

MESOPOTAMIA AND HIPPOPOTAMUS

by Stanley Bulbach

[Musings on *Judah in the Reign of Manasseh as Evidenced in Texts During the Neo-Assyrian Period and in the Archaeology of the Iron Age*, a doctoral thesis at New York University published in 1981.]

To the English speaking American, “Mesopotamia” had been a word that sounds as strange and silly as “hippopotamus.” That certainly doesn’t help us appreciate the importance of that region, its long history, and its relationship to our modern Western culture. If we don’t understand and appreciate the importance of the ancient Near East, particularly Mesopotamia, we will not be prepared to understand our contemporary world and to make wise decisions about it. Without seeing our past clearly, we can only barge blindly into the future.

Most of us have a general understanding that the origins of our modern Western civilization are founded in Classical Greece and Rome starting about 26 centuries ago. In reality, the origins of our modern western culture draw from the same older sources as ancient Greece and Rome had. Their Classical heights were founded upon the preceding cultures and history in Mesopotamia. And since the discovery of cuneiform texts in the mid-19th Century and their subsequent translation, we now have records of our cultural origins going back to the beginning of writing in the Near East. That means we no longer talking about 26 centuries ago, but twice as far back in time, to roughly 50 centuries ago.

This also means that the first half of our cultural and technical history is largely unknown to most of us save a few scholars in the ivory towers of our universities. Instead, when we think of ancient roots preceding Greece and Rome, we think about the Egyptian culture made so familiar by Hollywood, television documentaries, and “block-buster” museum exhibitions. Indeed, the written record of Egyptian history does start at around the same time as the Mesopotamian record or just a tiny bit later. But despite the photogenic allure of ancient Egypt to us moderns, relatively little of the ancient Egyptian culture contributed to the development of western culture. In sharp contrast, the contribution from Mesopotamia was enormous and has endured through the millennia.

For example, our modern form of law comes from Mesopotamia. Our forms of scientific observation, of dictionaries and grammars, our invention of standardized weights and measurements, our concepts of empire, our fundamental religious beliefs all come from the cultures of ancient Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, etc. The list is very long.

“Judah in the Reign of Manasseh as Evidenced in Texts During the Neo-Assyrian Period and in the Archaeology of the Iron Age” is a title that sounds like it could put a brick to sleep. But it is a thesis that tries to take a highly technical snapshot of one key century in the long history of Mesopotamia — roughly the 7th Century Before the Common Era (“BCE”). It is a pivotal century in many ways and a snapshot of it permits us an interesting vantage point from which to view the impact of the Near East on our modern lives and culture in the West.

The thesis ends with a number of conclusions. One of them, curiously, is that the boundaries of Judah — the Judahite “homeland” — survived the Neo-Assyrian conquest almost fully intact. Those boundaries are roughly what is today called the “West Bank,” one of the most intensely disputed regions on the globe today. Another conclusion of the survey of evidence in the thesis is that the coastal area between Judah and the Mediterranean is seen to have remained traditionally Philistinian, the eponymous ancestors of modern Palestinians. Subsequent history has cruelly swapped those boundaries posing a seemingly intractable, unsolvable conflict in our modern times.

Another conclusion of the thesis is perspective on the concept of “empire,” the development beyond the idea of kingship to the idea of emperor who rules over kings, and the curiously parallel maturation in Judah from the idea of a god of Israel to the belief of a sole god of the entire universe.

That development is another an example of the stunning impact of the Near East upon our contemporary lives. And it begins to clarify, I believe, my interest not only as an “Assyriologist,” but also as a contemporary fiber artist in the Near East.

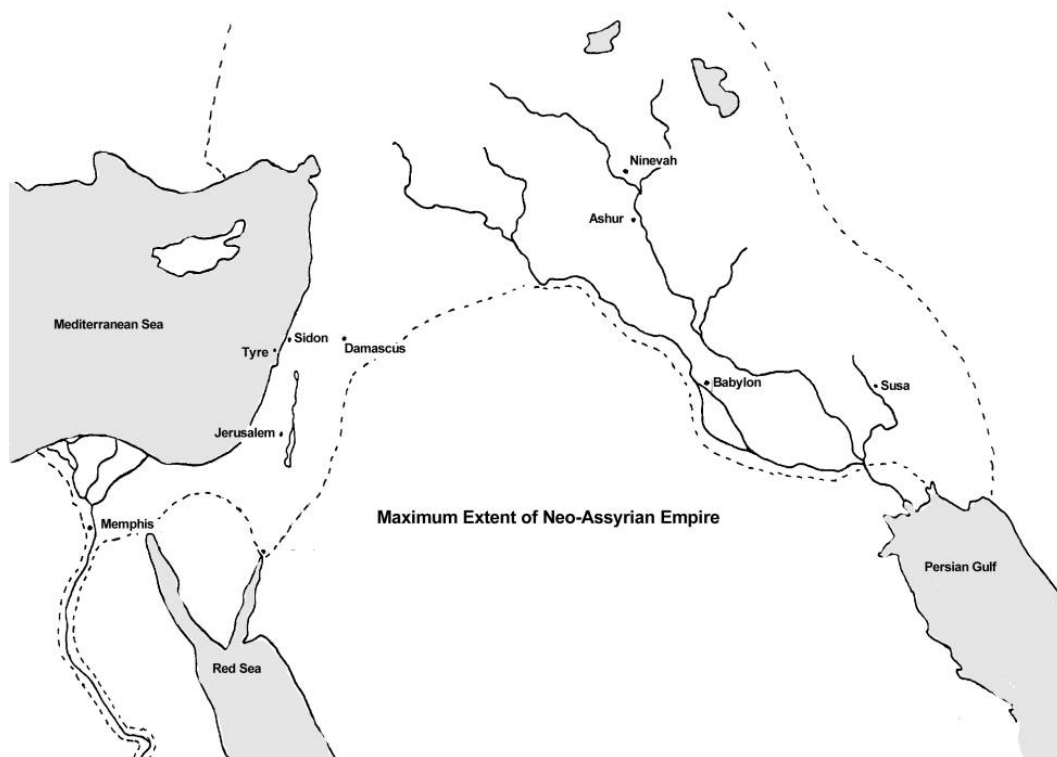
The three major religions of the modern world — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — are all firmly anchored upon ancient Hebrew prophecy. That prophecy was not so much the foretelling of the future, as it was that historic events are the result of the righteousness of ones actions, or the lack thereof. The central years of the famous period of classical Hebrew prophecy occurred in the 7th Century BCE at the same time the Neo-Assyrian Empire rose to its breathtaking heights. These two Near Eastern developments in religion and imperialism radically altered the course of Western civilization and both of these developments bear responsibility for the shape and nature of major aspects of our modern culture.

But historians are bedeviled by the unusually poor documentation at the crucial periods of both of these two striking phenomena. The striking hiatus in the records which appears simultaneously both in the biblical materials and in the Assyrian documents at that time impedes a better understanding of the central years of both of these cardinal developments. As a result, the difficulties of studying the effect of one development upon the other has not encouraged much examination of the interaction between the two.

Hebrew prophecy in the Biblical records was derivative of many internal elements and external influences. By the 8th Century BCE these factors combined to create a classical form of Hebrew prophecy which was unique. This prophecy further matured as the Jewish religion itself experienced the traumas of the next two centuries: the destruction of Samaria (the northern kingdom of Israel) and the loss of the Israelite tribes in 722-720 BCE; the Deuteronomistic “reforms” towards the end of the 7th Century BCE that reflected a growing urbanization; and the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon in the early 6th Century BCE.

This classical Hebrew prophecy has had inestimable effect upon the entire world. It recast Judaism from a regional cult whose god was stronger than other people’s gods into a religion whose theological concerns were universal. This was the final stage of evolution in Judaism from the henotheistic “God of Israel” who fought neighboring gods like Mat and Baal to true monotheism. Later from this classical Hebrew prophecy sprang forth Christianity, and later still, Islam.

The ascendancy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire — the other crucial development of the period — was also unique. Granted, as the Assyrians expanded their activity during the 8th Century BCE and peaked in the mid 7th, they were one of but many empires which in turn dominated the crest of civilization in the ancient Near East. However, it is essential to appreciate that it was this society which created the first domination of the entire Fertile Crescent, the first truly “universal” imperial system in the West, and therefore the first materialization of “world” domination to its peoples. What might have previously been an idea, was finally a reality. This innovation too had compelling impact upon future civilization in the West.



The Assyrian homeland in Mesopotamia and its key cities of Ashur and Ninevah lay north of Babylonia. Both societies were similar in language, religion and technology. Both societies had a very long preceding history. But there were significant differences between them too. For example, military conquest played a much larger role in the history of Assyria.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire is famous for its texts and its monuments that recorded and publicized its military strength. That strength was clearly impressive. Just considering technology, the Neo-Assyrians were using arrows with iron arrowheads that could pierce other metals. More than 7 centuries later, Rome would still be using much softer bronze. The Neo-Assyrians were also using siege machines and catapults at this early time. However, by the time of the Neo-Assyrian expansion, the growing empire was held together by much, much more than military power alone. The Assyrians were also known for their trade activity. For the first time in the West, empire under the Neo-Assyrians was coordinated by a comprehensive administration and by an economic surge of commercial activity on an international scale analogous to today's idea of a global economy.

Not only did the Neo-Assyrian expansion bring along standards of management and record keeping, it also established standardized weights and measurements, including even a way to determine the purity of gold used in commercial transactions.

For the first time in the West, the Assyrians established a "world" domination. It extended from the Persian Gulf in the east, up through Mesopotamia, west towards the Mediterranean, and all the way down to Upper Egypt in the south.

Since the beginning of recorded history there, the civilized oikomene of the Near East had been bipolar. The economic/political/cultural dynamic of civilization was typically divided between the Nilotic and the Mesopotamian centers of powers. But it was under the Neo-Assyrian emperor, Esarhaddon, in the early 7th Century BCE, when Assyria invaded the heartland of Egypt and instituted specific controls in such a manner that the entire contemporary Near East perceived Assyria to be the uncontested supreme ruler of all the known civilized world. Historical civilization in the West — civilization leaving written records — which was already 2½ millennia old at that time, viewed itself for the first time as capable of being under the rule of a single political power and its ruler. For the first time, "Ruler of the Universe" was not merely an idea. Suddenly, it was a material and political reality.

This of course compares interestingly with the novel contemporary focus of Hebrew classical prophecy on world history. At the same time that people are coming to terms with the idea of a single imperial power dominating their world, there thrives a prophetic tradition that begins speaking of a single god of the entire universe.

The apparent parallels between the developments in this biblical theology and this Assyrian imperial history are tantalizing. Ironically, it is difficult to examine the apparent parallels between these two crucial developments. We are impeded by one indisputable parallel. Again, at the very center of this white hot intellectual, material, religious and political activity we only find gaps in the records of both cultures.

In the Hebrew Prophetic movement, we find the records of the “new” or “great” prophets accumulating from Amos and Micah and peaking with Isaiah. That record includes the detailed history of Hezekiah, King of Judah, and the famous Neo-Assyrian siege of Jerusalem at the turning of the 8th Century BCE to the 7th. That siege is recorded not only in the Bible, but also the Assyrian Annals. Its archeological evidence survives today at the Siloam Tunnel in Jerusalem. Then there is almost a century of very little prophetic material and relatively sparse historical record. The prophetic materials appear to resume only much later with the prophecies of Nahum at the time of Josiah from about the year 620 BCE. Only after that came Jeremiah at the end of that century, and then after him, Ezekiel.

The Neo-Assyrian records continue longer than the Hebrew records. The last documents with significant details address how the Neo-Assyrians had successfully quelled the Babylonian rebellion in 648 BCE during the acme of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Then the stream of recovered documents suddenly grows silent. The cuneiform record is resumed only at the end of the century by the account in the “Babylonian Chronicles” of the destruction of the remnant of the Assyrian Empire. This is an alarming loss of record. Not much information about one of history’s most dramatic falls of empire is available for modern research.

When the Hebrew text of Nahum, a minor prophet, does finally break the silence for us later on, his report about the Neo-Assyrians is breathtaking:

Multiply yourselves like the locust;
multiply like the grasshopper!
You increased your merchants
more than the stars of the heavens.
The locust spreads its wings and flies away.
Your princes are like grasshoppers,
your scribes like clouds of locusts
settling on the fences in a day of cold —
when the sun rises, they fly away;
no one knows where they are.
Your shepherds are asleep,
O king of Assyria;
your nobles slumber.

Nahum 3:15b-17

The strongest power on earth up to that time, the most technically advanced society, a culture with libraries, zoos, gardens, roads, administrators, and a reach throughout the entire Fertile Crescent has suddenly disappeared like departing locusts.

By chance or circumstance, history has glossed over one of the most important generations in the development of Western and Near Eastern civilization. But after that silence we find firmly planted an idea of universal standards, a universal ruler; and in Judah, the new idea of a sole god of the entire universe.

The written history in Mesopotamia begins about 5,000 years ago, so there were many other generations and developments important to our modern lives to explore, understand, and appreciate. I believe that some of that exploration, understanding, and appreciation can be captured and expressed in art. As empire after empire arose, our cultural ideas were expressed in the textile arts. The ancient textile technologies and arts reflect not only some of the modern world's most fundamental religious and cultural ideas, they also reflect the roots of our economies and sciences.

If Mesopotamia sounds as strange and funny as hippopotamus, certainly it's not the fault of the ancient Mesopotamians. Both those words come from a later language, the ancient Greek. Both words share the same root, the Classical Greek for "river"; as in "Land between the rivers" and "river horse."

Our modern lives are all products of a very long river of tradition, culture, and history. And as an artist, I try to entice forth some of that past from its shadows for us to see and reflect upon.

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