

The Near East

Sumer

In the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates valley there developed a civilization as old if not older than Chinese civilization. At least by the end of the 3rd Millennium, the Sumerians, a non-Semitic people, were already beginning to write in an early form of cuneiform script. As the result of excavations at a place called Nippur, about one hundred miles from Baghdad, we now have a rich collection of written materials dated from the first half of the second millennium, from that people Samuel Noah Kramer said began history.

In many ways, Sumer stands in sharp contrast to China. In Sumer one sees the development of a complex mythology complete with cosmological ideas and a vast array of deities. Many of these gods do not die with the extinction of Sumer but live on with other names in Assyrian and Babylonian mythology. Also uncovered at Nippur were temples and other structures connected with holy places. Indeed, the idea of the ziggurat, that great "mountain" in the center of the world that so dominated Babylonian cities, found its origin in Babylonia's ancestor.

So too we find in Sumer the first attempts so far discovered to create a law code. While the Chinese preferred custom and ritual to legal code, the ancient Near East emphasized rules and regulations. This Sumerian idea became the inspiration for the Hammurabic Code and perhaps even for the Torah. Thus the law code is one of those features of religion that separates east and west Asia.

It should be noted that although Sumer was an important early urban center that developed many ideas that became common in many parts of the world, it was not an empire. Sumer seems to have been a cohesive urban center with a fairly uniform ethnicity. It was not an amalgam of many different tribal cultures but rather the spectacular development of one of them.

Egypt

In a very different sense one can say the same for Egypt, Sumer's great competitor for antiquity. It is true that Egypt, in his-

torical times, was created by a joining together of north and south Egypt. It is also true that at times Egypt sent armies out to control the Mediterranean littoral in order to better defend itself. Nevertheless, the Egyptian population seems to have been quite of a piece. Yes, there were Nubian slaves brought in to serve and refugees from west Asia who filtered in during times of distress, but over all, Egyptians were genetically and culturally similar. Egypt was not composed of conquered areas and peoples.

That fact certainly does not lessen our appropriate fascination with ancient Egypt and its culture. Even in the Early Bronze Age, when many other peoples still were living tribal lives, the Pharaohs of Egypt were already constructing those enormous pyramids that still create a tremendous sense of awe for the modern traveler. How were such early people able to construct those tombs using huge stones weighing many tons without the benefit of any modern equipment? It is enough to prompt modern myths about UFOs and alien builders.

Along with the pyramids, of course, one also finds a rich mythological culture carefully illustrated by those many tomb paintings. What is interesting, however, is that some of the most important Egyptian myths were never found in Egypt but are known only in their Greek version. I think particularly of the famous story of the death of Osiris and his recovery by his sister Isis.

About eighty Egyptian gods of various types have been identified. Many of them are pictured with animal heads. Among the most important are Osiris who once was, it is said, an Egyptian king, his sister Isis, his son Horus, and Horus' uncle Seth. After his murder, Osiris became the king of the dead, leaving his realm, Egypt, to be ruled over by his son Horus. Seth, however, contested the throne and there was a great battle between Horus and Seth. Horus won and ruled Egypt through the person of the Pharaoh.

Thus the Pharaoh was both a deity and the chief ritual officer of the land. The many temples that dotted the Nile valley were not for congregational worship. The Pharaoh appointed priests to offer the rituals—frequently animal sacrifice—in his stead. Through such state rituals the welfare of Egypt was protected. Although our view may be very much biased by the materials uncovered (for they have been largely from tombs), it seems clear

that, in a way, Egyptian religion was an affair for the state and not for the masses. Whatever individual religion was practiced has been left largely undocumented.

Unlike many Semitic peoples who generally cast doubts upon the possibility of anything but the darkest and least individual immortality, Egyptians did focus upon life after death, but there again, such immortality was for Pharaohs, their families, and their retinue. Whether the average Egyptian workers were thought to go to the land of Osiris was not of particular importance, at least in the early days. If they went, they went to serve the Pharaoh.

In any event, Egypt, like Sumer, seems to be the highly impressive but still natural outgrowth of tribal patterns of behavior. The effects of empire were only known later, as the Assyrians and Babylonians extended their boundaries over other peoples.

Assyria and Babylonia

The Tigris and Euphrates valleys, like the Nile valley and delta, were areas fit for agriculture and urban settlement. They became, during and after the age of Sumer, one of the centers for the development of human civilization. Unlike the Nile Valley, however, the Mesopotamian region was without natural defenses and thus was always subject to invasion, particularly from Arabia to the south and Persia to the east. So, the Mesopotamians learned to defend themselves and discovered that the best defense is frequently a good offense. That is to say, during much of the early history of this region, we find the peoples of the area seeking to expand their holdings, attempting to establish defensible borders farther and farther from the center of the kingdom. This led eventually to establishment of empires of considerable size.

One of the first empires was founded by Semitic invaders called the Amorites who united central and southern Mesopotamian states under the first Babylonian dynasty (circa 1830–1530 B.C.E.). Perhaps the best-known ruler from that dynasty was Hammurabi who lived about 1792–1750 B.C.E. and ruled over a very prosperous era in which Babylon controlled Assyria and part of Syria. Under his reign Marduk arises as the chief of the gods—a symbol for imperial power and might—though the famous Hammurabic law code was given, not by Marduk, but by Shamash, the Sun god.

Although China in general eschewed the proliferation of law codes and the Egyptians seem to have had little use for them, they became very important in the Near East. This is, in part, because Mesopotamian conquerors demanded that the conquered peoples give up their old gods to worship the deities of the victors. The law codes, in a way, replaced the old tribal lore to create a more universal standard of behavior. Small, unconquered tribes could simply rely upon their old folkways. Empires required a legal system. Such a legal system needed to have more than a human source; it needed divine authority. Shamash, the sun god, was a perfect lawgiver for the sun is universally known and travels through every region of the earth. He is also a symbol of enlightenment and knowledge.

The problem with a divinely given law code is that times change and laws fit for one age may become ineffective and irrelevant in the next. Thus the law code must be reinterpreted or replaced by a newly revealed code. Such problems were often made less difficult by the destruction of a dynasty by a foreign invader who could then introduce a new code. The longer a law code was in effect, however, the more the danger that it would become irrelevant.

Mesopotamian religion was, however, much more than law. It offered a highly complex mythology that served as a basis for the many elaborate rituals that were celebrated. The gods needed to be placated and obeyed, for if one fell into disfavor, the gods would abandon and the demons would attack, bringing illness and other catastrophes. Everything depended upon the very exact observance of the sacrifices and other offerings that the deities demanded, not only from individuals but from the state as well.

Ritual time was also exceedingly important and that encouraged very careful observation of the heavens in order to celebrate the various religious rituals at exactly the right moment. This led to the greatest development of mathematics and astronomy that the world had seen. It is to the Mesopotamians that we owe the western zodiac and the names of several constellations. Apparently the Mesopotamians also knew about the precession of the equinoxes long before Hipparchus “discovered” the phenomenon for the Hellenists in the second century B.C.E.

It is one thing to conquer a large empire; it is another to control it once it is conquered. The Assyrians and Babylonians tried to