1 Mesopotamia

The whole history of Western culture is a history of migrations from East to West and from North to South, wave after wave of peoples, speaking various languages and bringing various levels of culture. These early peoples lived in the simplest way, but they had developed techniques of organized farming which made them different from more primitive peoples who depended only on hunting and picking wild plants. The first farming people entered Europe around 8000 B.C..

Some time soon after 5000 B.C., something vital happened to humanity. People began, in various places, at Babylon in Mesopotamia, at Jericho in Israel, at Catal Huyuk in Turkey, and elsewhere, to build large numbers of houses close together. The result was the first cities, the beginning of modern society, of urban living (Latin urbs means town). The Greek word for city is polis. Here too lies the begin-ning of "politics"! The earliest remains of towns to be found in Meso-potamia are dated to 5000-4000 B.C.

Mesopotamia lies between what is now called Armenia (between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea) to the North and the tip of the Persian Gulf to the South. From the Armenian mountains two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, flow down, roughly parallel, and the land between them, surrounded by desert, was made fertile by the annual floods caused by the melting of the snow in springtime. "Mesopotamia" means "land between the rivers" in Greek. It corresponds to modern Iraq.

To the South-East of Mesopotamia lay Persia (now called Iran), and beyond that, the great sub-continent of India into which Sanskrit--speaking Aryans were to bring a culture related closely to that of Western Europe. Mesopotamia itself was really a double cultural space. To the North lay Assyria, centered on Nineveh, to the South was Babylonia centered in the city of Babylon (sometimes called Babel in the Bible), with the city of Ur not far from the Persian Gulf, in the South, and Haran (the home of Abraham in the Bible) far to the North.

Sumerian Culture

The first major culture to arise in Mesopotamia was that of the Sumerians, who arrived on the site of Babylon soon after 4000 B.C. and who main-tained a strong influence over the whole area as far as the Mediter-ranean for almost 2000 years. At the same time, the Egyptians were independently developing a sophisticated culture in the valley of the Nile. There is no other known language related to the Sumerian language.

While Western Europe was still in its Neolithic (New Stone Age) phase until 1700 B.C., Sumerian civilization was at its height and by 3000 had developed the earliest known form of writing, called cuneiform, picto-grams written on soft clay by the triangular stem of the papyrus reed, then baked hard and preserved until today in the dry sands of the desert areas, or in the fires which destroyed the cities.

The Sumerians discovered much of what we call technology and science. By 3500 they were smelting copper, gold and silver. By 3000, masons (builders) and smiths (metal workers) were specialists, wheeled vehicles were being used, and pottery was being made on the potter's wheel. Many have said that the wheel is the greatest human invention. Some time around 3000 the loom spread into Europe, another great advance, but at that same time, the Sumerians were inventing the oil lamp which allowed work to continue after nightfall, and, like the Egyptians and the Chinese, had begun scientific observations of the sun and the movements of the stars. In Egypt and in Mesopotamia, systems for writing numbers were invented.

One of the main factors in the development of Sumerian civilization was the need to come to agreement on the use of water in the irrigation canals on which agriculture, thus life, depended. In this way they discovered the need for laws which could be enforced with penalties, society became a structure of rights and obligations, something more than mere family or village ties.

Sumerian culture was basically agricultural and until metal coins were invented (3000-2500 B.C.) they used barley as money. These first city-dwellers built special temples for the celebration of religious rites and their religion was of the same kind as that found in Egypt, among the Hittites and Phoenicians and as far north as Scandinavia, a religion with a Mother-goddess and her son who dies but

is restored to life, only to die again. This fertility religion is closely linked to the cycles of the year, seed-time in spring, germination and growth, harvest and then barren winter.

A vital moment in history comes between 3000 and 2500 B.C.. New arrivals in Mesopotamia, settling in the northern area (Assyria) are speaking forms of Semitic languages which today have evolved into Hebrew and Arabic. At the same time, others move down into the very fertile coastal region of Lebanon (famous for its forests) and create the Phoenician towns of Tyre, Sidon and Byblos.

The First Assyrian Empire

Around the year 2300, Sargon of Agade took control of the whole of Mesopotamia, parts of Syria and Asia Minor and sent soldiers as far as Crete. This first example of far-flung control only lasted about 50 years but it is a sign that societies were emerging that were capable of great organization. What caused its collapse was the arrival of new groups. The Semitic newcomers, Elamites and Amorites, whose names are found in the Bible, seem to have given new energy to Babylon, which became a major centre of power under Hammurabi (1790-1750). Hammurabi is remembered as the first great codifier of laws.

From this time, for over 1000 years there is little to report. The focus of our story moves to Egypt and then to Israel, where Mesopotamia plays a vital role in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile of 587.

Mesopotamian Mythology

Sumerian society kept the old village system of “popular democracy”, decisions being made by all the adult males after long dis-cussions. The kings were more like priests, indeed, in many cultures the idea of kingship seems to originate from sacred functions rather than from exercise of power. The main cult was linked to the fertility myths of the new year and the need to renew the gods’ interest in the crops. The stories of the gods, varying through the centuries, were in the form of myths and came to be expressed in epic form; the most famous Mesopotamian epic is that of Gilgamesh but there are others, as well as songs lamenting the death of the shepherd god Tammuz, whose return from the dead heralded the return of fertility to the new year.

The Sumerian vision of the gods was similar to their experience of human society; the gods, each with particular but limited responsibility, are thought of as a pantheon where individuals are constantly fighting and competing with each other. Human destiny depends on the outcome of these quarrels. Each city is under a particular deity, who may for a while lose power to another, following which the city will also be conquered by that other god’s city. Such anthropomorphic pantheons are equally found in Greece and Scandinavia, and there are many similarities. The great difference lies in the nature of the central figure. In the older system, widespread, the central focus is on the Mother Goddess whose son is the dying and reborn power of fertility. Later, almost everywhere, the Indo-European invaders introduce another set of figures, a patriarchal pantheon with the Storm God in some kind of position of often threatened power.

A summary of Gilgamesh

In the time before the Flood, there was a city, Shuruppak, on the banks of the Euphrates. There, the counsel of the gods held a secret meeting; they all resolved to destroy the world in a great flood. All the gods were under oath not to reveal this secret to any living thing, but Ea (one of the gods that created humanity) came to Utnapishtim’s house and told the secret to the walls of Utnapishtim’s house, thus not technically violating his oath to the rest of the gods. He advised the walls of Utnapishtim’s house to build a great boat, its length as great as its breadth, to cover the boat, and to bring all living things into the boat.

Utnapishtim gets straight to work and finishes the great boat by the new year. Utnapishtim then loads the boat with gold, silver, and all the living things of the earth, and launches the boat. Ea orders

him into the boat and commands him to close the door behind him. The black clouds arrive, with the thunder god Adad rumbling within them; the earth splits like an earthenware pot, and all the light turns to darkness. The Flood is so great that even the gods are frightened:

> The gods shook like beaten dogs, hiding in the far corners of heaven,
>
> Ishtar screamed and wailed:
> "The days of old have turned to stone:
> We have decided evil things in our Assembly!
> Why did we decide those evil things in our Assembly?
> Why did we decide to destroy our people?
> We have only just now created our beloved humans;
> We now destroy them in the sea!"
> All the gods wept and wailed along with her,
> All the gods sat trembling, and wept.

The Flood lasts for seven days and seven nights, and finally light returns to the earth. Utnapishtim opens a window and the entire earth has been turned into a flat ocean; all humans have been turned to stone. Utnapishtim then falls to his knees and weeps.

Utnapishtim's boat comes to rest on the top of Mount Nimush; the boat lodges firmly on the mountain peak just below the surface of the ocean and remains there for seven days. On the seventh day:

> I [Utnapishtim] released a dove from the boat,
> It flew off, but circled around and returned,
> For it could find no perch.
> I then released a swallow from the boat,
> It flew off, but circled around and returned,
> For it could find no perch.
> I then released a raven from the boat,
> It flew off, and the waters had receded:
> It eats, it scratches the ground, but it does not circle around and return.
> I then sent out all the living things in every direction and
> sacrificed a sheep on that very spot.

The gods smell the odor of the sacrifice and begin to gather around Utnapishtim. Enlil, who had originally proposed to destroy all humans, then arrives, furious that one of the humans had survived, since they had agreed to wipe out all humans. He accuses Ea of treachery, but Ea convinces Enlil to be merciful. Enlil then seizes Utnapishtim and his wife and blesses them:

> At one time Utnapishtim was mortal.
> At this time let him be a god and immortal;
> Let him live in the far away at the source of all the rivers.

At the end of his story, Utnapishtim offers Gilgamesh a chance at immortality. If Gilgamesh can stay awake for six days and seven nights, he, too, will become immortal. Gilgamesh accepts these conditions and sits down on the shore; the instant he sits down he falls asleep.

Utnapishtim tells his wife that all men are liars, that Gilgamesh will deny having fallen asleep, so he asks his wife to bake a loaf of bread every day and lay the loaf at Gilgamesh's feet. Gilgamesh sleeps without ever waking up for six days and seven nights, at which point Utnapishtim wakes him up. Startled, Gilgamesh says, "I only just dozed off for half a second here." Utnapishtim points out the loaves of bread, showing their states of decay from the most recent, fresh bread, to the oldest, moldy, stale bread that had been laid at his feet on the very first day. Gilgamesh is distraught:

> O woe! What do I do now, where do I go now?

Death has devoured my body,
Death dwells in my body,
Wherever I go, wherever I look, there stands Death!

Utnapishtim's wife convinces the old man to have mercy on him; he offers Gilgamesh in place of immortality a secret plant that will make Gilgamesh young again. The plant is at the bottom of the ocean surrounding the Far‑Away; Gilgamesh ties stones to his feet, sinks to the bottom, and plucks the magic plant. But he doesn't use it because he doesn't trust it; rather he decides to take it back to Uruk and test it out on an old man first, to make sure it works.

Urshanabi takes him across the Waters of Death. Several leagues inland, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi stop to eat and sleep; while they're sleeping, a snake slithers up and eats the magic plant (which is why snakes shed their skin) and crawls away. Gilgamesh awakens to find the plant gone; he falls to his knees and weeps:

For whom have I labored? For whom have I journeyed?
For whom have I suffered?
I have gained absolutely nothing for myself,
I have only profited the snake, the ground lion!

The tale ends with Gilgamesh, at the end of his journey standing before the gates of Uruk, inviting Urshanabi to look around and view the greatness of this city, its high walls, its masonwork, and here at the base of its gates, as the foundation of the city walls, a stone of lapis lazuli on which is carved Gilgamesh's account of his exploits.