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# 1

## THE LITERATURES OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

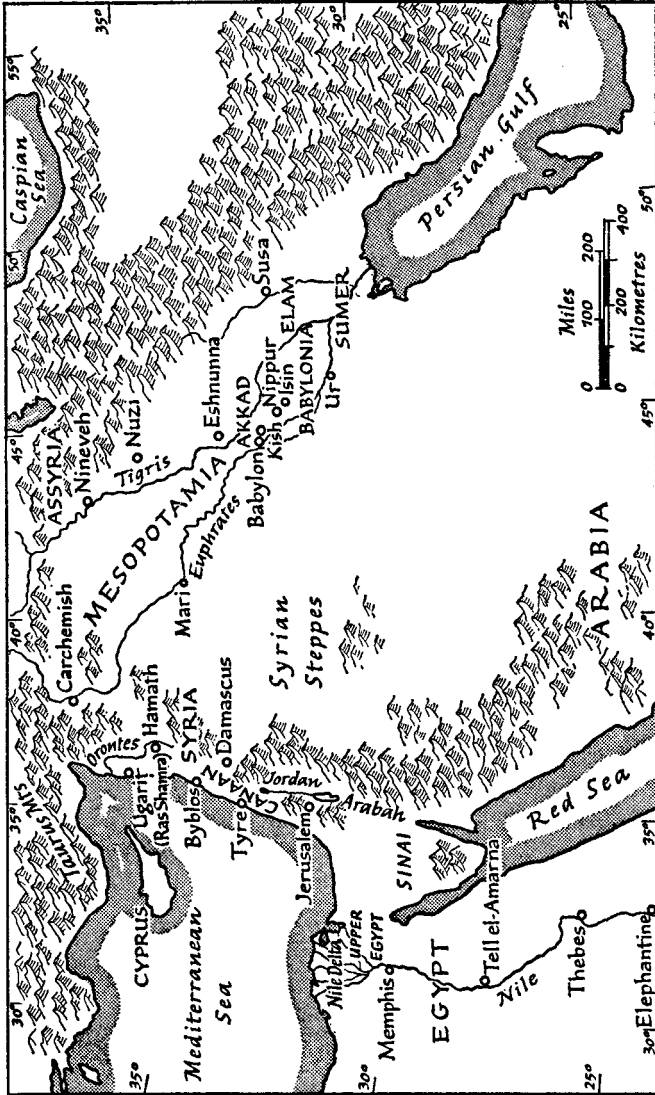
Ancient Israel was a buffer state between her two great neighbours, Egypt and Mesopotamia. She was exposed to their ways and ideas, and vulnerable also to invasion, so that her land was for centuries the home of other nations and cultures.

If we are to begin to understand the Old Testament story of Israel we must try to assess to what extent it is bound up historically, culturally and religiously with the literature of Israel's neighbours. Fortunately there is plenty of information to help us, for during the past century archaeological discovery has brought to life this part of the ancient world, making our first problem one of selection. Documents from further afield, such as those relating to Crete, Greece and Asia Minor, cannot begin to be examined here, and of the evidence available from Canaan and the surrounding nations only a fraction can be considered. The choice has been made in an attempt to cover as wide a range as possible, both in time and in type of literature, and in the hope that it may serve as an introduction to further study of the Old Testament in its setting.

### THE LITERATURE OF MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia, meaning 'the land between the rivers', is the name given in the Greek Old Testament to the Tigris and Euphrates valleys and the country between them – traditionally from time to time the home of the

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I. The Near East in Old Testament times

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## THE LITERATURE OF MESOPOTAMIA

Patriarchs, Abraham and his descendants down to Joseph. During Old Testament times this land, or parts of it, was invaded and conquered by the Sumerians, Akkadians, Amorites, Assyrians, Chaldaeans and Persians, to name only some of the nations who made their homes there. The northern part of the area is also often referred to geographically as Assyria and the southern as Babylonia, regardless of whether or not there was at the time an independent kingdom of Assyria or Babylonia. 'Assyria' is derived from the name of a people, 'Babylonia' from her chief city, Babylon.

Politically speaking, Babylonia's first time of greatness, frequently called Old Babylon, was from about 1830 to 1550 B.C. Assyria began to emerge towards the end of this period, but came to the height of her power much later, from 883 to 612 B.C., after which she was subdued by the Chaldaeans. They set up the kingdom of 'Neo-Babylon', which flourished until 539 B.C., when it was absorbed into the empire of Cyrus the Persian. These were the Mesopotamian kingdoms which had most to do with Israel; they and other ancient powers of the Near East are listed in the chronological table on p. 4.

The method of writing employed in Mesopotamia was known as cuneiform, meaning 'wedge-shaped'. Invented by the Sumerians, who settled in the south from about 4000 B.C., it consisted of impressions upon clay made by a wedge-shaped stylus, or, for permanent, monumental work, of carving upon stone. Sometimes writing-boards were used; made of wood or ivory, they had an inlay of wax mixed with coloured substance, soft enough to take the impression of a stylus. These boards had two advantages: they could be hinged together and folded flat to give any length of writing surface, and their inlay

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Date B.C.	Mesopotamia	Syria-Palestine	Egypt
2400 ▶			<u>Wisdom of Ptah-hotep</u> (about 2450)
2300 ▶			OLD KINGDOM (2686 - 2160)
2200 ▶			
2100 ▶	<u>Laws of Ur-Nammu</u> (2050)		
2000 ▶	<u>Creation and Flood Epics</u> (about 2000)		MIDDLE KINGDOM (2160 - 1786)
1900 ▶	<u>Laws of Kingdon of Eshnunna</u> (about <u>Laws of Lipit</u> 2000)		
1800 ▶	<u>Ishtar of Isin</u> (1950- 1900)		<u>Execration Texts</u> (1900-1700)
1700 ▶	OLD KINGDOM OF BABYLON (1830-1550)	PROLONGED PERIOD OF EGYPTIAN RULE	
1600 ▶	<u>Law Code of Hammurabi</u> (1728- <u>Mari Tablets</u> 1686) (about 1690)		RULE OF HYKSOS (1750-1568)
1500 ▶			
1400 ▶	<u>Nuzi Tablets</u> (1500-1400)		NEW KINGDOM (1568-1085)
1300 ▶	DECLINE OF BABYLON AND RISE OF ASSYRIA	<u>Ras Shamra Tablets</u> (about 1400) <u>Tell el-Amarna Tablets</u> (1400-1360)	<u>Teaching of Amen- em-opef</u> (1300)
1200 ▶		Settlement in Canaan (1250-1200)	The Exodus (about 1280)
1100 ▶		PERIOD OF THE JUDGES (1200-1020)	
1000 ▶		UNITED MONARCHY (1020 - 922)	
900 ▶		Death of Solomon (922) Division of Kingdom	PERIOD OF DECLINE (1085-525)
800 ▶	ASSYRIAN EMPIRE (883-612)	JUDAH ISRAEL <u>Moabite Stone</u> (830)	
700 ▶	<u>Babylonian Chronicle</u> (626-539)	Fall of Samaria to Assyria (722)	
600 ▶	<u>Jehoiachin Tablets</u> (595-570)	1st Fall of Jerusalem (597)	
500 ▶	NEO-BABYLON (612-539)	<u>Lachish Letters</u> (590-588)	
400 ▶	<u>Cyrus Cylinder</u> (539)	2nd Fall of Jerusalem (586)	Conquest by Persia (525)
300 ▶	PERSIAN RULE 539-333	1st Return of Exiles (539)	<u>Elophantine Papyri</u> (495-400)
	GREEK CONQUEST	Nehemiah (444) Ezra (398)	End of Persian Rule (404)
			333

2. Table of dates

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## THE LITERATURE OF MESOPOTAMIA

remained soft, so that alterations were easy. During the past hundred years thousands of cuneiform tablets have been excavated which have helped us to know more not only of 'the land between the rivers' and her history and religion, but also of her neighbours, including ancient Israel.

*The Creation and Flood Stories*

Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria from 668 to 633 B.C., was a cruel and ruthless military campaigner and at the same time a man of culture, who according to one of his own inscriptions 'learned the wisdom of Nabu, the entire art of writing on clay tablets'. From his capital at Nineveh he sent scribes throughout Mesopotamia to copy and translate into Akkadian, the language of Assyria and Babylonia, the documents they found, and to bring them back to the royal palace. A very considerable library resulted, which was unearthed partly in A.D. 1853 by Hormuzd Rassam, partly in 1873-6 by George Smith, a young assistant at the British Museum who had deciphered some of the tablets found earlier and discovered that they told the story of a great flood, not unlike that of Genesis. George Smith's excavations brought to light thousands more tablets, 'giving', as he wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, 'the history of the world from the Creation to the Fall of Man'.

Although most of these texts were written down in Ashurbanipal's time, and none of them earlier than 1000 B.C., they were originally composed in Old Babylon, perhaps as early as 2000 B.C. Yet even this is not the beginning of the story. Subsequent to the discoveries at Nineveh, excavations at Nippur and Kish have shown that the Sumerians also knew and recorded these traditions of Creation, Paradise and a great flood. No doubt

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when the Semitic invaders (from whom came most of the later inhabitants of Mesopotamia) took over the Sumerians' style of writing, they also inherited some of their religious traditions.

The keynote of the *Creation Story* is conflict. Apsu and Tiamat, the gods of fresh water and salt water, are overcome and slain by their offspring, and the hero of the final victory is Marduk, who creates heaven and earth from the dead bodies of his opponents. As king of the gods Marduk makes man to be their servant, and builds Babylon as his home.

At first all this looks very different from Genesis, and indeed the whole behaviour of the gods, including Marduk's purpose in creating man, seems foreign to biblical thought. Yet there are similarities. The Babylonian myth begins:

When on high the heaven had not been named,  
Firm ground below had not been called by name,

a setting not unlike the watery chaos of Gen. 1: 2, where 'the earth was without form and void', and continues with an order of creation which, leaving aside the rather major omissions of animals, fish and birds, roughly corresponds to that of Genesis 1. Then in Ps. 74: 13, 14 we read:

by thy power thou didst cleave the sea-monster in two  
and break the sea-serpent's heads above the waters;  
thou didst crush Leviathan's many heads  
and throw him to the sharks for food.

So here, as elsewhere in the Old Testament (for example, Ps. 89: 10, Job 7: 12, Isa. 51: 9), there are references to a primaeval conflict, reminiscent of that between the gods of Babylon, but this time with Yahweh, the God of

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## THE CREATION AND FLOOD STORIES

Israel (for the derivation of the name see pp. 143, 160), defeating monsters called Leviathan, or Rahab, or 'the sea-serpent'.

In the *Flood Story*, which is part of a much longer poem called the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the gods determine to destroy mankind. The hero, Utnapishtim, builds a ship, and with his family, animals and possessions survives. The ship grounds on Mount Nisir, and after seven days Utnapishtim sends out a dove which

Went forth but came back;

Since no resting place for it was visible, she turned round, and this exercise is later repeated with a swallow and with a raven; the latter

went forth and, seeing that the waters had diminished,

He eats, circles, caws, and turns not round.

When the family leave the ship they offer sacrifice, and Utnapishtim is given immortality by the gods.

In recent years, further study of some of the fragmentary material in the Ashurbanipal tablets, together with other texts dating back to the reign of Ammisadduqa, who was king of Babylon some thousand years before Ashurbanipal reigned in Assyria, has shown that the source of this story was the Babylonian *Epic of Atrahasis*. The hero, like Utnapishtim, warned of coming judgement, escapes with family, animals and birds in a home-made (and rather simpler) boat, and, after a flood lasting seven days (the account of the grounding of the ship is missing), disembarks and offers sacrifice.

Here as in the *Creation Story* there are points of likeness to Genesis – amongst them the danger, the recording of the specification of the ship and the duration of the flood, and, in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, the grounding on a

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mountain and the sending out of the birds. But there are major differences: the apparently capricious reason for the deluge, and the conferring of immortality on Utnapishtim, or, in the Atrahasis Epic, the description of a system of social class for the post-deluvian era, contrast sharply with the covenant between Yahweh and Noah described in Gen. 9: 12–17.

Obviously the writers of early Genesis knew their own forms of these ancient stories, elements of which indeed seem to have been known throughout the whole of the ancient Near East. Yet we must not overrate the connection. The use of traditional material does not necessarily imply an uncritical acceptance of its underlying ideas; the violent, unpredictable deities of Babylonia are far removed from the God of the Old Testament. If we read Genesis side by side with the Babylonian material it is difficult to escape the conclusion that they are founded upon widely differing religious ideas and principles.

#### *Mari, Nuzi and the Age of the Patriarchs*

Genesis chapters 12 to 50, the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, are not contemporary records; on any theory they are accepted as having been written hundreds of years after the events they claim to describe. None of the characters can be identified in history, nor can we place within centuries when they could have lived. Yet evidence from Mesopotamia, of the period roughly between 2000 and 1500 B.C., throws a certain light on these stories. Of this evidence perhaps the most interesting is the material discovered at Mari and Nuzi.

Somewhere around 2000 B.C. there was a great movement into the Near East of nomadic peoples who had lived on its outer fringes. These invaders, called



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## MARI, NUZI AND THE AGE OF THE PATRIARCHS

'Westerners', or 'Amorites', by the Babylonians, set up a number of independent states in and to the west of Mesopotamia. (In the Old Testament the Amorites are mentioned in Gen. 15: 16 as inhabiting the land of Canaan, and are included in the list of nations whom the Israelites were later instructed to drive out (Deut. 7: 1). They were defeated a number of times, but remnants survived until the tenth century B.C., when according to 1 Kings 9: 20, 21 Solomon incorporated them into his forced labour corps. After this they disappear from the biblical scene.)

In 1936 excavations directed by André Parrot, under the auspices of the Musée du Louvre, began on the upper Euphrates, and subsequently revealed *Mari*, capital of an Amorite kingdom which flourished until its last king, Zimri Lim, was defeated by Hammurabi of Babylon in about 1697 B.C. The royal palace of some three hundred rooms contained the royal archives, upwards of 20,000 clay tablets, about 5,000 of them communications to Zimri Lim from officials, local chiefs and neighbouring kings. In these records the names Levi and Israel occur, with others from the same roots as Gad and Dan – though without any reference to Old Testament characters or tribes. The king is worried by nomads on the fringe of the desert, and the most troublesome group is the Banu-Yamina (another form of Benjamin); one 'Bannum, the king's servant' reports:

Yesterday I departed from Mari, and spent the night at Zuruban. All the Banu-Yamina raised fire-signals. . . and so far I have not ascertained the meaning of those signals. Now, I shall determine the meaning, and I shall write to my lord whether it is thus or not. Let the guard of the city of Mari be strengthened, and let my lord not go outside the gate.

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*Nuzi*, east of the Tigris and 150 miles north of Baghdad, was excavated between 1925 and 1931 by a joint expedition of the American School of Oriental Research in Baghdad, and Harvard University. It was the home of the Hurrians (the biblical Horites of Gen. 14: 6), and tablets of the fifteenth century B.C. (some of them now in the British Museum) reflect various customs of the time and may elucidate some of the incidents in Genesis. For instance, there are provisions for childless couples to provide themselves with an heir; they could adopt a son to look after them in old age and ensure a decent burial, as Abram apparently adopted Eliezer (Gen. 15: 2), but the bargain would be at least partly nullified by the birth of a son. In one case of an adopted son whose wife failed to produce children, it was decreed that she should give a handmaid to her husband, as Sarah gave Hagar (Gen. 16: 2), and Rachel, Bilhah (Gen. 30: 3). The 'tablet of adoption belonging to Nashwi', who adopted a certain Wullu, rules that 'If Nashwi has a son of his own he shall divide (the estate) equally with Wullu, but the son of Nashwi shall take the gods of Nashwi'. Obviously the possession of the household gods marked the legitimate heir, hence Laban's anxiety in Gen. 31: 26 ff. when he discovered Rachel's theft of his images. In the same tablet, Nashwi bids Wullu marry his (Nashwi's) daughter and none other: 'If Wullu takes another wife he shall forfeit the lands and buildings of Nashwi', just as Laban bound Jacob in Gen. 31: 50: 'If you ill-treat my daughters or take other wives beside them when no one is there to see, then God be witness between us.'

Once more, the value of such evidence must not be exaggerated. It helps us to understand, and within limits to date, the background of the patriarchal stories. But it