

## CHAPTER 1

### From "The Huluppu-Tree" from *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*

#### Historico-cultural Background Sumerian Culture

Expert Sumerologists have noted that Sumeria was the earliest culture to develop in the ancient area called Mesopotamia (Greek for "between rivers"). In that fertile region, the domestication of grains such as wheat, oats, and barley, as well as animals such as goats and sheep, enabled civilization to develop. Urban areas were created and began to expand.

Life in urban areas needed to be regulated in order to run smoothly, and by 3200 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era, a neutral archaeological term), the invention of *cuneiform* writing helped the Sumerians to establish and govern a well-organized bureaucracy. Each city-state was ruled by a priest-king, such as the epic hero Gilgamesh and Dumuzi, husband of Inanna.

#### Oral Tradition

Cultures without a system of writing cannot depend on written texts to perpetuate their traditions. Such preliterate cultures must pass on information to the younger generation through *oral tradition*. In many cultures, oral tradition is carried on by a special storyteller, or it may be practiced by a group of individuals with exceptional memories. Oral tradition can be recognized by frequent repetitions or refrains used by the storyteller, and by rhythmic or verse form.

When a culture later develops a system of writing and begins to record its cultural traditions, features of oral tradition, such as repetition, frequently are carried over into the written form. Thus we can recognize traces of oral tradition in written texts such as *Inanna* and the Old Testament.

#### The Epic

The epic is an ancient, largely Western, poetic form derived from oral tradition. Originally sung by a poet, the epic consists of a series of adventures connected by a central, usually male, heroic figure. The hero generally has a miraculous birth and/or death; divine powers aid him in his adventures; he crosses a body of water in his journey or quest for a personal and cultural goal. The object of the hero's quest may be something material—such as valuable wood—or an abstract concept—such as fame or glory.

#### The Text

*Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* is an unusual text in that the "hero" of this earliest of epics is a female. In this cycle, or collection of poems, Inanna evolves from the rather helpless girl shown in our selection to a powerful goddess who later dominates heaven and the earth's cycle of fertility. The selection begins with a summary form of the Sumerian creation story (called *Enuna Elish*), indicating a number of cultural aspects such as polytheism, the systematic division of the universe, assignment of its parts to various gods and goddesses, and the importance of bread. A woman who fears male gods, Inanna rescues the *huluppu* or willow tree and brings it to an Eden-like holy garden. Her ambitions to build a "shining throne" and a "shining bed" symbolize her hopes for political and sexual power;

however, early in her career, she is weak. Without male assistance (from the epic hero Gilgamesh), Inanna is unable to drive from her tree the snake, the monstrous *Anzu*-bird, and the rebellious Lileth (Adam's first wife in the Kabala). When her brother Gilgamesh succeeds, Inanna makes him a *pukku* and a *mikku*, a hoop and stick believed to represent objects of royal power such as a more modern orb and scepter.

#### MINI-LECTURE on *INANNA*

According to historians and archaeologists of Middle Eastern culture, the rise of Sumerian culture was critical in the development of the modern West. In the prehistorical period, that is, the time before the invention of writing, people in Mesopotamia probably lived in nomadic tribes. They passed important cultural information from one generation to the next through word of mouth, called *oral tradition*. This information included ideas about the creation of the world or stories of the gods. These myths were told by good storytellers or sung by poets with good memories.

The land in Mesopotamia was very fertile, allowing the people to domesticate grains as well as animals. With time, industrial skills such as weaving, leatherworking and carpentry were developed. Using their new technology, the Sumerians built several large urban areas, called city-states. The network of city-states in Sumeria shared two important things: a common polytheistic religion and a written language.

By 3200 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), the Sumerians had invented a system of writing, called *cuneiform*. It consisted of triangular characters that were pressed into wet clay with a stick. In Mesopotamia, stone, metal, and wood were difficult to find, but clay was everywhere. Clay was the material for making many kinds of objects such as cooking utensils and statues of the gods. Even houses and important religious buildings or temples, called *ziggurats*, were made of clay. The Tower of Babel, mentioned in the Bible, is an example of a *ziggurat*.

A system of writing enabled the Sumerians to establish a well-organized bureaucracy to run their city-states. The Sumerians made other contributions to Western civilization, including military use of the wheeled, horse-drawn chariot; creation of a written code of law; and a system of mathematics based on the number six, still used today in the measurement of the circle (360 degrees), in the division of time (hours and minutes), and in some weights and measures. We continue to study the Sumerians not only because of their important technological inventions, but because of their religious and literary contributions to civilization.

Among the literary texts the Sumerians recorded in clay were *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and stories of the goddess Inanna. Sumerian epics tell us much detail about their human heroes and their polytheistic beliefs. For example, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* contains the story of the gods' destruction of a corrupt world with a great flood. These mythological

**stories are important because they influenced later cultures, especially the Hebrews in the writing of the Old Testament.**

**The poem *Inanna* is an example of an epic, a long poem combining fact and fiction, which tells the story of an important hero. In its earliest forms, it derived from oral tradition; the original composer is unknown. The epic consists of a series of adventures connected by a central hero, usually a male. Our poem, however, centers on a female figure, Inanna. The well-known male hero, Gilgamesh, helps in rescuing the *huluppu* tree from her enemies.**

**The epic hero is helped by the powers of the gods in his (or her) adventures; his journey or quest represents not only a personal goal, but something of great import to the hero's culture. Since the efforts of the epic hero benefit his entire culture, by studying a particular epic, we can learn much about the values of the culture which created it.**

**"The Huluppu-Tree" begins with a brief summary of the Sumerian creation. Then Inanna cares for her sacred tree, a symbol of life, in a garden that resembles the later garden of Eden in Genesis. Other Sumerian influences on Hebrew culture will be seen in a study of the Old Testament.**

## CHAPTER 2

### Genesis (Chapters 1 and 2) from the Old Testament

#### Historico-cultural Background

Religious tradition traces the Hebrews to Abraham, who came from the Mesopotamian city of Ur ("Ur of the Chaldeans," Genesis 11.28). Although Abraham's twelve grandsons are identified with twelve Hebrew tribes, recent archaeological evidence suggests that at the end of the thirteenth century B.C.E., the source of Israel's unity and common identity was *not* blood kinship, but rather the belief in one god, Yahweh.

Some archaeologists have explained that certain groups settled into agriculture before others, leading to tension between farming and semi-nomadic herding groups. This tension is seen in the competition between suitors for Inanna (one, a farmer, the other, a herder), and in the conflict between Cain and Abel. Thus, the early Canaanites were an agricultural people who had first settled the eastern Mediterranean shores. Gradually there settled among them formerly nomadic people who gave allegiance to one deity, Yahweh. The polytheistic Canaanites referred to these people as *h'apiru*, foreigners or outlaws. The new settlers were later joined by Hebrew refugees from Egypt (after the Exodus), and together they revolted against the Canaanites, conquered the area, and founded Israel.

Abraham's origin in Mesopotamia was not the only connection between the early Sumerian and the Hebrew cultures. Under Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian successors to Sumer, Jerusalem was sacked in 598-597 B.C.E., and Jewish captives were deported to Babylon. Again in 587 B.C.E., Babylonians burned Jerusalem

and destroyed Solomon's temple, sending more Jews to Babylon. As captives there, the Hebrews came into intimate contact with Babylonian culture, including the religion and oral tradition. By 539 B.C.E., when the Persian king Cyrus the Great captured Babylon and returned the Hebrews to Jerusalem, they carried back with them many stories of the gods and epic heroes.

In the first century B.C.E., when rabbis gathered in Jamnia to organize the Torah, or five books of Moses (the first five books of the Christian OT), they drew from numerous cultural traditions. Scholars of the biblical canon have identified three major sources for the first books of the OT, and refer to them as J (Yahweh), E (Elohim) and P (Priestly). Our text contains passages only from the J and P sources.

#### Sources of Genesis, Chapters 1 and 2

All of Chapter 1 and up to verse 3, Chapter 2, is from the P (Priestly) source. In this text, the divine being is called "God" in the English translation. The style is very repetitive. There is no great detail given about the creation. It was just *done*. However, the time frame is very specific, with events assigned to each of seven days.

The portion from Chapter 2, verses 4 to 25, is from the J (Yahweh) source. In this text, the divine being is named "Lord God" in English. He is more human; e.g., he breathes. Moreover, there are more details. Compare, for example, the creation of man and woman in Chapters 1 and 2. Note the details given in Chapter 2. The inclusion in the Old Testament of two different creation stories is evidence of material being drawn from two rather different, but nevertheless sacred, sources.

#### Original Form of the OT

It is important to note that the original language of the *Torah*, or the beginnings of the Old Testament, was Hebrew mixed with some Aramaic. During the first millennium B.C.E., Hebrew was the most important literary language, while Aramaic was the common or vernacular language. At a later period, the Greeks divided the original text into books or verses. However, their divisions did not always fall where appropriate. An example is the division between Genesis, Chapters 1 and 2. The division should fall between Chapter 2, verses 3 and 4, where the first creation story ends and the second one begins, rather than where it is, in the midst of the first story.

#### MINI-LECTURE on GENESIS

(Review carefully before giving the mini-lecture. You may wish to present this material in more than one class. When discussing the OT sources, refer to the chart in the student text.)

**At the time of early Sumerian cities, about 2500 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), Hebrew civilization consisted of twelve nomadic tribes spread across a large area in the Middle East. Religious tradition traces the origin of the patriarch Abraham to the city of Ur of the Chaldeans, a Sumerian city. Abraham's grandson Jacob (also called Israel) had twelve sons identified with the twelve Hebrew tribes.**

**Archaeological evidence shows that at the end of the thirteenth century B.C.E., the Jews were united by devotion to one god, Yahweh. They came into the Canaanite area between the eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Because the monotheistic Hebrews did not believe**

in the many gods of the Canaanites, the Canaanites called these people "h'apiru" (later, Hebrew), meaning foreigners or outlaws. Eventually the Hebrews conquered the area of Canaan and established Israel.

Ancient Israel reached its highest power under wise King Solomon (961-922 B.C.E.), when the great temple at Jerusalem was built. However, after his death, the nation was divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. Twice during Israel's history (598-597 and 587 B.C.E.), the Babylonians, successors to the Sumerians, invaded Israel. King Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Hebrews and deported them to Babylon. There the Hebrews came into contact with Sumerian/Babylonian written and oral tradition.

When Jewish rabbis came to write the five books of the Torah, later incorporated into the Old Testament, they drew upon a number of sources, several of which had been influenced by Sumerian tradition. Two very important sources for the OT are called J and P sources. J, the oldest, refers to the one God as Yahweh, translated into English as Lord God. In the text from the J source, the Lord God is described in human terms, with lively, concrete, picturesque images. This source, written in Solomon's time (950 B.C.E.), comes from the area of Judah.

The second source we shall consider is the P, or Priestly, source, dating from 539 B.C.E. In this source, the law is very important, and the language is abstract and repetitive. Originating from Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, it shows an interest in genealogies and precise dates. Both sources were used to create the Torah.

The original text of the Torah was written in Hebrew on a continuous papyrus scroll. Papyrus was prepared in large quantities in the city of Byblos on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Because of its export of papyrus, the Greeks connected the name of Byblos with a book or scroll. Not only did the Greeks give the name Bible to the collection of the Old and New Testaments, they also divided the text into chapters and verses. As we shall see, because the Greeks were not familiar with the J and P sources, some divisions were not correct. Finally, it was the Greeks who named the first book of the Old Testament Genesis because of its opening line, "In the beginning."

### CHAPTER 3 From *The Odyssey*

#### Historico-cultural Background

In spite of the ancient Greek belief in a true Heroic Age, more modern historians felt that the events described in Homer's epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were nothing but myths. Opinions changed, however, after the German Heinrich Schliemann began in 1870 to excavate the site of Bronze Age Troy. Located near the

Dardanelles, Troy is described by Homer's stock phrases as "well-walled" and "a broad city." The Trojans are "horse tamers."

As for Homer, the prolonged controversy over his identity has involved issues such as when he lived and where he came from, and whether he represents one or more poets; Samuel Butler even believed the poet was a woman. The influence of Homer's work cannot be underestimated. First, it formed the basis for Greek education and culture to the time of the Roman Empire. Second, because of renewed interest in Homer during the Renaissance and in more recent times, his work has had major influence throughout the western world. Indeed, Homer is the standard for epic.

The detailed studies of the two epics by Milman Parry indicate that *The Iliad* seems to be the earlier work as its structures are simpler; *The Odyssey* is a product of a more mature poet. Parry has shown that oral tradition was the source of Homer's poetry. This is evident in such characteristics as formulaic structures that helped the singer to remember as he sang; these include stock epithets ("godlike Odysseus"), repetitions of groups of lines and sometimes of entire stories.

While *The Iliad* recounts the story of Troy and the wrath of the hero Achilles, the action of *The Odyssey* takes place after the fall of Troy to the Greeks and the ten-year struggle of Odysseus to return home to Ithaca. The most powerful enemy of the Trojans was Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, who had secured his power by marrying Clytemnestra, daughter of Tyndareus of Sparta and sister of Helen, "the face that launched a thousand ships." The beautiful Helen married Agamemnon's brother Menelaos, who became King of Lakonia, giving control of southern Greece to the two brothers. The kidnapping of Helen by Paris, Prince of Troy, led to the Greek siege and defeat of Troy.

Unfortunately, during Agamemnon's absence from Mycenae, his wife Clytemnestra plotted with her lover Aigisthos to kill Agamemnon on his return. Later their son Orestes took revenge on his mother and Aigisthos. This story contrasts with that of Odysseus and his twenty-year absence from his home in Ithaca. Unlike Agamemnon, Odysseus is fortunate enough to possess a faithful wife, Penelope, and a loyal son, Telemachus. And except for Poseidon, the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus want to see him safely home.

#### MINI-LECTURE on *THE ODYSSEY*

(Refer to the chart of Greek gods and goddesses where appropriate.)

**Homer's epic material was drawn from oral tradition which told the details of the Greek war against Troy and the return of the Greek heroes to their homes after many years. Archaeological investigations seem to indicate that Troy fell about 1250 B.C.E during the Bronze Age glory of the city of Mycenae. At that time, southern Greece was dominated by the two sons of Atreus: Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, and his brother Menelaos, husband of Helen and king of Lakonia. After Paris, Prince of Troy, kidnapped Helen and returned with her to Troy, Menelaos and Agamemnon organized the Greek armies to attack and defeat Troy.**



Unfortunately, to achieve success, before departing for Troy, Agamemnon had sacrificed their daughter, thus making his wife Clytemnestra very angry. Upon his return home, Clytemnestra and her lover Aigisthos murdered Agamemnon. Later, her son Orestes took revenge on both his mother and Aigisthos. The tragic story of Agamemnon's marriage is told in Book I of *The Odyssey*.

*The Odyssey* begins with an invocation—an appeal to the muse or goddess of inspiration—for the poet to sing well of the epic hero Odysseus. Techniques that help the singer to remember his lines include the use of formulas—that is, repeated phrases, lines or entire stories; and stock epithets, such as "godlike Odysseus" and "excellent Aigisthos," which show qualities associated with one of the heroes or the gods.

While most of the poem focuses on the adventures of the epic hero Odysseus, the opening book draws on Greek mythology and shows the main gods on Mount Olympus behaving very much like humans. They are jealous, become angry, and enjoy good dinners. It is the anger of Poseidon, god of the sea, that keeps the epic hero on his long sea odyssey to return home to his faithful wife Penelope and loyal son.

Homer's epics are the model for this poetic form in the West. As with all epics, *The Odyssey* has significance on two levels: the personal, that is, the man who struggles long and hard to return to his home and family; and the social, that is, the king who returns to his native land, drives out the younger men of Ithaca who desire his power, and reestablishes his rule in justice and prosperity. For the culture that creates it, the epic defines the personal qualities and behavior of the much-admired hero.

## CHAPTER 4

### *From Antigone from The Theban Plays*

#### **Historico-cultural Background**

Tragedy originated in the worship of Dionysus, a Greek nature god associated with wine and spring fertility rites. Female worshippers concluded their orgiastic songs and dances with the ritualistic shedding of blood, usually that of a goat, to guarantee agricultural fertility. Their songs, called dithyrambs, refer to the "double birth" of Dionysus, rescued from his dying mother's womb by his father Zeus, who sewed him into his own leg for a second birth.

By the end of the sixth century B.C.E., worship of Dionysus was civilized and organized into choral groups. The first known individual performer, Thespis, combined choral song with the speech of a masked actor who engaged in dialogue with the chorus. With the great tragedians of the Athenian Golden Age, tragedy evolved further: Aeschylus added a second actor, allowing dramatic conflict; Sophocles added a third actor, permitting further elaboration of individual characters. Both based their plays on

ancient myths known to the Greek public. Euripides, the youngest of the three, subjected the received myths to a critical view in his dramas.

Public performance of dramas during the fifth century B.C.E. was no mere entertainment; it was a religious event that all Athenians were expected to attend. Presented in a large open-air amphitheater, male actors performed the roles of humans and gods using few theatrical properties. A mask was worn, along with platform shoes ("larger than life"); individual actors declaimed from the stage (*skene*), while the chorus performed in the orchestra, or open circular area. Scenery was scant; a mechanical device, called the *deus ex machina* (god from the machine), was used to lift an actor playing a god above the stage.

#### MINI-LECTURE on *ANTIGONE*

(When discussing the characters in *Antigone*, use the genealogical tree of the Royal House of Thebes in the student text.)

The history of Greek tragedy can be traced back to prehistorical ritual song and dance in honor of the ancient god of wine and fertility, called Dionysus or Bacchus. Under the influence of wine, female worshippers of Dionysus carried out wild, bloody sacrifices to ensure fertility of the earth. There is evidence that in the earliest rites the sacrificial victims were men. Later victims were animals, especially goats, giving rise to the name *tragedy* (*tragodoi*), meaning goat song. The religious group songs and dances were taken from rural areas to the city and became more formal. They were now divided into a large group, called the chorus, and an individual actor. The first single performer was Thespis; a form of his name, thespian, is now used to describe all actors.

Near the end of the sixth century B.C.E., Athenians honored Dionysus at annual spring competitions in which prizes were given to the best tragedies and comedies. The Dionysia was an important four-day religious festival when business was suspended, and every Greek, regardless of class or gender, was expected to attend. In open-air theaters that could hold 13,000 spectators, playwrights competed for prizes for the best comedy and tragedy. Those who wrote tragedies based their plays on Greek myths, that is, stories filled with complex meaning that are passed from generation to generation.

The Greek drama reached its height during the fifth century B.C.E. in Periclean Athens. Because of Pericles' military skill, the city-state of Athens dominated Greek culture. A time of relative peace, this unprecedented golden age saw the development of the concept of democracy and the flourishing of the all the arts. During this time, Pericles built the famous Parthenon and other religious buildings on the Acropolis.

Pericles governed his city with a group of ten men selected by the Athenian citizens. Among the ten was the dramatist Sophocles. In 468, Sophocles had come to Athens to successfully compete in the annual dramatic contests. Along with Euripides and Aeschylus, Sophocles is one



of the most important figures in the development of the classical Greek tragedy. Author of over 120 plays, Sophocles' innovation in the tragedy was the addition of the third individual actor. The plot, or the series of events, in the tragedy was known to the audience from myths drawn from Greek oral tradition.

The tragic hero always struggles courageously against his fate and suffers the gods' punishment with dignity; therefore, Sophocles' contribution to tragedy was not the invention of stories; his innovation was his creative use of poetic language to tell the story. In addition, Sophocles' dramatic art develops a character by contrasting him or her in a dialogue with another character; we can see this technique in the dialogue between the sisters, Antigone and Ismene.

The plot of the play *Antigone* is based on the Legend of Thebes. Because Cadmus, the legendary founder of the city of Thebes, angered the gods, he and all the descendants of the Royal House of Thebes were cursed with misfortune. His great-grandson Oedipus, for example, was fated to kill his own father and marry his mother Iocaste. Shortly before the action of this play, their sons Polyneices and Eteocles killed one another over the throne of Thebes, leaving their uncle Creon to rule. Creon has given a full military funeral to Eteocles. However, Creon has forbidden the burial of Polyneices because he had attacked his own city. Their sister Antigone defies Creon's law and demands a religious burial for her brother Polyneices. Creon's insistence on not burying him leads to the suicides of Antigone, his son, and his wife, Iocaste, leaving him to suffer alone. He realizes too late that even the king cannot defy the laws of the gods.

According to Aristotle in his *Poetics*, a tragedy shows the decline of a single tragic hero from good fortune to bad. He considers Creon the tragic hero whose tragic flaw or defect causes his downfall. Aristotle also states that women cannot be tragic heroes. Modern audiences, however, frequently are moved by Antigone's concern for her brother and identify her as the tragic hero.

The role of the chorus in the tragedy is to comment, to summarize, and to explain to the audience the meaning of the action. As old men, they represent the collective wisdom of the community. Their good advice is frequently ignored by the tragic hero until it is too late. That is what happens in the tragedy *Antigone*.

## CHAPTER 5 From "Red Thread Maiden"

### Historico-cultural Background

Although isolated in many ways, China has long played an important role in world history. Physical barriers such as the Gobi Desert to the north, and mountain

chains running north to south, tend to isolate parts of China, making central government control difficult. Indeed, historically, only three governments succeeded: the Han (206 B.C.E. - 220 C.E.); the T'ang; and the Ch'ing (1644 - 1911).

As in Mesopotamia, the earliest civilization in China arose between two rivers, the Yellow and the Yangtze, in Shen-si province. In this fertile area, settlements based on rice and millet culture developed and spread along the Kansu corridor to the lower reaches of the Yellow River (Huang Ho). Excavations at the ancient Shang capital at An-yang have brought to light a large group of exquisite bronzes as well as bones and tortoise shells bearing the first evidence of Chinese writing. These pictographs, dating to about the twelfth century B.C.E., were used in divination rituals.

The native Chinese religion, Taoism or Daoism--meaning "the way"--is a mystical, nature-oriented system. Its beliefs were overlaid by the humanistic teachings of Confucius (K'ung Fu-tzu, "K'ung the Master"). Confucianism taught a system of appropriate behavior in a political and social hierarchy.

The third major religious influence of ancient times came with the introduction of Buddhism by Indian monks following the Silk Route in the first century C. E. Based on the teachings of the Indian prince Gautama Shakyamuni, who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., Buddhism appeals to people of all classes. Gautama left his life of luxury to become a wandering monk; at age 35, he attained spiritual enlightenment and became known as Buddha. Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism devalues the present, physical world and seeks peace for the spirit in a state of nothingness.

#### MINI-LECTURE on "RED THREAD MAIDEN"

**China is the largest of all Asian countries and has the greatest population of any country in the world. At present, it consists of 21 provinces, some larger than European countries. The people of China are ethnically and linguistically diverse. Until the twentieth century, only three governments, including the T'ang, were able to control all of China.**

**The Chinese literary tradition is the oldest continuous written tradition in the world. The earliest literary works in the canon date to the fifth century B.C.E. and are referred to as the Confucian Five Classics. All of these works have been extensively commented upon by the followers of Confucius. The Five Classics includes *The Book of Songs*, a collection of poems which at an early time became models for every scholar. Indeed, the writing of poetry was considered necessary for any learned man and formed part of the civil service examinations. Prose literary forms such as short stories, plays, and novels were developed many centuries later.**

**Historically, China has a distinct religious and ethical system. The native Daoism or Taoism is based on mystical beliefs related to the natural world. Added to this are the teachings of the master Confucius. Confucianism taught a system of appropriate behavior in a political and social hierarchy that viewed the emperor as the Son of Heaven and earthly life as a mirror of the heavenly world. Confucius valued filial piety and piety toward the ancestors. Confucianism could best be summed up as a humanist respect for oneself and others, expressed by self-control, good**