son Cambyses II.

The second cache was discovered by Schmidt in the Treasury at Persepolis in 1936-38. These tablets numbered only 753 and contained records of monetary transactions from the year 492 BCE through the reign of Xerxes or perhaps early into the reign of Artaxerxes at which time it became standard to keep records in Aramaic on papyrus.³ Persepolis is thought to have been originally built by Darius, but there is some doubt as to whether it dates back as far as the reign of Cyrus. No solid evidence has yet been found except that Darius I states with his usual flair that no previous construct was there.

A great deal of the Biblical significance of the Persian period centers around Cyrus. He is the gentle conqueror and ruler who returned the Jewish people to Jerusalem from their Babylonian exile. Further, he ordered the rebuilding of the temple and the return of the treasures which had been looted from the Jewish homeland by the Babylonians. We find in the cuneiform record that he showed respect to many gods who were worshiped by people in Persia and Babylon. In fact, he even made sacrifices to some of them in temples he had rebuilt or restored for his people.

The Bible tells the story with fair completeness; however, it is the cuneiform inscriptions which allow us now to verify the scriptural accounts and begin to understand and interpret sections of the saga which have perhaps been slightly tainted by Jewish

³J.M. Cook, The Persian Empire, (Great Britain, 1983): 86.

historians.

"Now in the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and put it also in writing, saying, 'Thus saith Cyrus King of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.'
(2 Chronicles 36:22-23)

This account is fascinating and valuable because it specifically states that the decree of Cyrus which sent the Jews back to Jerusalem was put into writing. It was this record that Darius sought in the archives some years later.

"Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon. And there was found...a roll, and therein was a record thus written: 'In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded...And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house...be restored.'" (Ezra 6:1-5)

The verification sought by Darius was to lift a form of injunction which had been placed on the temple building process in Jerusalem at the urging of the Jews' enemies who were angered by the allocation of so many resources for the rebuilding of the temple. With the tablet located, work continued, and the temple was rebuilt. However, one must ask, if Cyrus truly felt commanded by Yahweh to rebuild this temple and if he felt that the lands he had conquered had been given to him by Yahweh, why did he not practice only the religion of the Jews, and further, why was so important a decree as this lost among the archives prior to Darius' reign?

The answer to these questions lies in a comparison of Biblical passages with actual cuneiform texts. These texts can verify historically the events of the Old Testament, but they definitely clash in terms of the motivations behind the events.

"Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates...I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: That they may know from the rising of the sun...I am the Lord, and there is none else."
(Isaiah 45: 1-6)

The Cyrus cylinder which records Cyrus' victories and his entry into Babylon differs from this Biblical account. He does not mention Yahweh in his inscription, rather, he states that he was led into Babylon to deliver the people with the mandate and guidance of the Babylonian god Marduk who walked by his side "like a true friend". According to the cuneiform, Marduk was angry with the Babylonian king Nabonidus because he was something of an absentee monarch and had let many of the temples and religious buildings fall into disrepair. Cyrus was the liberator, the Moses of the Babylonian people in their own homeland. Cyrus also states in his cylinder,

When I entered Babylon in peace, with joy and gladness I founded the seat of dominion in the palace of the princes.⁴

This entry into Babylon is confirmed by Jeremiah who wrote,

The mighty men of Babylon have forborne to fight, they have remained in their hold...to show the king of Babylon that his city is taken on every quarter.⁵

⁴Joseph Horner, Daniel, Darius the Median, Cyrus the Great, (Pittsburgh, PA, 1901): 62.

⁵Horner, 62.

Darius I/Behistun

The existence of records from the Persian period is credited mostly to Darius I. Unfortunately, while he did display a passion for written records, he also made heavy use of propaganda. "Kings may have been illiterate (with the exception of Shulgi and Ashurbanipal), but they were well aware of the propaganda value of creating a permanent record of their exploits."⁶ One reason Darius was adamant that his version of his reign survive through history may be the seemingly clandestine methods by which, according to existing records, he came to power.

Cyrus the Great had a son and heir named Cambyses who succeeded to the Persian throne in 530 BCE on the death of his father. By 528 BCE, he had completed preparations to invade Egypt and launched its conquest. In his absence, his brother Smerdes attempted to usurp the throne. As Cambyses raced home from Egypt to crush the rebellion in 522 BCE, he was killed in Damascus while in the same year his brother Smerdes was killed by seven conspirators of which Darius was apparently one. However, Darius' role in the conspiracy seems now to have been rather small, in spite of the fact that he claims credit for crushing the rebellion and earning the kingship of Persia. This level of propaganda characterizes Darius accounts of his activities.

King Darius' greatest achievement for his own legacy is surely the enormous inscription carved into the cliff at Behistun. This

⁶Christopher Walker, Cuneiform, (British Museum, 1987): 28.

great carving was begun by Darius in 520 BC in the Elamite cuneiform language which was used by the Persians as an official language. The depiction is of Darius, at a seemingly life-size five feet eight inches tall, flanked by two subjects, while in front of him stand eight kings roped together in a chain representing eight lands conquered by Persia.

In all the inscription lists twenty-two lands which were subject to the Persian Empire. The beginning of the inscription is a fine example of "Darius the Mede"'s distortion of the record as he lists his name and his father's while then claiming the ancestral lineage of Cyrus the Achaemenian, a lineage he had supposedly helped to remove from the throne.

"I am Darius, the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of Persia, the King of the Provinces, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenian; of Arsames the father was Ariaramnes."

"For all his protestations in his royal inscriptions Darius did not have a bias in favour of telling the truth, and the genealogy he does give verges on the incredible."⁷

Shortly after the completion of the Elamite rendition in 520 BCE, the same text was carved on the mountainside in Akkadian which was the common language of Babylonia and Assyria. Finally, in 519 BCE Darius had the text revised, amending the Elamite to 263 lines and the Akkadian to a total of 112 lines, adding a ninth king to the rope chain and carving the text a third time in 414 lines of

⁷Cook, 9.

the Old Persian script. It is almost surprising, in spite of the difficulty of carving the relief, that Darius did not depict several more members in his 'chain gang'. He had achieved the throne by crushing many less organized rebellions and dealt with many more such insurrections throughout his reign.

It is believed that the Old Persian cuneiform was not evolved directly from the contemporary Babylonian and Late-Assyrian forms or from the Elamite, but that it was invented by the order of King Darius I to give him a distinctly different, but equally versatile way of recording events of his reign as neighboring kings had done. There is doubt as to whether the script existed before Darius, but again he states in his narrative that he invented the script to please the deity Ahuramazda who hovers over his head in the carving and to whom his hand is raised.

To preserve this tribute at Behistun, Darius then ordered that the stone be smoothed around the relief, a successful attempt to prevent later generations and rulers from defacing his legacy. Further, Darius distributed copies of the inscription to all the Persian provinces in appropriate languages. Copies have been discovered in Akkadian and Aramaic.⁸ Many other royal inscriptions have been found in the same tri-lingual fashion as Behistun with the sometime addition of Aramaic and Hieroglyphs.

Biblically, Darius is the king whom Daniel serves when he is thrown to the lions. This arrogant, brash Persian monarch is

⁸Cook, 19.

horribly upset when he is tricked into signing a decree that condemns Daniel to the lions.

While it may be believable that Darius was saddened by the treachery that led his friend into peril, it seems tremendously incredible that Darius would have made a decree such as is recorded,

I make a decree, That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and steadfast forever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.
(Daniel 6:26)

Decipherment

Decipherment began in earnest in the mid-1700's at Persepolis with the recognition of proper nouns and common verbs. Specifically, five distinct ideograms were recognized for king, country, earth, god, and the name of the Persian deity Ahuramazda.⁹ The Old Persian inscriptions displayed a seemingly cryptic form of symbolic language with 42 recognizable characters--an alphabet. It is theorized that the alphabetic nature of the Persian text is attributable to the influence of Aramaic. The language also made use of very convenient word separation symbols. The script was found on very few clay tablets at that time, but it was widely discovered on monuments and depictions of battles.

It was later realized that this was the most developed cuneiform that would be discovered, because it represented the latest period of its use.

⁹Walker, 46.

In 1837 Sir Henry Rawlinson began tackling the seemingly impossible task of deciphering the cuneiform inscription at Behistun. The rock face measures eighteen feet by ten feet and hovers 340 feet above the springs and the village below. The name Behistun was derived by Rawlinson from the name Bisutun, meaning without columns, which characterized the village at the base of the cliff.¹⁰ The inscription was nearly unreachable by design, so that the copying of the carving was a perilous but tremendously worthwhile expedition. "Apart from the adventure and difficulty involved in gaining a near enough approach to the all but inaccessible reliefs and inscriptions to copy them, the results deriving from the interpretation of the inscriptions have been momentous, transcending probably in ultimate importance even the discovery of the Rosetta Stone."¹¹

The work of Grotefend at Persepolis had deciphered 13 of the 42 symbols in the Old Persian "alphabet" through his recognition of the ideograms mentioned earlier and the identification of Darius, Xerxes and Hystaspes.¹² In the 1840's with the work of Rawlinson at Behistun, the rest of the language was further deciphered through comparisons of the facts of Darius' life as related by Greek writers with the autobiographical account on the cliff. From these 42 signs, decipherment could proceed into the

¹⁰Cook, 67.

¹¹A.J. Arberry, The Legacy of Persia, (Oxford, 1953): 19.

¹²Arberry, 20.

131 signs of the Elamite language and the several hundred from the Babylonian period.

II. Babylon/Assyria

The next step forward for archaeology and backward in time was the uncovering of Babylonian and Assyrian cuneiform. It is difficult to state precisely when the Babylonian and Assyrian periods (which were largely contemporaneous) actually began. Many scholars choose to begin in the eighteenth century BCE when Hammurabi, the sixth king of his dynasty, began the Babylonian Empire. This is a fair division since the beginning of Hammurabi's reign was a sort of break from the past. It was the end of Sumerian culture as it had been known in the region for over 1500 years.

However, the ambiguity remains because it was not a significant break with the Akkadian culture. Undoubtedly, the best-known Babylonian document to historical scholars is the Law Code of Hammurabi, but the language inscribed on this stele is really not very far removed from its predecessor, late-Akkadian. For this reason, this period is widely referred to as the Old Babylonian Period, with truly distinctive Babylonian being recognized from about 1550 (the Kassite dynasty) through the Chaldean dynasty and King Nabonidus 1000 years later.

Additionally, Assyrian documents are recognized as far back as the Old Assyrian period (the nineteenth century BCE), but the best-known kings and documents, i.e., Ashurbanipal with his

splendid palace reliefs and Sennachereib with his famous prism found at Nineveh, are from the much later Neo-Assyrian period, 883-627 BCE.

The Babylonian tablets were found in much larger quantities than the Persian. The Babylonian/Assyrian monarchs kept libraries and archives of tablets, the unearthing of which began extensively in the early 1800's. In 1811 Claudius James Rich mapped the ruins of the Babylonian region under the order of the East India Company. In 1820 Rich sketched the ruins of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh near modern-day Mosul. He excavated there and found many inscriptions including the cylinders of Nebuchadnezzar and Sennachereib which were immediately sent to Grotefend for decipherment. The language of this time period was found to contain numerous characters and a lack of word separation which differed from the Old Persian and created many difficulties in translation.

Old Babylon/Hammurabi

The Babylonian/Assyrian period should be divided into three segments which correspond to political dominance in the region: Old Babylonian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian. The Old Babylonian period takes its primary importance from the king Hammurabi (1728-1676 BCE).

At the time of Hammurabi's rule, the leading god was Marduk. Marduk ruled the nation with the king as his representative on Earth. Everyone else was a servant in the great monolithic

society. Under Hammurabi's reign, Babylon was greatly expanded because it was relatively unchallenged politically. Assyria was emerging as a power in the north as was Elam in the east, but neither had developed to the point of being an overwhelming threat.

After thirty years in power, Hammurabi began conquests of surrounding city-states and continued to keep Assyria in check. He listed the names of the defeated states in the prologue of his Law Code stele in order of their religious importance beginning with Nippur (the former Akkadian capital) and Eridu and ending with Ashur and Nineveh.¹³ In all he listed twenty-four cities, along with their gods and temples, and created to the delight of modern historians a great atlas of the Babylonian region.

With regional dominance established, Hammurabi was free to turn his attention to more domestic matters. The result of his domestic focus was the famous Law Code of Hammurabi which gave the king a place in history as more than a military general and leader. He is viewed as an enlightened and revolutionary thinker and pioneer.

The black diorite stele containing the code was discovered by Jean Vincent Scheil in 1901 at Susa, the ancient capital of Elam.¹⁴ It stands over seven feet tall and contains approximately 300 cuneiform paragraphs of legal texts dealing with society, domestic issues, and morality. Hammurabi was a thorough ruler who was

¹³James Wellard, Babylon, (New York, 1972): 118.

¹⁴Wellard, 119.

concerned and involved in even the smallest details of his subjects' lives as is evidenced by the intricate detail and completeness of the laws. He softened some of the penalties of the traditional law, but essentially adhered to a philosophy of 'an eye for an eye'.

Unlike many kings of the time period, he did not seek to maintain his power based solely on a divine right or by military oppression. Hammurabi sought to preserve his dynasty by establishing a justice system that would inspire loyalty from his subjects. He states in the prologue to the code that he was commanded by the god Marduk to establish justice in the land.

The code of laws included sections on administering the justice, marriage, family relations, property governance, slave purchases, and social classes. Women were not given high social status, in fact they were considered property, but they were treated humanely. They were granted some protection if they were deserted or taken seriously ill.

One of the most important aspects of this great cuneiform record from Old Babylon is that it provides modern scholars with a fairly detailed view of the daily life of the Mesopotamian people. The code recognized three social classes. The first, awellum, was the upper class. It consisted primarily of officers, kings, administrators, and priests. The second class, mushkenum, was the middle class, which consisted mainly of merchants, farmers, and craftsmen. The third and lowest social class, wardum, was made up of slaves and women. People in this class had no rights except

those allowed by their masters.¹⁵

The laws in this code were certainly the fairest ever conceived in the Mesopotamian region, but they were very definitely weighted in favor of the upper class. In fairness, it must be noted that if a member of the upper class were actually convicted of a crime, the penalty was proportionally more severe than that administered to a member of a lower class. Also, the upper class paid more for community services on a day to day basis. The system had a socialistic aspect in that sense. An example of the general bias of the law:

"summa esmet awilum istebir esmetu isebbiru" - If he breaks the bone of another man, they will break his bone.

"summa in muskenim uhtappid u lu esmet muskenim istebir 1 mana kaspam isaqqal" - If he destroys the eye of a subordinate or breaks the bone of a subordinate, he shall pay one mina of silver.¹⁶

Slaves theoretically had the right to challenge their masters in court in order to buy their freedom and establish a business, thereby creating a place for themselves in the middle class. However, this was a very unlikely occurrence because most members of the lowest class were members of other ethnic groups which had been taken as prisoners of war.

In general, life in Old Babylon, according to Hammurabi's written record, was devoted to the fulfillment of physical and material desires. A man had one wife and as many concubines as he could afford. The gods were viewed as having a physical form and

¹⁵Wellard, 129, 30.

¹⁶Walker, 56.

therefore the ability to eat food and maintain sexual relations freely with the priestess, the temple sisters, or even the priests. The same sexual liberality was viewed as appropriate for men in society.¹⁷

The Law Code of Hammurabi offers an interesting comparative study to the Pentateuch because it is over three centuries older than the laws of Moses. This code and some earlier texts in Mesopotamia have brought to light an origin and development for the genre of laws found in the Old Testament which previously seemed revolutionary in their time period. A primary difference is the patriarchal tone of the Mosaic law. Further, the Hebrew law contains guidelines for ritual and religious behavior while Hammurabi's code, although he is depicted on the stele receiving the law from the Babylonian sun-god Shamash, is still more of a civil law code and somewhat more secular in nature. The Babylonian laws are designed for a more urbane culture as opposed to the rather nomadic society of the Hebrews during Moses' time.

Other Babylonian texts of this period and from the later periods further augment the view of daily life. It is evident that many doctors existed from the number of medical texts that have been found. Many of the remedies relied on omens from the gods and potions which contained quantities of beer.

Large numbers of complex mathematical and astronomical texts have also been found. These included, for example, the record of

¹⁷Wellard, 133.

solar and lunar eclipses as far back as the eighth century BCE. These sciences were derived from earlier Mesopotamian societies. "At a time when Europeans were still living in caves and grottoes and probably could not count beyond the number of their fingers, the Sumerian schoolboy was working on quadratic equations."¹⁸

Clearly, only a small percentage of the population were actually engaged in these scientific pursuits. The society was not unlike our own except for the overriding tone of autocracy. There was no sense of democracy or politics.¹⁹

Assyria

Hammurabi had managed to consolidate and make workable some of the traditions of earlier civilizations; however, on his death, the open-minded society he had created fell into chaos. His son, Samsuiluna (1749-1712 BCE), was not as efficient a ruler as his father had been. Barbarians, many of which were from Elam, were constantly raiding the kingdom and Assyria began its rise to power. Babylon declined in importance as other cultural centers arose in outlying areas.

The history of the period of "Middle Babylon" (1550-c.1100 BCE) is enigmatic at best and is probably better known from regions outside Babylon from the Mari archives, the Hittite civilization, the El-Amarna archives, and the Ugarit archives. In 1595 BCE

¹⁸Wellard, 136.

¹⁹Wellard, 139.

Babylon was conquered by the Hittites who ruled for a very short period before, in approximately 1550 BCE, the Kassites conquered the region. The Second Babylonian Dynasty, sometimes simply called the Kassite Dynasty was established and maintained under several little-known rulers over a 600-year period. The Kassites had been a nomadic people who were more horse breeders and warriors than statesmen.

At this time Babylon began its tenure as essentially a vassal state to the rising star of Assyria. A cuneiform inscription of the early Assyrian king Tukulti-nintura reads,

I defeated his troops and slaughtered his men. In the middle of the battle I personally captured Kashtiliash, the Babylonian king. My feet trod on his royal neck, he was my footstool. I brought him captive and bound before the god Ashur, my lord.²⁰

This warlike period continued between many small factions in the region. When Mesopotamia came once again completely under one dominant power it was that of Assyria. The timespan from c.1000-612 BCE is known as the Neo-Assyrian period. The Hittites had nearly vanished from sight and Egypt was in decline. Assyria stood alone and rose tremendously in power under the rule of its many kings, most notably, Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076) who reached the Mediterranean in his raids of expansion.

This was a time of military conquests and propaganda-filled written battle records. An inscription of Tiglath-pileser, for example, states,

From my accession to the throne to the fifth year of my reign. my hand has conquered in all forty-two countries with their

²⁰Wellard, 140.

kings, from the banks of the lower Zab, the land of the distant mountains, to the banks of the Euphrates, the land of Hattu and the great sea where the sun sets.²¹

The Assyrians had adopted the formidable horse-drawn chariot from the Hittites and had developed advanced military strategies. The utter domination can easily be read in written inscriptions in spite of each king's taints of arrogance.

Tiglath-pileser I - "Lands, mountains, cities and princes I have conquered and brought under my yoke."²²

Shalmaneser III - decreed in 840 BCE that the young enemy women were to be burned alive with their children after they were raped.²³

Sargon II - "With my select bodyguard and indomitable warriors, I advanced like a strong wild ox...Like a young gazelle I ascended the high mountain peaks in pursuit of the enemy."²⁴

The wealth captured in any campaign was taken and stored near Nineveh as the property of the king, god's representative on Earth. The animals and other loot were distributed to the soldiers as payment for their service to the king.

The first notable king of Assyria as a dominant power was Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE). He left many stelae and inscriptions about his military dominance and the tributes he exacted from surrounding lands.

tribute of silver, gold, lead, bronze, vases of bronze, clothing of many colors, linen tunics, a large and a small monkey, ebony and box-wood, sharks' teeth, produce of the sea,

²¹Andre Parrot, Nineveh and the Old Testament, (London, England, 1955): 31.

²²Wellard, 142.

²³Wellard, 143.

²⁴Wellard, 142.

I have received from them and they kissed my feet."²⁵

However, in spite of his successes, he never reached Damascus or Israel.

None of the Assyrian kings during the empire's rise or during its dominance show any great relevance to Biblical studies until Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE). Shalmaneser III desired more than his father had been able to achieve before him. He went to war with a federation of eleven allied kingdoms of which Damascus and Israel, then under King Ahab, were members. In his own words, Shalmaneser defeated the very formidable army soundly.

I caused a deluge to overwhelm them; I piled up their corpses, I strewed the plain with their hosts. By my sword I made their blood flow in the hollows of the land.²⁶

These words are found on an important archaeological discovery which was unearthed at Kalakh. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser depicts the king standing with six Assyrian officials and thirteen vassals, while before him prostrate is most notably King Jehu of Israel. This stele is the first indication that exists in history of Israel's being recognized as an independent state. Shalmaneser states, "Then I took tribute from the Tyrians, the Sidonians, and from Jehu, the descendant of Omri (founder of the house of the northern kingdom of Israel)."²⁷

²⁵Parrot, 31-2.

²⁶Parrot, 33.

²⁷Parrot, 35.

Twenty years later, Shalmaneser's grandson Adadnirari III (805-782 BCE) continued to oppress Israel and take tribute from the house of Omri now ruled over by Joash.

I crushed under my feet the land of Amurru, the countries of Tyre, Sidon, Omri, Edom and Philistia. I laid on them a heavy tribute.²⁸

Interestingly, there is no mention in the Black Obelisk or the accounts of Adadnirari of Judah, nor are any of the tributes which were mentioned and even recorded in administrative and business documents in Assyria ever noted in the Biblical texts.

The reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BCE) did not involve the same omission. During his reign, Ahaz was king of Judah and Menahem, after two murders, succeeded to the throne of Israel. According to the Bible, Menahem was in conflict with the king of Syria and sent a plea for help and a great deal of gold and silver to Tiglath-pileser III who did assist.²⁹ Further, the Biblical account states,

the king of Assyria came against the land: and Menahem gave a thousand talents of silver, that his hand might be with him to confirm the kingdom in his hand. (II Kings 15:19)

In this case the Biblical record is confirmed but not by any kingly inscription. Instead there is an administrative tablet which records the collection of this tribute and many others around the year 738 BCE.³⁰

²⁸Parrot, 38.

²⁹II Kings 16:17,8.

³⁰Parrot, 40.

After Tiglath-pileser's reign his son, Shalmaneser V (727-722 BCE) took the throne. During his reign there exists another discrepancy between the Biblical texts and the cuneiform records with regard to the siege of Samaria.

In the twelfth year of Ahaz the king of Judah began Hoshea the son of Elah to reign in Samaria over Israel nine years... Against him came up Shalmaneser king of Assyria; and Hoshea became his servant and gave him presents...Then the king of Assyria came up throughout all the land and went up to Samaria, and besieged it three years. (II Kings 17:1-3, 5)

According to the text, Shalmaneser V found that Hoshea was conspiring against him with the king of Egypt. In his anger, he conquered Hoshea's capital, Samaria.

The cuneiform texts which were left by Shalmaneser's successor Sargon II (721-705 BCE) were extensive and detailed and clearly stated that it was he who had conquered Samaria. The Biblical text of only five verses then actually covers a period of several years between the time Shalmaneser exacted tribute from Hoshea and the time that Sargon II actually conquered it. In the latter part of this segment, the Bible refers only to the king of Assyria not to Shalmaneser by name.

Sargon II's account is found on a prism which he had inscribed to commemorate his victory. The prism was discovered at Nimrud in 1952 and recounts the taking of 27,280 prisoners and 200 chariots.³¹ In fact, the door frame at the entrance to his palace states,

³¹Parrot, 45.

"Sargon, conqueror of Samaria and of all Israel."³² The conquering and obscuring of the kingdom is detailed in II Kings 17.

Following his conquering of Samaria, the Bible states, the king of Assyria restored the city for his own uses.

And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon and from Cuthah and from Ava and from Hamath and from Sepharvaim and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel. (II Kings 17:24)

This passage is verified by Sargon II,

I rebuilt the town better than it was before and settled therein people from countries which I myself had conquered.³³

It was during the reign of Sargon II that the beginning of an alliance was formed between Egypt and some Palestinian and regional leaders to oppose Assyria. This alliance was dealt with but not crushed by Sargon II who died in battle in Elam, leaving that task to Sennachereib.

Sargon II's greatest legacy was a splendid new palace complex at Dur-Sharrukin, a.k.a. Khorsabad, which was near Nineveh. It is most noted for its stone wall reliefs which, if laid end to end would stretch more than a mile in length.³⁴ The courtyard contained several wooden pillars which were coated in a light layer of bronze. Sargon had planned an entire town which would be built around the palace. The town was never built, but the outer walls

³²Parrot, 45.

³³Parrot, 46.

³⁴Georges Contenau, Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria, (London, England, 1964): 8.

were constructed with a partially paved roadway from the gate to the palace.

Cuneiform texts found in other locations described that buildings as being covered with gold. Very little gold has actually been found in excavation; however, archaeologists have determined that the stone of the roofs were covered in a yellow glaze which would have probably glistened like gold in the sunlight.

The first excavator at the site was Paul Emil Botta in 1843, but he actually did little more than discover the outer wall and got a vague idea of the immensity of the complex. The excavations were continued in 1927 when it was discovered that Botta's plans of the palace were not entirely accurate. The drawings Botta had discovered made the palace seem symmetrical. In fact, it was much more trapezoidal in shape.

Discoveries other than the huge wall reliefs include two great winged bulls which guarded the gates. They appeared to be walking if seen from the side and stood rather stoicly if viewed from the front. Also discovered was a large ziggurat, which still stands to the fourth story, which appears to have been multi-colored. Of significance to cuneiform study are the two huge reliefs of the Sumerian/Akkadian epic hero Gilgamesh about who more later.

The last three kings of the Neo-Assyrian period are of primary importance with regard to cuneiform. The first is Sennachereib (704-681 BCE), the second is Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE), and the third is Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE).

Sennachereib left a tremendous legacy for Biblical scholars to study. His prism, often referred to as the Taylor prism after its translator is of great importance because of its accounting of Sennachereib's military excursions in to Palestine. In 703 BCE there arose a revolt in the region of Palestine against the power of Sennachereib.

The threat came from a coalition effort between the Palestinian forces and the forces of Egypt. Hezekiah was urged to join this alliance, but the prophet Isaiah was firmly against involvement in the plot. He believed that the Assyrian incursion represented the anger of Yahweh being levied against Jerusalem for its evil deeds.³⁵ However, Isaiah also believed that Jerusalem would not fall,

And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward and bear fruit upward.
(II Kings 19:30)

Sennachereib swept through the region and took 46 Palestinian cities according to his record.

The Egyptian army, though formidable could not withstand the Assyrian advance either. Sennachereib met and drove back the Egyptian force at Ekron and proceeded to siege Jerusalem as he had promised in his earlier ultimatum to Hezekiah. Sennachereib's prism recounts the siege and states that Hezekiah "like a caged bird, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city."³⁶ Another brief

³⁵II Kings 19:20-29.

³⁶Bernhard Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, Fourth Edition, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1936): 347.

account was found on a bull in Nineveh where Sennachereib states, "I laid waste the large district of Judah and made the overbearing and proud Hezekiah, its king, bow in submission."³⁷

For the most part the Biblical account agrees with these events. The Egyptian army came as an ally to the defensive forces of Hezekiah,

So Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria warring against Libnah for he had heard that he was departed from Lachish. And when he heard say of Tirhakah of Ethiopia, Behold, he is come out to fight against thee: he sent messengers again unto Hezekiah saying, Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah, king of Judah, saying, 'Let not thy God in whom thou trustest deceive thee', saying, 'Jerusalem shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria'.

(II Kings 19:8-10)

Further, we see Biblically that Hezekiah was not adequate to the task of defending his cities. He fearfully prays to Yahweh,

Lord, bow down thine ear and hear: open. Lord, thine eyes, and see: and hear the words of Sennachereib, which hath sent him to reproach the living God. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have destroyed the nations and their lands...I beseech thee, save thou us out of his hand.

(II Kings 19: 16-19)

and that he responded to Sennachereib's ultimatum with an offer to pay tribute,

I have offended; return from me; that which thou putttest on me will I bear. And the king of Assyria appointed unto Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. (II Kings 18:14)

Indeed, it seem clear that Sennachereib's invasion was thorough and that his blockade was complete with regard to Jerusalem. The question arises then, why did he not destroy

³⁷Parrot, 54.

Jerusalem as he had destroyed so many other cities? The cuneiform records of Assyria offer no accounting for any sudden withdrawal from the region. The tone of the clay records simply indicate that the campaign ended successfully with a large tribute exacted from Hezekiah.

The theories for why Sennachereib are three-fold and cannot be verified by any tablets yet unearthed. First, Sennachereib felt that he had made his point in his siege of Palestine. As long as Hezekiah was paying for the rebellion, why destroy his capital? Additionally, the expenditure for the campaign was costly and time-consuming, and it is possible that Sennachereib was called back to Nineveh to deal with urgent matters of state that had arisen. A second theory is posed by the Greek historian Herodotus who recounts an Egyptian legend that the army of "Sanacharibos" was attacked by swarms of rats which gnawed away pieces of equipment and halted the Assyrian march to Egypt. "It is well-known that rats are the carriers of epidemic diseases, especially plague, and it might well be that both the Biblical narrative and the passage in Herodotus refer to this."³⁸

The Biblical account referred to here is the third possibility.

saith the Lord, for I will defend this city (Jerusalem)...
And it came to pass that night that the Angel of the Lord went
out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred
fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the
morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. So Sennachereib,
King of Assyria departed, and went and returned and dwelt at
Nineveh.
(II Kings 19:33-36)

³⁸Parrot, 62.

Regardless of which account one believes, the fact is that Jerusalem was not destroyed and the cuneiform records offer no reason why. Interestingly, they also do not offer any account of a plague which surely would have been carried back to Nineveh by the army had they been so infected.

In 681 BCE Sennachereib was murdered, as he worshiped in a temple, by his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer who escaped then to Armenia.³⁹ The next king of Assyria was another of Sennachereib's sons, Esarhaddon(680-669 BCE). This king was clearly important for primarily military reasons. It was Esarhaddon who launched a successful campaign against Egypt. His father had successfully battled with Egypt and kept its power in check, but it was Esarhaddon who thoroughly reduced Egypt to a vassal which is how it remained until the Assyrian army was evicted by the pharaoh Psammetichus in 664 BCE. After his conquest there, his only true enemy was Elam to the east, and in 646 BCE, he soundly crushed that threat as well.

Esarhaddon made a complete written record of the huge empire he established. The conquests were recorded on a black obelisk which is far less significant biblically than his father's prism had been, but is still very informative historically.

The stele was found at Zinjirli in Northern Syria and depicts Esarhaddon pouring a libation to the several deities while the

³⁹II Kings 19:37.

defeated Egyptian pharaoh Tirhakah is prostrate before him. The stele also lists twenty-two kings who had submitted to his power, including the then king of Judah, Manasseh. Here again, the Biblical accounts differ from the cuneiform.

Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon.
(II Chronicles 33:11)

Manasseh is described in the Biblical texts as a king who caused the people to err. He did not follow the edicts of Yahweh and in fact set up an idol in the temple.⁴⁰ According to Chronicles, the trials of being led to Babylon reformed Manasseh's character such that he cried out to Yahweh. "Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God."⁴¹

Interestingly, there is no mention of this event in the annals of Esarhaddon. His record states that several kings were summoned to Nineveh without even listing their names. It hardly seems credible that a king who clearly carried the Assyrian royal arrogance could record, "Abdimilkutte (king of Sidon) its king who fled...I caught like a fish...and cut off his head."⁴² and yet never mention leading the king of Judah away from his city in chains!

Esarhaddon was stricken with a sudden illness on a Palestinian campaign and died. His younger son, Ashurbanipal, became the next unique leader of Assyria. Esarhaddon had planned a new,

⁴⁰II Chronicles 33:7.

⁴¹II Chronicles 33:14.

⁴²Parrot, 64.

magnificent palace at Nineveh from which his son ruled. He waged many military conquests to maintain the size and power of the empire. Perhaps the most notable conquest of Ashurbanipal was against his elder brother who had inherited the throne of Babylon, still a vassal state, and revolted against Assyria. The brother died in his burning palace under the might of Ashurbanipal's army.

Ashurbanipal is not best remembered by historians as a military leader. He was unique because he took the written documents and records of his time beyond the realm of warfare. He sent people to ancient cities which had been destroyed in Akkad and Sumer to retrieve texts and documents from the rubble. He had these translated (Ashurbanipal was a literate king) into Assyrian and amassed the greatest library ever known in the region. His grandfather, Sennachereib, had amassed some tablets, but nothing on the order of Ashurbanipal's library.

I wrote on tablets, both wrote and read them, and when I had finished with them, I placed them in my library so that I can peruse them for myself or read them aloud (to my guests).⁴³

The Nineveh library contained tens of thousands of texts. It was discovered in 1845 by an archaeological expedition led by Austen Henry Layard. Approximately 30,000 were unscathed when Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BCE. In fact, it was the utter destruction and obscuring of Nineveh which preserved the record of its existence. The flames of the burning city baked many of the clay tablets to a hardness which would enable them to survive

⁴³Wellard, 149.

through the centuries.

Most notably, it was in the Nineveh library that the Babylonian Creation and Flood stories were unearthed. These tablets were among those shipped to the British Museum and translated by George Smith in 1872. The details of the great deluge and its singular survivor, Utnapishtim, contained on these tablets so closely matched the details of the corresponding Biblical account of Noah, that the comparison could not be ignored. The irrefutable proof that the Biblical accounts of the Creation and the Great Flood were not without cultural precedent was a discovery that altered the thinking of theologians forever. The discovery forces the intellectual community away from a literal interpretation of the Biblical texts and rightly urges the consideration of the Biblical texts of the Old Testament within a legitimate historical context.

Neo-Babylon

After Ashurbanipal's death, two of his sons ruled in succession: Ashur-etil-ilani and then four years later Sin-shar-ish-kun. Neither monarch is significant in the history of the region. Assyria was in decline and Nabopolassar (625-605 BCE) founded a new dynasty, the Chaldean, in Babylon.

Nabopolassar began searching for an ally which would help overthrow Assyria and end Babylon's tenure as a vassal state. He found that ally in Media. The Medes were ready to revolt, as they often were, and Nabopolassar allied himself with the Median king

Cyaxxes. The two waged war along with the Scythians against Assyria and its newfound ally Egypt. After four years of battles in the region Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BCE, and the former territories of Assyria were divided between Media and Babylon. The new period of Babylonian dominance had begun. The historical record was deciphered in a cuneiform tablet from Mari in 1923 and corresponds with the Biblical text,

And he will stretch out his hand to the North and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a desolation and dry like a wilderness.
(Zephaniah 2:13)

Nabopolassar was a skilled politician who broke the century-long bond which had held Babylon in place; however, the only territory he added to Babylon were the spoils of the war with Assyria, the majority of which had actually been fought by the Medes.

Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BCE) resumed the age-old pattern of military conquest and expansion. However, he did not renew the tradition with regard to cuneiform inscriptions. The three primary Neo-Babylonian kings left many inscriptions, but they did not detail battles and conquests. They centered instead on domestic issues and matters pertaining to the restoration of the buildings, lands, and temples of Babylon and its increasing territories.

Nebuchadnezzar restored and enlarged his father's palace and raised the terraced platform, creating the famous Hanging Gardens at Babylon. He restored and rebuilt many temples. He paved the main street of Babylon and placed on it the well-known Ishtar gate

which beautifully depicted bulls and dragons in reliefs and mosaics of enamel.

Nebuchadnezzar also strengthened the fortification of the city itself. He extended and reinforced the double-wall line around the city and built new citadels along the perimeter.

In addition to his building activities, Nebuchadnezzar did conduct numerous military campaigns. Most notably for Biblical scholars, of course, is the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587 BCE, and the leading of the Jewish people into a period of exile in Babylon. The excursion is chronicled best in the Biblical text of Jeremiah,

In the ninth year of Zedekiah the king of Judah, in the tenth month, came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army against Jerusalem, and they besieged it..the city was broken up...Then Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard carried away captive into Babylon the remnant of the people that remained in the city. (Jeremiah 39:1-2, 9)

Nebuchadnezzar also has a substantial role in the book of Daniel. Interestingly, this king has visions which only Daniel is able to interpret for him. At one point Nebuchadnezzar has a vision that his mighty kingdom is taken from him. The man responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem ends this account in an incredible manner,

At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honor and brightness returned unto me...Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgement: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase. (Daniel 4:36,7)

There is no parallel in cuneiform literature for this account of Daniel, just as his later dealings with Belshazzar are not

verifiable. However, it is noteworthy that Daniel chapter 5 calls Belshazzar the son of Nebuchadnezzar when he is in fact not at all related to the famous king.

Nebuchadnezzar was followed on the throne by his son Amel-Marduk (562-559 BCE). This monarch was no comparison to the other kings of this dynasty. He was denounced by the priests in Babylon as being 'an unworthy successor to his father and restrained by neither law nor decency.'⁴⁴ These priests plotted his murder and replaced him on the throne with the Babylonian general Nergal-shar-usur or Neriglissar (559-556 BCE) who had been a party to the siege of Jerusalem.⁴⁵

This king reigned for only three years and was succeeded by his son who reigned only nine months. Neither is the subject of inscriptions or is really of any importance except that their incompetence led to the installation of the third significant king of the Chaldean period, Nabonidus (555-539 BCE).

Nabonidus was not a king who was particularly concerned with matters of state. He became heavily interested in the restoration of the temples of the Sumerian god Sin, the air god, and the shrine of the Mother Goddess, Ki⁴⁶ in his hometown Harran. Nabonidus left the political issues to be handled by his son Belshazzar, who is often mentioned in Biblical texts, and resided in a desert oasis

⁴⁴Wellard, 181.

⁴⁵Jeremiah 39:13.

⁴⁶Ki was more commonly known by Ninmah, Ninurta, or Ninhursag.

far outside the city.

Nabonidus left an inscribed stele which told of his command to rebuild the temples of Harran. It also tells that those who had destroyed the temple of Sin in Harran, called the Umman-Manda were mighty, but that Cyrus had vanquished them.

That house which thou hast commanded to build, the Umman-Manda folk have encompassed it, and their forces are strong. But Merodach spake unto me: The Umman-Manda which thou hast mentioned, they, their country, and their kings that marched with them, are no more...Cyrus, the king of Anzan, his young servant, with his few troops routed the numerous Umman-Manda folk.⁴⁷

This depiction demonstrates well that Cyrus of Anzan, also king of Persia, was increasing in power. It was not long after that Cyrus marched so peacefully into the city of the absentee monarch and began the great Persian Empire. Nabonidus had neglected the temples of the Babylonian gods, most notably Marduk, and his people were glad to be rid of him when Cyrus arrived and ended the Chaldean dynasty and the Babylonian empire.

Decipherment of Babylonian/Assyrian cuneiform was stifled by the great variety of the symbols (over 600 were then in use) until 1850, when an Irish archaeologist named John Hincks read a paper to the British Association declaring that the Assyrian characters were not alphabetic, but syllabic.⁴⁸ This declaration had been made possible by the studying of the recent discoveries of Sargon's

⁴⁷Horner, 46.

⁴⁸A.H. Sayce, The Archaeology of the Cuneiform Inscriptions, (Chicago, 1977): 19.

palace at Khorsabad (1840's).

The texts discovered here shed new light on the origin and development of the Babylonian texts which allowed them to be classified. The later Babylonian symbols, while still very different from Persian symbols, were partially decipherable through the recognizing of certain Persian documents as translations of Assyrian and Babylonian texts. It became possible to develop a core of words with a known translation. At this point another man named Henry Rawlinson, who had worked on decipherment at Behistun, joined with Hincks and concluded that the Assyrian language was so odd because it had developed from Akkadian which had a pictographic origin; however, that origin had yet to be uncovered.

The first breakthrough in the discovery of Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform came on January 17, 1869 when Jules Oppert, a great analyst and decipherer, translated a text which listed a man's title as the "King of Sumer and Akkad". This raised the obvious question, "where was Sumer?" since it had not yet been discovered.

It was at this point (the late nineteenth and very early twentieth century) that archaeologists posed and debated the 'Sumerian question'. The bilingual texts from Khorsabad and in fact some from Nineveh showed Sumerian alongside Akkadian or Babylonian. The excavations at ancient Lagash, beginning in 1877, had unearthed similar texts, as well as statues of the very sedate king Gudea and the famous Stele of the Vultures among others. The problem which faced archaeologists was the apparently non-semitic

nature of the Sumerian script. To further confuse the issue, the Sumerian contained certain Semitic idioms and 'loan words' which were obviously out of place.

We now know that Sumerian preceded these Semitic languages and are struggling to unravel the difficulties which were faced by the assimilation of a non-Semitic language and culture into the Semitic Akkadian and later Assyrian/Babylonian. In an effort to better understand these difficulties, it is valuable to review the struggle faced by scholars at this time period as they wrestled with the 'Sumerian Question'.

Dr. Rudolf Brunnow, who published Classified List, a major work in Babylonian decipherment, is criticized by Dr. Morris Jastrow as holding to the theory that "all the so-called bilingual texts revert to a Babylonian origin, and that the so-called 'Sumerian' version is in all cases a translation from the Babylonian."⁴⁹ One of the primary reasons for this belief is that the Mesopotamian culture "is so thoroughly Semitic...at the earliest period to which it can be traced back, as to leave no room for any possible non-Semitic elements."⁵⁰

The question then is why should any texts be written in Sumerian at all? The initial theories gave Sumerian a cryptographic origin. The scribes and priests of the Babylonian period were attempting to foster secrecy through the use of this

⁴⁹Jastrow, 97.

⁵⁰Jastrow, 100.

encoded writing in an effort to maintain a certain level of supremacy and preserve the sacred nature of some documents. In earlier times, "scribes were highly trained bureaucrats and specialists, who must have wielded a great deal of power as the majority of the population was illiterate."⁵¹ As an increasing number of the population, and perhaps even some monarchs, gained literacy, perhaps the scribes and priests felt threatened enough to invent a language for sacred documents which only they themselves could read.

Jastrow discounts this theory, "if they were Semites, intent on writing Sumerian as a sacred script distinct from the Babylonian spoken and written by them for general purposes, they would hardly have profaned the sacred character of Sumerian by introducing Semitic words and Semitic constructions."⁵² The introduction of the Semitic elements would have compromised the secrecy of the cryptographic language the priests had supposedly invented.

Another theory, this one posed by Brunnow, suggested that a group of non-Semitic marauders had conquered and briefly controlled the Euphratean region, introducing a non-Semitic element to the region and the language. Jastrow, and indeed probably others, had difficulty with this theory as well. It seems ludicrous to think that such an invasion could have taken place in a time when records of battle were being kept without any mention being made in the

⁵¹Harriet Crawford, Sumer and the Sumerians, (Cambridge, 1991): 153.

⁵²Jastrow, 104.

texts. While it is true that the conquerors invariably write the history to their own advantage, the continuation of the development of Semitic cultures in the region would seem to suggest a reconquering of the region which could not have escaped mention. Further, as Jastrow stated, "the one thing that under such circumstances would not have been preserved would have been the 'Sumerian' language, since it would neither have been hallowed by any historical or religious traditions, nor associated with anything that would have appealed to the Semites."⁵³

While Jastrow and others in his camp continued to argue and maintain that Sumerian was its own linguistic entity, they were stopped by the fact that Sumerian had not been discovered in an unadulterated form. Jastrow's advice at the time (1906) was sound, "If we have not yet found texts reverting to a time when 'pure' Sumerian was written...then it is surely more rational to wait until we get copious specimens of 'pure' Sumerian before we adopt the hypothesis of the Sumerologists."⁵⁴ Further, J.D. Prince, who was on the cutting edge of Sumerian linguistics at the time stated, "Sumerian as we know it up to the present time stands alone...nor is it possible to connect Sumerian as yet with any language by dint of probably accidental verbal similarities."⁵⁵

⁵³Jastrow, 101.

⁵⁴Jastrow, 104.

⁵⁵J.D. Prince, "Materials for a Sumerian Lexicon, with a Grammatical Introduction," Asstriologische Bibliothek, XIX (Germany): viii.

III. Sumer/Akkad

The copious specimens which Jastrow wanted were discovered two decades later. Inspired by Sir Leonard Wooley's excavations at Ur in the 1920's, William Kennett Loftus and others began excavations at Uruk in modern-day Southern Iraq. They discovered a site which held eighteen habitation levels spanning almost 4000 years. In addition, Uruk had, at the beginning of the third millennium BCE, been a cultural center in the Euphratean region. The Biblical texts remember Uruk (Erech),

And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech,
and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.
(Genesis 10:10)

The land of Shinar could easily be the land of Shumer, or Sumer as it has become commonly known. There are additional theories which pose that Shem, the son of the Biblical Noah, has a name derived from the land of Sumer as well, and is perhaps the figurative father of that region.

The rise of Uruk as an urban center began around 3500 BCE when the neighboring city of Ubad was gaining prominence. Levels I, II, and III of Uruk are identified as existing during the Ubad period. The focus for a study of cuneiform must be Uruk Levels IV and V primarily. It is at Level IV that the quantities of early cuneiform tablets were discovered.

In the neighboring plateaus of modern-day Iran, there was another region where language was beginning--Elam. The language known as Proto-Elamite appeared in the Elam region and its center

Susa almost as early as the genesis of cuneiform at Uruk IV.⁵⁶ Still, the language of Uruk has remained the primary focus of study for two reasons. First, the Elamite linear script style has not been completely decipherable, in spite of the fact that it seems to have developed from pictographs very similar to those at Uruk. Second, the linear Elamite script was short-lived even in the Iranian sites, which began during the early Akkadian period to use Sumerian and Akkadian linguistic forms on monuments and commemorative inscriptions. This conversion was in spite of the efforts of the Elamite conqueror, Puzur-Inshushinak, to revitalize the Proto-Elamite language in Susa.⁵⁷

It is still unclear what connections the Elamite/Susa culture had with the Sumerian. Some scholars maintain that the adoption of the Uruk language was the result of the city's regional prominence in a trade relationship. Others maintain that elements of the Iranian culture were brought into the region by settlers or nomads who descended into the valley from the plateaus and melded peacefully into the existing culture. Whatever the reality of the cultures, "the exact relationship between these two very early forms of cuneiform remains to be worked out."⁵⁸

It is equally unclear what relationship must have existed between the Mesopotamian region and the Syrian area--Tell Brak and

⁵⁶Walker, 41.

⁵⁷Walker, 41.

⁵⁸Crawford, 155.

Habuba Kabira. "Two tablets from Tell Brak, found in 1984, depict a goat and a sheep, each accompanied by the number 10. They are quite as primitive as anything from Uruk; if anything they may even be earlier, since they show the whole of the animals, whereas pictures on the earliest tablets from Uruk show only the heads of animals."⁵⁹ Since Christopher Walker's book, quoted here, is among the most recent of sources on cuneiform, it would seem that the next task of researchers is to establish what the relationship was between Syria, Iran, and Iraq circa 3000 BCE. Were they influential to one another or were they like Jericho, Jarmo, and Catal Huyuk where agriculture seemed to rise independently in three separate sites? The script similarities would seem to suggest a relationship that has simply not yet been fully uncovered.

In general, writing methods were developed as a result of an increase in productivity at Uruk. The surplus of agricultural goods led to trade with neighboring communities and gave rise to a need for a system of keeping records of transactions. While Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform texts have gone beyond simple business transactions and deal also with mathematical and astronomical topics for instance, the early texts discovered at Uruk were 85% economic and 15% lexical.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Walker, 7.

⁶⁰Walker, 11.


The earliest tablets are dated in the early Neo-lithic period. They were made with a pointed tool, usually a reed stylus, on damp clay and were mere pictographs--structural representations of complete objects or animals which were involved in the transaction. The tools used were usually reeds which were slanted to a sharp edge. A perpendicular imprint would be a point, while an imprint on a slant would form a wedge shape--hence the name cuneiform from the Latin word cuneus meaning wedge.


Through a lack of meticulous attention to detail and simply for convenience, the pictographs became smaller and less detailed. In time, the symbols were not precise likenesses of objects, but rather representational symbols which were ultimately standardized. This development made it possible for lexical texts to be written and for the training of scribes to begin.






Many early texts are bullae, or clay balls, or sealed envelopes which needed to arrive undamaged with the merchandise to maintain the security of the transaction and the integrity of the messenger. The contents of the ball were small shaped objects which represented the merchandise. A sealed envelope would contain an inventory of the goods being traded.

The earliest cuneiform texts had all elements of a sentence or thought grouped randomly in a box on the tablet. These writings show little or no evidence of a grammatical system, which obviously creates difficulties for modern interpretations. It is conceivable that the Sumerians found this style equally vague, since it soon developed into a syllabic system which made use of phonetics and

grammar.

As the system became more syllabic, the symbol for an object would take on the phonetic value of the name of that object. The pictographic symbol for barley for instance came to represent the symbol se  (pronounced 'sheh'), because the word for barley was se.

Another great difficulty encountered in Sumerian cuneiform was its extensive use of polyphony, giving one sign several values, and homophony, using several signs to represent the same sound.⁶¹ For instance, the early-Akkadian sign an  also bears the meaning DINGIR, meaning deity. This sign appears in words with its syllabic value, but also precedes the names of deities and sometimes kings.

Each syllabic representation consists transliterally of a consonant and a vowel, making it possible to form closed syllables. It is common for the exact pronunciation of one syllable in a word to be influenced by the other. For example, the sign  can have the phonetic values ab, or ap. In the word  , ap-
tu (window), it is transliterated normally as ap. In the word 
, ab-be (fathers), it mirrors the second syllable's starting consonant and is transliterated as ab.

Following the Uruk period the nearby site of Jemdet Nasr gained prominence, but the primary focus of cuneiform stayed in Uruk which was still a vital force in the region. Uruk rose again

⁶¹Walker, 12.

to prominence during the Dynastic period.

The Dynastic period of Mesopotamia incorporates three periods or regional dominance. The first was in Kish, the second in Uruk, and the third in Ur.

The site of Kish is relevant to the study of cuneiform for a few reasons. First, it was to Kish that the rite of kingship descended from the gods after the deluge that destroyed most of mankind in the Biblically-parallel flood saga of the Gilgamesh epic. The descending of the rite is also recorded in the famous Sumerian King List (now at the British Museum) which states that Enmerkar, the son of the Sumerian sun-god Utu built Uruk. Enmerkar's grandson who ruled over Uruk was Dumuzi (Tammuz) who was the shepherd god and the "dying" god mentioned in Biblical texts,

Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. (Ezekiel 8:14)

Following Dumuzi in the Uruk dynasty is Gilgamesh, the subject of the famous epic. It is during his reign and Uruk's rise that the last king of Kish gain relevance in cuneiform texts.

Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish is one of four pieces of the Gilgamesh epic. This section of the saga describes the continuing state of hostility and struggle between the city-states in the region. Agga sent an ultimatum to Gilgamesh ordering him to submit to the legions of Kish. Gilgamesh in reply convenes the elders of Uruk and asks their permission to declare war on Kish. They debate and refuse the request which prompts Gilgamesh to convene a council of the younger men in the city who declare war for independence.

These debates are noted by the renowned Sumerian scholar Dr. Samuel Noah Kramer as "the convening of man's first political assembly, a 'bicameral congress' which purportedly took place almost five thousand years ago."⁶²

As the saga continues, Agga sieges Uruk and would easily have crushed the defiant city. He is impressed, however, by the site of Gilgamesh eventually coming out to fight in person. He yields to Gilgamesh's plea and releases the city for a tribute. It is now that Gilgamesh begins his rise to the status of epic hero.

Agga has set you free for the sake of Kish,
Before Utu, he has returned you the favor of former days,
Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab,
Your praise is good. (Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish)

Two other sections of the epic are Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven and Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World. These sections detail Gilgamesh's search for immortality and some of his journeys with Enkidu, who in the latter section, defies Gilgamesh's warning and descends into the Nether World. He is trapped in its depths, but later visits Gilgamesh as a spirit and is persuaded to tell what he has seen in the Nether World.

It is theorized by some scholars that the Gilgamesh epic was used as a source by the author of Ecclesiastes. Both pieces of literature are concerned with the search for immortality, but the solution in each case is different. "Gilgamesh's solution to mortality, to be satisfied with the buildings and accomplishments

⁶²Samuel Noah Kramer, The Sumerians, (Chicago, IL, 1963): 186.

one leaves behind, is rejected."⁶³ That rejection in Ecclesiastes is fairly blatant,

I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees...Then I looked on all the works my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6, 11)

however, both texts encourage the reader to overcome mortality by not worrying about it and making the most of what one has each day.

Aside from the similarity of the problem discussed in each work, there are two other points which support the theory of Gilgamesh as a source for the book. One is that the book of Ecclesiastes is almost totally secular in nature. It contains no reference whatsoever to Israel's covenant or sacred history.⁶⁴ The other is a remarkable similarity in some of the passages. For example, One portion of Gilgamesh reads,

Two men will not die; the towed boat will not sink,
A towrope of three strands cannot be cut.
(Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living)

An undeniably parallel Biblical passage,

Two are better than one...If they fall, one will lift up
his fellow...A threefold cord is not quickly broken.
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

The most relevant section of the Gilgamesh epic is undoubtedly Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living which deals with the same

⁶³William Hallo, Bruce Jones, and Gerald Mattingly, The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Inscriptions, (Lewistown, NY, 1990): 363.

⁶⁴Hallo, Jones, Mattingly, 364.

quest but contains a very relevant Biblical parallel. In his travels and his desire to earn immortality, Gilgamesh encounters the flood hero Ziusudra (in the Sumerian version) who has obtained immortality through his piety. He and his wife are the sole survivors of the deluge which was sent by the gods to wipe out mankind. The account given by Ziusudra of the deluge so closely matches the Biblical account of Noah and the flood that Smith, who deciphered the later version discovered at Nineveh in 1872, could predict almost exactly what missing portions of the tablet would say.

An interesting point to note is that, through time, the legend has had three heroes. The first Sumerian account, as stated, involved Ziusudra who was the son of a king. As a king, he was actually part-god and would therefore deserve to be spared from the deluge. The later account, found at Nineveh, cited the hero as Utnapishtim who was a common man whose piety had earned he and his wife the right to be saved. The Biblical account is similar.

One reason for this discrepancy could be the Sumerian belief that all people were created as servants for the gods and specifically for An, the principal deity. As such, they would be completely subject to the will of the gods and would never deserve to be saved. One Sumerian text recounts the creation of men as servants for the Anunnaki who were demi-gods created to serve An,

After on the mountain of heaven and earth,
An had caused the Anunnaki (his followers) to be born...
The Anunnaki of the Duku eat, they are unsated,
Of the holy sheepfold, the milk the sweet,
The Anunnaki drink, they are unsated,
For the holy sheepfold, the goodly,

Man was given the breath of life.⁶⁵

The only real parallel here to the Biblical creation account is the metaphor of life coming to man through the breath of the god.

In 1933-1956 Andre Parrot excavated at Mari to the west of Sumer where he discovered substantial archives. Here and at other sites were discovered large quantities of Sumerian hymns which fall into four categories: 1.) hymns praising the gods, 2.) hymns praising kings, 3.) a mixture of prayers to gods and blessings for kings, 4.) hymns extolling Sumerian temples. In fact, there are several different types of texts including school texts, domestic texts, and even a farmer's almanac listing agricultural time tables.⁶⁶

Included in these texts is another seeming Biblical parallel which is truly unique because it parallels an event in New Testament literature.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:3,4)

In this Biblical account, the apostles were given a spiritual gift of speaking in tongues in order that they might communicate with people of all lands and spread the gospel.

⁶⁵Samuel Noah Kramer, Sumerian Mythology, (Philadelphia, PA, 1972): 2.

⁶⁶Kramer (1963), 205.

In a Sumerian poem the an event which could be interpreted as speaking in tongues is unleashed as a calamity upon the people of Sumer. The god Enki whose seat was Eridu was jealous of the god Enlil who enjoyed the second position in the pantheon under An. When he is forced to admit that everything he controlled was given to him by Enlil, he is furious and takes out his aggression on mankind.

Harmony-tongued Sumer, the great land of the me of
princeship...
To Enlil in one tongue gave speech.
(But) then, the lord defiant, the prince defiant, the
king defiant,
Enki, the lord defiant, the prince defiant, the king
defiant, the lord defiant, the prince defiant, the
king defiant,
Enki, the lord of abundance, whose commands are
trustworthy,
The lord of wisdom, who scans the land,
The leader of the gods,
The lord of Eridu, endowed with wisdom,
Changed the speech in their mouths, put contention into
it,
Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one.⁶⁷

Akkad

In 2316 BCE, the Mesopotamian region had been through the Early Dynastic phases of Kish and Uruk and was again in a state of constant turmoil. At this time, a rising ruler in Nippur, Sargon, conquered Uruk and its king Lugal-zagesi. Sargon led Lugal-zagesi through the streets of Nippur as a captive of war. Uruk was fallen.

Sargon the Great founded the first great empire in mankind's

⁶⁷Kramer, (1972).

history, the Akkadian Empire. He had begun his career as a servant, a cup-bearer to Ur-Zababa, king of Kish. He quickly rose in power; however, and, after attacking Uruk, seized Ur, then the region of Eninmar which ran from Lagash to the Persian Gulf. Finally, he attacked Umma to complete his dominance in southern Mesopotamia.

Next, Sargon extended his military campaigns to the North. He conquered Mari, Jarnunta, and even Ebla, in modern-day Syria before moving east to the region of Elam. Sargon's empire was tremendously large, and it is a tribute to his leadership that he was able to maintain such a dominance when no one in the area had ever done so before him. Sargon left inscriptions describing his military conquests which provide us with the detail of his oppression of the still existent, yet impotent Sumerian culture.

Sargon had two sons, Rimush and Manish-tushu. Both of these rulers followed in their father's footsteps with military conquests and stelae and statues commemorating those events dedicated in Nippur. Rimush ruled nine years, crushing rebellions and asserting control in the southern regions. Following his rule, his brother came to power and maintained the empire in formidable fashion for fifteen years.

When (Manish-tushu) had crossed the Lower Sea in ships thirty - two kings had gathered against him, but he defeated them and smote their cities and prostrated their lords and destroyed (the whole countryside) as far as the silver mines.⁶⁸

⁶⁸Kramer (1963), 62.

When Manish-tushu died, his son Naram-Sin came to power. He is regarded as the second great Akkadian ruler by modern scholars, and he was the last ruler of the Akkadian empire as such.

Naram-Sin crushed many strong rebellions in Sumer and extended his dominance in all directions. He reduced Elam to a vassal state and left many stelae and statues in which he called himself "king of the four quarters" and the "God of Akkad".⁶⁹

The god Naram-Sin was apparently not infallible. A historical interpretation from the Assyrian period entitled "The Curse of Agade: The Ekur Avenged" describes Naram-Sin as negligent and accuses him of committing sacrilege in the temple of Nippur and invoking Enlil's wrath. Whatever the cause, seven years after Naram-Sin took the throne, the Gutians from the eastern mountains invaded Akkad and toppled the empire. One inscription reads,

The holy Inanna (the moon goddess, a.k.a. Ishtar) leaves untouched their gifts...like a maid who forsakes her chamber, the holy Inanna has forsaken her Agade shrine; like a warrior with raised weapons she attacked the city in fierce battle, made it turn its breast to the enemy.⁷⁰

The Gutians ruled in the region for over seventy years. They favored Lagash which rose in importance in the south. Lagash was ruled over by the king Gudea(2141-2122) who is well-known in cuneiform study because of the many statues of this straight-faced, serious king which have been found, along with two inscribed cylinders discovered from the period of his reign. One of these

⁶⁹Kramer (1963), 62.

⁷⁰Kramer (1963), 63.

cylinders contains the longest known piece of Sumerian literature which is a description of the building of the temple at Lagash, Eninnu.

There were several petty rulers in the Sumerian region as various city-states continued to war with the Gutians. The third Dynasty at Ur had produced the kings Ur-Nammu and his son Shulgi who was a literate king. He and his father left many inscriptions, and Shulgi expanded his influence over Elam to the east during his extraordinary 48-year reign.

Four regimes after Shulgi came Ishbi-Erra who founded a new dynasty with its capital at Isin which became a powerful city-state for the next two centuries and gave rise to the next king of note in the region, Lipit-Ishtar, the grandson of Ishbi-Erra.

Lipit-Ishtar is well-known because he gathered together the first known amalgamation of laws in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian Law Code was certainly barbaric by today's standards, but it was not for example completely inconsiderate to women,

If a man turned his face away from his first wife...(but) she has not gone out of the house, his wife which he married as his favorite is a second wife; he shall continue to support his first wife.⁷¹

This type of concern for even a lower class citizen, as a woman would have been, characterizes the Sumerian Law Code and sets the stage for the famous Law Code of Hammurabi who was a contemporary of Rim-Sin of Larsa who had conquered Lipit-Ishtar and obscured his Law Code.

⁷¹Kramer (1963), 338.

Now that so much is coming to light about the extraordinary societies which existed in Mesopotamia, we can just begin to appreciate our ancestry and sadly to understand how little has been accomplished in three thousand years. It is important never to lose sight of the original Sumerian language. "It's influence on its Semitic descendant can be seen...Semitic idioms and modes of thought were clothed in a Sumerian dress."⁷² These semitic idioms and their Sumerian descendants have helped to characterize the Biblical literature which have shaped the society of the dominant western world of the twentieth century.

⁷²Sayce, 30.

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