

The Idea of History in Ancient Mesopotamia

I. NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

IN THE INTELLECTUAL WORLD OF THE SUMERIANS NO CONCEPTS would seem to be more distinctive and fundamental than the associated ideas of *n a m* and *m e*. The first has the approximate force of our "essence" and "destiny" combined. The other has no suitable analogue in the world of ideas with which we are familiar, for *m e* appears to be the activating feature appropriate to each *n a m* and required for its proper functioning.¹ Every essential element of nature and society has its individual *m e*.² Cosmic rule and kingship on earth, qualities and emotions noble as well as base, arts and crafts—these and many others become dormant when their special *m e* is absent.³

No rendering of such an intimate cultural term can be

¹ Cf. B. Landsberger, *Archiv für Keilschriftforschung*, 2 (1924-25), 64-8; *Islamica*, 2 (1926), 369; *Fakültesi Dergisi*, 3, 154.

² See Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, pp. 64-7.

³ When the Zû bird stole the Tablets of Destinies from Enlil every *m e* became inoperative; cf. *ANET*, pp. 111 ff. Does this myth imply that the Tablets of Destinies controlled each and every *m e* or that they constituted the individual *m e* of the universe on which all others depended?

more than a rough approximation. We may choose "norm" or "decree," "dynamic force" or the like.⁴ We may go on to point out that the *m e* was endowed with esoteric and enduring properties. Yet, for all our efforts, we find ourselves unable to evoke the meaning inherent in the native term. It is in the nature of distinctive civilizations that their distinguishing features cannot be lifted intact out of their context. Neither can their original designations be translated into words stemming from a foreign source and based on alien experiences.

Ideas of history peculiar to a given society are likely to constitute some of that society's most meaningful features. Because they reflect, however, basic societal values, they are difficult for outsiders to apprehend. To appreciate the Mesopotamian idea of history in all its ramifications we should need to know in effect what the Sumerians, who played a major role in the evolution of the civilization of Mesopotamia, conceived as the *n a m* and the *m e* of history in general and their own history in particular. This we cannot determine. The two characteristic concepts, which are elusive for us in the first place,⁵ are never applied by the sources to an institution or an abstraction which we could confidently equate with "history." All of this is a fair measure of the complexity of the problem that now confronts us.

⁴ For a recent discussion see T. Jacobsen, *JNES*, 5 (1946), 139, n. 20, where "*modus operandi*" is proposed as a reasonable approximation.

⁵ It is significant in this connection that Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, p. 16, in analyzing the nature of civilization, concludes that its two primary aspects are "form and dynamics." Now "form," or "the elusive identity" of a given civilization or of any of its distinctive components, is for all practical purposes very close to the Sumerian *n a m*; and "dynamics" would be as good a rendering of *m e* as has yet been suggested. Frankfort does not adduce our terms for a possible comparison, but he might easily have done so. It would thus seem that the Sumerians had already anticipated this particular—and altogether convincing—result.

Does this absence of a native term corresponding to our "history" imply that Mesopotamia, in its long career as an integral civilization, failed to evolve a particular idea of history? Hardly. The historic Mesopotamian was keenly aware of his past; he was forever busy recording its details; and he was intent on drawing from the past certain practical lessons. All this can readily be demonstrated. What is less obvious is the over-all system resulting from the sum of such interests and activities. The sense of history varies from place to place and from period to period. In the ancient Near East that sense was highly developed in Palestine⁶ but very little, apparently, in Egypt. To the Mesopotamian, history was something involved in the larger issues of life and destiny as manifested in the past, tied up with the present, and projected into the future. But it was also something to be lived, not dissected. Accordingly, the Mesopotamian's awareness of the process was reflected in numerous ways, but it did not lead to a direct statement of principles.

Our conception then, of the idea of history in ancient Mesopotamia has to be pieced together from the incidental reflections of that idea in sundry phases of the underlying civilization. We can thus expect here only a reflection of a reflection or, to paraphrase a distinguished student of historiosophy, a reflection of the

⁶ Cf. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums* II/2 (1931), 285: "So hat die Blütezeit des jüdischen Königtums eine wirkliche Geschichtsschreibung geschaffen." Contrast, however, Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 12: "two forms of quasi-history, theocratic history and myth, dominated the whole of the Near East until the rise of Greece." This is not the place to demonstrate in detail that Meyer's statement rests on a sounder foundation than Collingwood's. But in justice to Collingwood's provocative study it should be added that its author had not had the opportunity to acquaint himself with much essential information on the progress of historiography among "our forerunners in civilization."

second degree⁷—our analysis of the analysis of the ancients indirectly conveyed. To attempt this we have to approach the subject with the fragmentary data of our own age, two millennia and more after the history in question had come to a close at long last. Yet the results need not be unduly speculative, for the themes involved pervade large areas of Mesopotamian civilization and are thus capable of repeated control. The question is whether we can reassemble the component motifs into a self-consistent pattern.

Most of the pertinent material has been treated in separate investigations by eminently competent authorities.⁸ Larger portions of the total design have also been subjected to penetrating analysis.⁹ All such results loom large in the presentation that follows. Yet no study to date has focused directly on the whole topic before us; although some of the territory has been well explored, large stretches of it remain untouched. To that extent therefore our argument must carry with it some of the risks and hazards of an initial effort. This is not, to be sure, a case of a writer rushing in but an instance of his

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ See Olmstead, *Assyrian Historiography*, University of Missouri Studies in Social Science, Ser. III, Vol. I (1916) which although antiquated and rather tangential to the present topic, being primarily a textual comparison of late annals, is still useful; Güterbock, *ZA*, 42, Pt. I, 1-91, a penetrating and pioneering discussion; Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, AS 11 (1939) which is no less important, although limited to the earliest phase of the problem. Note also Mowinkel, *Gunkel Festschrift*, pp. 278-322, and W. A. Irwin, "The Orientalist as Historian," *JNES*, 8 (1949), 298-309.

⁹ Cf. e.g., these major studies on the connection between religion and the state in Mesopotamia, a subject that has a pronounced bearing on the question before us: Labat, *Le caractère religieux de la royauté assyro-babylonienne*; Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East*; Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*. See also Jacobsen, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (ed. H. and H. A. Frankfort) pp. 125-222, and Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. Other references will be given in the course of the discussion.

having been persuaded to take the plunge. Nevertheless, the wisdom of a venture must be open to doubt when the field is one where angels have not been known to tarry.

II. THE GENERAL CULTURAL SETTING

Our task, then, is first, to seek out the principal elements which enter in one way or another into the concept of history in ancient Mesopotamia; and second, to inquire whether these sundry elements yield anything resembling a harmonious design. Before we survey the separate motifs we must touch briefly on three broader themes which furnish the essential background. These themes are civilization, religion, and government. It goes without saying that only the roughest kind of outline is possible at this time; no more than is necessary to suggest how each of these factors might affect the superimposed idea of history.

1. CIVILIZATION

Mesopotamian civilization reaches back to remote prehistoric times—an indeterminate number of centuries prior to 3,000 B.C.—and it survives as an active force until Hellenistic times. The prehistoric age, although brilliantly illuminated in some respects, must forever remain dim and inarticulate in others, notably in the social and intellectual fields.¹⁰ This is precisely why it is prehistoric. The long historic span, however, is richly documented thanks to the presence of writing. The picture that

¹⁰ Cf., in general, Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization*, pp. 32 ff.; Speiser, *JAOS*, 59, suppl. 4, 17-31.

emerges is clear enough in its main contours, although innumerable details remain obscure.

Perhaps clearest of all is the fact that the underlying civilization enjoyed substantial uniformity throughout its long career. This is not to imply that it was a static civilization; its dynamic character is constantly in evidence. But the statement can be made and upheld that certain basic values present from the start retain their vitality to the very end. Dominant beliefs and practices which we notice under the Sargonids of Akkad, in the third millennium, are still in vogue in the first millennium, under the Sargonids of Nineveh. The changes that the passing centuries bring with them do not affect the main framework. For purposes of our over-all appraisal, therefore, the cultural constants outweigh the chronological variables.¹¹

It is particularly noteworthy that this essential uniformity of Mesopotamian civilization throughout its historic course was maintained in spite of a great diversity of participants. For Mesopotamia, unlike Egypt or Palestine, was not the home of a single dominant ethnic group in the period under discussion. On the contrary, several significant groups pass in review, usually more than one at a time. The Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians are the best known, but there are others. The Sumerians, moreover, inject into the scene the potentially disruptive feature of a language apart. The common

¹¹ It should be stressed in passing that over its long course Mesopotamian civilization confronts us with abundant evidence for discontinuity as well as continuity and that opinions differ in regard to the interpretation of these contrasting phenomena; cf. Speiser, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 23, Pt. I, 339-56; [see above, pp. 213 ff.] Yet such differences of opinion center primarily about sundry details. The over-all structure remains uniform and self-consistent.

civilization, then, was uniquely cosmopolitan. It transcended ethnic, linguistic, and political boundaries, achieving cultural unity where disparity would be the normal outcome.

This unusual attainment of unity through disparity must be credited to the Sumerians. It is wholly immaterial in this connection what position one takes in regard to the question of ultimate Sumerian priority.¹² The long prehistoric stage lacked the means to leave to posterity definite ethnolinguistic criteria. All it could do was strew the area with material remains of several distinctive cultures.¹³ Eventually, however, the survivors are drawn within a single orbit. They come to reflect the same kind of cultural content and direction in religion and literature, law and government, arts and sciences.¹⁴ By that time the normative features are unmistakably Sumerian. These features appear early in the historic age. And whether the Sumerians had been on the scene from the very beginning or had arrived recently—which the present writer regards as an inescapable conclusion—it is they who made history beyond all dispute.

The fact, however, that the Sumerians were not alone in building up the civilization of Mesopotamia had this important consequence. For all cultural purposes, the land was bilingual: for the last two thousand years of its

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. Perkins, *The Comparative Archeology of Early Mesopotamia*.

¹⁴ Political differences, notably between Babylonia and Assyria, could not offset the underlying cultural unity. Thus, Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria, whose concluding years dovetailed with the beginning of Hammurabi's reign, caused his own inscriptions to be couched in the style and spirit of Babylonia. His lead was followed by all Assyrian rulers after 1350 B.C.; cf. Landsberger and Balkan, *Belleten* 14 (1950), 220. Analogous instances could be adduced for various other phases of the intellectual life of Assyria.

history the literate elements had to make use not alone of the Semitic Akkadian but also of the unrelated Sumerian.¹⁵ Recourse to two languages was a broadening experience in many ways. It implied a victory over parochialism, some capacity for toleration, and a certain universality of outlook. And the eventual bearer of this heritage, in the strict cultural sense, was not properly a Sumerian, a Babylonian, or an Assyrian. He was essentially a Mesopotamian.

2. RELIGION

The tendency toward universalism just mentioned is most clearly evident in religion. And since the religion of Mesopotamia was in all essentials a contribution of the Sumerians, we may speak this time specifically of the Sumerian religion. Perhaps its two outstanding features are the human attributes of its gods and their identification with the powers of nature and the cosmos. It is on this last count that we have here a universalistic, and certainly a supranational, conception of religion.

Furthermore, the Sumerian saw in the society of the gods the prototype of human society. The two interpenetrated. Man took his cue from the gods at the same time that the gods were being drawn closer to mankind.¹⁶ No one god was the sole source of power and authority. All the leading figures of the pantheon had themselves been created. None was fully secure in his status, none

¹⁵ Hence when the combined Sumero-Akkadian vehicle proved its usefulness farther afield, as it did with the Hittites, the ultimate tool became trilingual to some extent, as any student of Hittite will feelingly confirm.

¹⁶ Cf. the literature cited in n. 9; also Landsberger, *Fakültesi Dergisi*, 3, 151.

really omnipotent. Authority resided in the community of the gods. As a community, the gods required organization. This organization took the form of a state. The state, in turn, was a self-governing body and, as such, a safeguard against absolutism.

But the lack of absolute authority on the part of any one god led to uncertainty about the actions of the divine powers combined. Nothing was settled for all time, nothing could be taken for granted; hence the anxiety and the insecurity of the mortals, who must forever be intent on propitiating the gods in order to obtain a favorable decision. The view that nothing was permanent and that the gods were unpredictable brought with it a fitful and dramatic conception of the universe, one that called for constant watchfulness and elaborate ritual.¹⁷ By the same token, however, there was always room for hope rather than apathy and resignation.

3. GOVERNMENT

Since the cosmos was conceived as a state, and since government on earth was a replica of divine government, the Mesopotamian state must correspond to the cosmic state. This principle remains valid throughout the entire history of Mesopotamia. It follows that the authority of the mortal ruler was severely circumscribed by two factors. First, his mandate stemmed from the gods to whom he was responsible for his every move. Second, the head of the pantheon lacked absolute power, in that the cosmic

¹⁷ See Frankfort, *Intellectual Adventure*, ch. 1, and *Kingship and the Gods*, Bk. II. The fundamental fact is the limited authority of any one god, no matter how high his position in the pantheon.

state subscribed to the principle of government by assembly.¹⁸ Hence so it must be also with government on earth.

The normative place of the assembly in the sociopolitical structure of Mesopotamia has only recently come in for proper appreciation.¹⁹ It is a feature that combines with the overriding importance of the law to impose effective checks on unilateral authority. No major societal undertaking can be sanctioned without the prior approval of the appropriate assembly. This applied to the choice of the head of the pantheon²⁰ or to the grant of immortality to a mortal,²¹ just as it does to political moves by human rulers,²² whether these be legendary or historical. In this all-pervasive safeguard against autocracy lies perhaps the key to the appeal and the magnetism which Mesopotamian civilization exercised upon many neighboring cultures.

So much for the general cultural setting against which we must now endeavor to trace the idea of history in Mesopotamia. To some extent the background has already determined the scale and disclosed the outlines of the design that we seek to recover. But the whole cannot

¹⁸ Cf. Jacobsen, *Intellectual Adventure*, pp. 125 ff., and *JNES*, 2, 159 ff. For similar results arrived at from a different starting point cf. Speiser, *Studies in the History of Science* (Philadelphia, 1941), pp. 1-13, and *Waldo Leland Volume*, pp. 51-62.

¹⁹ In addition to the references in n. 18, cf. also, Oppenheim, 5, 224 ff.

²⁰ "The Creation Epic," Tab. 3, ll. 130 ff. (*ANET*, p. 64 f.).

²¹ "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tab. XI, ll. 197-8.

²² An Old Assyrian text expresses this in a succinct formula: "Ashur is the king; Irishum is [but] the toparch [*iššakku*] for Ashur"; cf. Landsberger and Balkan, *Bulleten* 14, 231. Similarly, in the Cappadocian tablets *Sarrum-kên* (Sargon) I of Ashur is only a *rubā'um*, or "prince," whereas the ruler of Hattum boasts the title of *šarrum*, or "king"; cf. *ibid.*, p. 231 and *Orientalia*, 20 (1951), 483. Thus, far from being despotic, as has often been alleged, the Assyrian rulers were careful to emphasize their subsidiary role in affairs of state, for even there the leading parts were reserved for the gods.

be placed in focus without due attention to the component parts.

III. NATURE OF THE SOURCE MATERIAL

Before there can be any systematic thought about history there must be sufficient interest in the past. For such preoccupation in Mesopotamia there is manifold and extensive evidence. Much of it consists of direct historical references: regnal lists, chronicles, annals. In addition to these there are literary compositions in which bare historical facts have been woven into a richer fabric of myth and legend; historical tales, in short, as opposed to straight history. That literature should go to the past for its most popular motifs is in itself significant. But echoes of remote days are not confined to literature. They are clearly audible also in a field that has no room for fancy, the deadly serious field of omens. Another form of awareness of the past is attested in certain architectural practices. And lastly, a number of Mesopotamian rulers have left us concrete evidence of their antiquarian pursuits, with an occasional hint as to motivation. These, then, are the main types of sources where we must look for the fugitive idea of history in Mesopotamia. The clue these sources furnish will be followed up later in the so-called wisdom literature. First, however, let us isolate that clue. We shall begin with the rulers whose antiquarian leanings are noted in the records.

Royal inquiries into the past are connected as a rule with religious matters. They may revolve, for instance, about the building history of major temples. Thus we are told by Shalmaneser I, an Assyrian ruler of the 13th

century, that a temple at Ashur originally built by Ushpia had been rebuilt by Irishum I (i.e., Erishu), restored 159 years later by Shamshi-Adad, and reconstructed by Shalmaneser himself after a lapse of 580 years.²³ The same temple required urgent attention under Esarhaddon, who counts another 580 years between Shalmaneser's reconstruction and his own.²⁴ The fact that the various computations reveal some discrepancies need not concern us here. It is the detailed record of the successive restorations that is alone important in the present instance.

Of similar import is the statement by Ashurbanipal that, on capturing Susa, he was able to recover the image of the goddess Nana which the Elamite Kudur-Nahundi had carried off from Uruk 1,635 years before.²⁵ Likewise related is the observation by Nabonidus, a frustrated archeologist turned king, that 3,200 years had elapsed between the burial of Naram-Sin's foundation inscription of the Shamash temple at Sippar and his own recovery of that inscription.²⁶ Once again the chronology does not stand up to modern audits, but the research behind such data cannot be ignored.²⁷

How is this form of interest in the past to be explained? The answer is hinted at by the Old Assyrian king Irishum I, the same ruler who is cited first by Shalmaneser I, and later, by Esarhaddon. In writing about the Ashur Temple, Irishum says: "Should the building grow weak with age, and a king like me wishes to rebuild the structure, he

²³ KAH, I, 13, col. 3, ll. 32 ff.

²⁴ A. Poebel, JNES, I (1942), 290 ff.; E. Weidner, AFO, 15 (1945-51), 89.

²⁵ Cf. L. W. King, *Chronicles Concerning Early Babylonian Kings* (1907), I, 12, n. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11, n. 2.

²⁷ For other ancient retrospects of this kind cf. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*, 2, 363.

shall not displace the nail that I have driven in, but shall restore it to its place."²⁸ The nail or peg (*sikkatum*), as has recently been demonstrated, is here—and in many instances elsewhere—a symbol of the completion and dedication of a solemn project for which the protection of the appropriate deity is being invoked. It is in a sense the outward sign of a pact between the devout builder and his deity. The usage can be traced back, independently, well into the 3d millennium.²⁹

We may assume, then, that temples were viewed in Mesopotamia, from early days on, as the embodiment of a covenant between a god and his community. It was vitally important for succeeding generations that the covenant, and the good will which it betokened, be maintained. Hence the original foundations must not be disregarded in later repairs and alterations. Nor must the symbol of relationship with the deity, the peg that literally nailed down the agreement, be moved from its original spot.

It thus follows that here was one practical and vital reason for the constant and exacting study for the past. That reason was the urgent need for not upsetting the friendly relations with the cosmic powers that had been established in the past. A distant echo of this policy is reflected in II Kings 17:24 ff. The people whom the Assyrians had transplanted to Israel after the fall of Samaria are instructed by the conqueror to make their peace with the god of the vanquished in order to obviate his wrath.

The principle that the past must be studied so that the present may learn how to get along is evidenced also

²⁸ Landsberger and Balkan, *Bulleten* 14, 224 ff., ll. 19–23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252 ff.

in the process of assembling great libraries of ancient records, notably the library of Ashurbanipal.³⁰ There was a utilitarian purpose to that king's intellectual pretensions. He spells it out for us himself. In an itemized order for texts to be procured—looted might be a better term—in the city of Borsippa, there is included a blanket request for "rituals, prayers, inscriptions on stone, and whatever may be good for kingship," as well as "any tablet or ritual . . . that is good for my palace."³¹ The phrases "good for kingship" and "good for my palace" go a long way toward defining the meaning of the past as viewed by Mesopotamian royalty. It was a case of self-interest, even enlightened self-interest, in a sense. The past was significant because it could inform the present in regard to the future. But what was the information thus gathered and the lesson obtained from it?

Before we take up this question, there still are some general points to be made in passing. The preceding remarks have stressed the fact that the Mesopotamian view of history, once it had been formulated, remained substantially unchanged through the ages. To be sure, events of the passing centuries must have left their mark on historical thinking. Yet the underlying civilization, as we have seen, continued intact in terms of basic values. In a history as long as Mesopotamia's this outstanding fact cannot be stressed too strongly. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ashurbanipal's astrologers should consult the same manuals that had been used by Hammurabi's diviners

³⁰ In the process of accumulating this library inferior copies were withdrawn to be replaced by better and earlier texts. For a specific reference to a Hammurabi original thus utilized cf. Olmstead, *History of Assyria*, pp. 490–1.

³¹ See CT, 22, 1, and R. H. Pfeiffer, *State Letters of Assyria* (1935), No. 256.

more than a thousand years earlier or that historical tradition in the 1st millennium should dwell on themes that had won popularity as early as the turn of the 3d millennium. The living past was an abiding reality.

The presence of such a stock of common themes makes it easier for us to choose a particular segment of the past for closer scrutiny. History can be apprehended only in retrospect from a fixed point in time. The whole history of Mesopotamia would be too vast a span for a brief yet fruitful survey. If it is true, however, that the normative concepts of the civilization of Mesopotamia had crystallized already by the end of the 3d millennium, a convenient vantage point early in the 2d millennium should afford us all the necessary perspective. Although later periods will not be left out of account, we shall concentrate on the earlier as the basis for ideas about history.

The modern student breaks up the old sources of historical tradition into such categories as folklore, history or quasi history, theology, magic, and the like. This is a logical procedure from our standpoint. Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that to the originating civilization such categories differed from one another in emphasis and purpose but scarcely in validity. All made use of the same data of past experience. A given episode or motif is often utilized simultaneously by each. It is as if the main themes of historical tradition, before they were released to the separate disciplines of the day, had been screened and distilled by a central school of thought. The thinking of that school, and not our thoughts about the same data, must be our ideal objective. The point has been well made by R. G. Collingwood that "the historian who studies a civilization other than his own can apprehend the mental life of that civilization only by re-

enacting that experience for himself."³² We should try, then, to put ourselves in the position of a native student of history of long ago—it is a synthetic and ideal abstraction, of course—and look back on the past as he saw it. In so doing, we have to take over the student's personal failures of knowledge and sympathy. Yet no stage of historiography, including our own, can be said to have shaken off completely the shackles of its particular environment.

IV. THE PAST AS SEEN BY THE MESOPOTAMIANS

Let us suppose, then, that a promising young scholar, say in the year 1750 B.C., desiring recognition at Ur, Nippur, or Babylon as Doctor of the Past, has been asked by his examiners to name five epochal junctures in the history of his culture. If he was thoughtful and learned beyond his years; these are the stages that he might have singled out: 1) The beginning of civilization; 2) the Deluge; 3) the crisis under Etana, the shepherd; 4) the rivalry between Kish and Uruk, culminating in the clash of Agga and Gilgamesh; and 5) the period of Sargon and Naram-Sim. Local traditions could cause some changes in such a list;³³ the accession of the given reigning dynasty would not be overlooked. But the culture as a whole would probably have agreed on these five epochs. What was the consensus about them?

1) Civilization was a gift from the gods who vouchsafed

³² *The Idea of History*, p. 163; cf. also, pp. 282 ff.

³³ Thus the Chronicle Weidner (see the next section, cf. n. 42) assigns prominence to Marduk and Babylon at a time when neither had as yet risen above the level of mediocrity; see rev. ll. 11 ff.

it to mankind as a full-grown product. It was abroad from the day that "kingship had been lowered from heaven."³⁴ The primeval kings learned the necessary details through the Seven Sages.³⁵ But it was the presence of kingship as such that marked the difference between order on the one hand and anarchy and barbarism on the other.

2) After a hazy period of enormous length the gods saw fit to regret their gift to mankind. They sent down the Deluge, which all but swept away the last vestige of life on earth. For a number of anxious days the future of life and civilization hinged on the fate of the precarious craft that bore the hero of the cataclysm; his ark contained, providentially, "the seed of all living creatures," including "all the craftsmen."³⁶ Thus was culture saved from the elements.

3) The fresh start marked the beginning of an unbroken chain in which the present was but the latest link. (It meant much the same thing to the ancients that the dawn of history means to us.) Shadowy outlines of post-diluvian rulers appear on the distant horizon. The first realm to become manifest is the city-state of Kish. And the first of the new rulers to be featured by historic tradition is the shepherd Etana.

Etana's place in the traditional lore of Mesopotamia is attested in several ways. He is recognized in art,³⁷ figures in an omen, is prominent in a bilingual text dealing with the Seven Sages, and receives more than passing notice from the Sumerian king list.³⁸ Above all, however, Etana

³⁴ This is the introductory phrase in the Sumerian king list; cf. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, pp. 58 f.; 64, n. 119; 70.

³⁵ Landsberger, *Fakultesi Dergisi*, 2, 431; O. R. Gurney, *JRAS*, 1936), 459-66.

³⁶ "Gilgamesh Epic," Tab. XI, ll. 83, 85.

³⁷ Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, pp. 138, 139.

³⁸ For the epigraphic material on Etana cf. Güterbock, *ZA*, 42, 22; Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, p. 80, n. 67.

is known as the hero of a celebrated epic which was to live on in at least three recensions: the Old Babylonian, the Middle Assyrian, and the Neo-Assyrian.³⁹ There can thus be no doubt about Etana's enduring place in the culture of his land.

What does that lasting impression signify? The popular answer is given in this repeated phrase: "Etana, a shepherd who ascended to heaven."⁴⁰ But what had caused that extraordinary journey? The epic traces the reason to a crisis in the hero's family, but it is doubtful whether learned circles were satisfied with that account. Our imaginary candidate, for instance, might be expected to refer to the proemium of the tale, which gives a different setting. Mankind, as the Old Babylonian poet informs us, had as yet to have a king. All the characteristic norms of kingship lay inactive before Anu in heaven, "there being no consultation (*mitluku*) for the people."⁴¹ In other words, government by assembly had not yet come into being.

³⁹ Speiser in *ANET*, pp. 114 ff.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, p. 80, n. 67.

⁴¹ Speiser, *ANET*, pp. 114, A-1, ll. 11-14. The norms (i.e., *m e* symbols) in question are virtually the same that are cited in the Sumerian *m e* myth discussed by Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, pp. 64 ff.; the pertinent lines are given in transliteration, *ibid.*, p. 116.

The myth just referred to has a further and broader significance for our present purposes. In the divine hierarchy which this myth reflects first place is held by *e n*, with the as yet obscure *s i* coming next; both are accompanied by the abstract element *n a m* mentioned earlier. The list continues with "godship, the tiara exalted and enduring, the throne of kingship . . . the exalted scepter, staffs[?], the exalted shrine, shepherdship, kingship" (cf. Kramer, *op. cit.*, p. 66). In other words, "god" is third in the list, whereas "king" is considerably farther down and is preceded by "shepherd." It follows that here and in related instances *e n* cannot simply be rendered "high priest," as is often done, nor can the derived Akkadian abstract *enūtu* (e.g., "Creation Epic," Tab. 6, l. 97) be analogously translated. The term obviously stands for "master of the universe" and is thus an exact equivalent of the West Semitic *Ba'al*. For a slightly different view see now, Jacobsen, *JNES*, 12 (1953), 180 ff.

In human government the above hierarchy is reduced at the top to three positions: *e n/bēlu* "sovereign," *lugal/larru* "king," and *ensi (-ak)* /*iššakku* "local chief" or "toparch," the last being the representative of some

If this explanation is valid—and all signs would seem to show that it is—then the crisis under Etana was social and cultural rather than personal. It is to that juncture that historical tradition would appear to date the introduction of representative government in Mesopotamia as a basic factor in civilization. The shepherd in Etana would thus be a symbol of the king's limited authority and the source of a cultural stereotype featured in all subsequent history.

4) For further literary support of this early dating of representative government we need not go further than the end of the dynasty to which Etana himself has been assigned. According to the king list, the last ruler of the 1st Dynasty of Kish was one Agga.⁴² What saves this king from being just another name in a tedious list is the fact that we know him independently from a Sumerian epic which describes his contest with Gilgamesh, lord of Uruk. Perhaps the most important thing about this particular poem is the insight which it affords into the role of the assembly in vital matters of state. Before he can embark on his perilous venture against the dominant power of Kish, Gilgamesh seeks the sanction of two separate bodies: first, the assembly of the elders, and next, the assembly of the warriors.⁴³ It is there that ultimate authority was evidently vested, as early as the period when history can be apprehended only through the spyglass of legend. And

higher authority, either divine or human. The mortal king was no more than a steward under orders from his god, a shepherd tending his master's flock.

⁴² This is the Sumerian form. The Semitic pronunciation was evidently *Ak(k)a*. Cf. Chronicle Weidner, *ZA*, 42, 48, ll. 31, see Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, p. 84, n. 99. Note that the name is Sumerian although the dominant local element would seem to be Semitic; cf. below n. 62.

⁴³ Cf. Jacobsen, *JNES*, 2, 165–6; S. N. Kramer, *ANET*, pp. 44–5.

lest one think that the assembly was little more than a hollow form, we have now the unimpeachable testimony of an Old Babylonian omen, which shows that approval in such cases was by no means automatic. The verdict of the assembly was sometimes *puhrum ul imtagar* "the assembly will fail to reach an agreement."⁴⁴

The poem about Agga and Gilgamesh—to dwell on it for another moment—lends color to the assumption that the hero of the cycle of Gilgamesh legends was originally an historical figure. It follows that Lugalbanda and Enmerkar,⁴⁵ two predecessors of Gilgamesh who are likewise no strangers to legend, can no longer be dismissed outright as fictional. The possibility has to be reckoned with—direct proof, of course, is not to be expected—that these three rulers of Uruk had played memorable parts in the penumbral stage of the history of Sumer. The victory of Gilgamesh over Agga, which appears to have terminated the supremacy of Kish, may well have heralded the emergence of the Sumerians as the political masters of Sumer and Akkad.⁴⁶ To the Sumerians the event was history. To us it comes through only as a weak and indistinct echo. We are not in a position, therefore, to

⁴⁴ *YOS*, Vol. 10, No. 31, col. 10, ll. 43–4; cf. also, *Orientalia*, 5 (1935), 225 f.

⁴⁵ For a recently published epic about this hero see Kramer, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, University of Pennsylvania Museum Monograph, 1952.

⁴⁶ It may therefore be significant in this connection that the king list gives Mes-kiag-gasher, the legendary founder of this royal house—the 1st Dynasty of Uruk—the title *e n* as well as that of *l u g a l* (col. 3, "L" 1–3); the translation of the first as "high priest" is not appropriate (see above, n. 41). What this titulary would seem to imply is transition from city-state to empire. The dynasty is continued by Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh—in the order cited—each a celebrated figure in the legendary lore of Sumer, with Gilgamesh obviously regarded as the greatest of them. This is indeed an Heroic Age, as Kramer has emphasized (cf. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 90, 120–30), not only of Sumer but also, and more particularly, of the Sumerians as such.

decide how much of the outcome may have been due to the ethnic factor—if Kish had been substantially non-Sumerian—and how much to political and cultural influences alone. We can appreciate, however, the unparalleled impact of Gilgamesh on later ages. If his historical prototype was really the founder of Sumerian supremacy, the unique vigor of the Gilgamesh motif would receive a convincing explanation.

5) The last major juncture in the early history of Mesopotamia, as listed by our imaginary informant, is the age of Akkad. To us, at a remove of over four millennia, the period of Sargon and Naram-Sin easily outweighs in importance any of the preceding eras. This is so mainly because the Akkad age is at last under the full light of history. The contemporary rulers left us original accounts of their achievements as well as various monuments which enable us to check these accounts. Claims of conquests ranging from Elam to Anatolia are substantiated by statues, stelae, and temples from the places conquered: Susa, Ashur, Nineveh, Diyarbekir, and others.⁴⁷ We can thus start out for the first time with a hard factual core.

The ancients were just as impressed with the Sargonids as we are, although not for quite the same reasons. We welcome that age because of the material it provides for concrete research. The ancients seized on it because it stirred their imagination, even though the underlying history may still have been vivid in memory and tradition had not yet strayed far from reality. The times of Sargon and Naram-Sin soon become the favorite themes of epics and folk tales, poetry and prose, admonitions and omens.

⁴⁷ Cf. Speiser, *JAOS*, 72, 97-101.

And the leading figures of the age are not merely local celebrities. Their fame spreads to other lands and cultures; it is reflected, for instance, in the literature of the Hurrians and the Hittites.⁴⁸ The civilization that had long been nurtured in southern Mesopotamia becomes an international factor, transcending ethnic, geographic, and political boundaries.

Much of this, however, is primarily source material for history. In order to appreciate the impact of the events on the idea of history we must concentrate on the secondary sources, the editorials and the columns and the sermons, so to speak, rather than the direct news accounts. Because the Sargonid era had been so rich in events, it gave rise also to a corresponding amount of reflection; hence its central place in the pattern which we are seeking to recapture. Other historical milestones should not, of course, be ignored. But it will simplify matters if, in common with the ancients, we allow the Akkad age to dominate the design of historical thought, while reserving other stages in the long career of Mesopotamia for purposes of control and elaboration.

V. TRADITIONAL VIEWS ON THE MEANING OF THE PAST

To the succeeding ages, then, the century of Sargon and Naram-Sin stood out as a period of unprecedented achievement. But it was no less memorable a fact that the power of Akkad collapsed eventually. The history of that dynasty was thus a vivid example of ebb and flow in

⁴⁸ See Güterbock, *Kumarbi*, and *JCS*, 5, 135-61; 6, 8-42.

the fortunes of an empire. It brought into sharper relief the rise and decline of other dynasties. There was an almost rhythmic regularity to this unvarying alternation. Regularity was suggestive of cosmic laws. In short, here was a ready basis on which to found a system for the interpretation of history.⁴⁹

In its main outlines the scheme in question may have been as old as the emergence of the characteristic civilization of Mesopotamia; but the details must have been long in taking shape. Things on earth were directed from heaven, therefore history was necessarily theocratic history.⁵⁰ The victorious king was the recipient of divine favors, whereas disaster was brought upon the land by ill-fated rulers. Sargon, as the founder of Akkad's might, was obviously destiny's favorite. By the same token, Naram-Sin must have been marked for ill fortune, since the waning years of his reign were disastrous for Akkad. Similarly, the end of any dynasty was the direct result of the god's displeasure.⁵¹

Given the theocratic premise and the long succession

⁴⁹ See Güterbock, *ZA*, 42, 13 ff.

⁵⁰ It should be stressed, however, that Collingwood's strictures against theocratic history—in that it is not history proper—(*op. cit.*, pp. 14 ff.) apply in this instance only in part. The fundamental thing is that the supreme god of Mesopotamia is not an omnipotent being. His authority can be affected not only by the divine assembly but also by such extraneous circumstances as the theft of the Tablets of Destinies. Under the resulting system, therefore, the object of historical thinking cannot be "single and infinite," to cite Collingwood's description of theocratic thought (*ibid.*, p. 5). To some extent, at least, past events must have appeared to the traditional Mesopotamian as "final and plural," thus fulfilling some of Collingwood's criteria of historicity (*ibid.*). It would surely not be going too far to assert that in Mesopotamia history ruled the gods more than the gods ruled history. Theocratic government, in short, was to the Mesopotamian merely human government one stage removed. The local theocracy, in other words, did not of itself constitute an insuperable barrier to research and inquiry. And research and inquiry amount to a convenient paraphrase for "history."

⁵¹ Güterbock, *ZA*, 42, 75 f.; Speiser, *JAOS*, 72, 97 ff.

of dynasties that had come and gone by the end of the 3d millennium, the social philosopher of the Old Babylonian period had every reason to see the past in terms of recurring cycles. But did he apply such findings to the future? Was Marduk certain to do to Babylon as Nidaba had done to Lagash or Enlil to the Gutis? Would the timeless cure-all which spells "It cannot happen to me" have stood in the way of a tidal school of historiography? The question is of considerable interest, but the available data do not add up to a conclusive answer.

The past, at any rate, was high-lighted by alternating periods of bliss and disaster. As a rule, each succeeding dynasty was the instrument whereby the gods displaced the given incumbent. Occasionally, however, the gods might send a strange new people as a scourge, as happened in the case of the Ummān Manda who broke the power of the Sargonids. In other words, sequence was construed as consequence.

There had to be, of course, a reason for the dynastic changes consistent with the theocratic principle of state. The gods would forsake a mortal ruler and turn against him because he had offended them in some way (the technical Akkadian term is *qullulu*). The offender is said to have transgressed his solemn oath of office (*mamīta etēqu*) or overstepped the bounds set for him by his god (*itē ili etēqu*).⁵²

The classic illustration is the well-known case of Lugal-zaggesi of Umma and Urukagina of Lagash. Rivalry between these two remarkable rulers—in a prodigal generation which was to see both eclipsed by the matchless Sargon—brought about the destruction of Lagash. To the Lagash chronicler of the event the destruction of his city

⁵² See *Belleten*, 14, 263.

was "an offense against Ningirsu, its god." No blame attaches to Urukagina, on whose part "there is no offense." Both Lugalzaggesi and his goddess Nidaba shall bear the consequences. Thus a political clash resolves itself into a contest between the respective patron deities, much as a dispute between shepherds might have to be settled by their masters. In practice, might was right. In theory, right was invoked to account for might.

This motif of theological offense as grounds for historic change confronts us throughout Mesopotamian history. I shall cite only two further instances, which may be less familiar than most. In a unique document from Mari, which will interest us again later on, Yasmaḥ-Addu, a contemporary of Hammurabi, solemnly affirms that no member of his family had ever "committed an offense against his god" (*ša ana ilim uqallilu ul ibašši*).⁵³ None had violated his oath to the deity or broken international agreements which the gods had witnessed. On the other hand, the very opposite was true of the rival rulers.⁵⁴ For their part, no doubt, the accused hastened to reverse the charges.

The same attitude animates a poetic work of the Middle Assyrian period, wherein Tukulti-Ninurta I contrasts the perfidy of Babylon with the unfailing righteousness of Ashur.⁵⁵ The Kassite king of Babylon is branded as "transgressor of the oath" (*ētiq mamiti*),⁵⁶ who admits at length that "most grievous have been the offenses of my land, numerous its sins" (*qellēt mātiya šupšuqā imīdū*

⁵³ ARM, Vol. 1, No. 3, l. 6. The king of Eshnunna is alleged to be planning a similar offense, cf. *ibid.*, No. 26, ll. 32 ff.

⁵⁴ Their guilt is termed *qullultum* (l. 18).

⁵⁵ The text has been presented in transliteration and translation by Ebeling, MAOG, Vol. 12, fasc. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, col. 4, l. 20.

arnū).⁵⁷ Echoes of similar sentiments are common in the inscriptions of the 1st millennium.⁵⁸

With so much stress on formal features, the idea of history developed against this kind of background could not readily free itself from stereotypes. To be sure, with Urukagina or Yasmaḥ-Addu or Tukulti-Ninurta I the theocratic concept of state was modified by practical needs, except that expediency sought retroactive moral sanction. With theologians, however, unsoubered by everyday burdens of state, history could reduce itself under particular circumstances to a mechanism of utmost simplicity. It was all a matter of either honoring or ignoring elementary orders from on high. Everything else was incidental.

This monolithic approach is especially pronounced

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 27. Ebeling's translation of this passage cannot be right. In the first place the feminine (pl.) *šupšuqa* is not co-ordinate with the masculine *imīdū*; it modifies the preceding *qellēt*, construct plural to *qillatu*. Accordingly, the initial *inanna abra* cannot be rendered with Ebeling's translation in a transitive sense: "Jetzt (aber) habe ich die Schlechtigkeit meines Landes gesehen" (p. 17); the phrase means "Now I looked about." Cf. ZA, 43, 64, l. 243; *ina adnāti abrema šitnā idātu*, which Landsberger translates "As I looked about among the habitations, the signs were contradictory." Secondly, Ebeling himself renders the parallel passage in col. 6, l. 33 in the way just advocated: "[Seine Vergehen] sind drückend, viel sind (seine) Sünden." Even in the latter passage, however, the supplemented form should be *[šū]-up-šu-q[af]*, as required by the original (*Archaeologia*, Vol. 69, pl. 52), and not *[šū]-up-šu-q[u]*; the missing noun was evidently *[qillassu]* "his offense."

⁵⁸ It is not impossible that we may have the approximate wording of the king's oath on assuming his obligations under a treaty. The Etana epic, as has already been pointed out, reflects a considerable measure of interest in social philosophy. It is very suggestive, therefore, that its three extant versions—the Old Babylonian, the Middle Assyrian, and the Late Assyrian—give us the same basic oath: "He who oversteps the bounds of Shamash [note the motif of *itē ili etēqu*], may Shamash surrender him for evil to the executioner! He who oversteps the bounds of Shamash, may the mountain withhold from him its passage! May the darting weapon of Shamash, overthrow him and catch him!" Cf. ANET, p. 114, A-2, ll. 1-3; p. 115, B, ll. 4-7; p. 116, C-2, ll. 11-16. It is clear from the context that this solemn oath was meant to evoke a picture well known to the audience. [The view just expressed has been confirmed in the meantime by an Old Babylonian text, D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets* (1953), No. 1, l. 18.]

in the so-called Chronicle Weidner.⁵⁹ The text has an Old Babylonian setting and an incurable Babylonian bias. What makes it significant, for all its stilted features, is that the chronicle is, in fact, the first Mesopotamian textbook on the idea of history; partisan, doctrinaire, and obviously below the level of the best thought of the time, but a historiography of a sort nonetheless.

The beginning is lost save for a few disconnected phrases,⁶⁰ just enough to indicate that the writer had started out with an exposition of general principles: "which you have commanded I have noted, and for the life of distant days . . ." (21'); "he who offends against the gods (*šá a-na i-li^{pt} . . . ú-qal-la-lu*)⁶¹ of this city, his star shall not be stable in heaven . . ." (27'); "the conduct of a [?] former king that I have heard much about . . ." (30'). In other words, the purpose of the work was didactic. The past had a lesson which should be heeded for the sake of the future.

The chronicle then proceeds to a schematized survey of important stages in human history, including the time of Akka⁶² of Kish and Enme(r)kar of Uruk, representatives of the first two dynasties after the Flood.⁶³ But the bulk of the account concerns itself with the Dynasty of Sargon and the events before and after that period.

⁵⁹ For the publication of this text and invaluable spade work on it see Güterbock, *ZA*, 42, 47 ff.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶¹ Note the telltale technical term.

⁶² The corresponding form in Sumerian contexts is the aforementioned A(g)ga which need not, however, indicate any real difference in pronunciation, since the Sumerian stops do not appear to have been distinctive as to voice. Incidentally, the name itself appears to be Sumerian, whereas the earlier kings of that dynasty bear Semitic names. Does this circumstance reflect a gradual Sumerianization of Akkad?

⁶³ See above, Pt. IV, sec. 4 of this article. It is clear from this and other occurrences that these early Sumerian heroes maintained their hold on tradition even after the decline of Sumerian political authority.

Sargon was punctilious about the cult and so he prospered. But Naram-Sin was hostile to the people of Babylon,⁶⁴ thereby inviting divine retribution through the medium of the Gutian barbarians. Nothing could be simpler than this temple view of history; cult and ritual were the most significant factors in the affairs of state. We know, however, from the instances already cited, and from many others that can be adduced, that this was by no means the prevailing view. The gods could be arbitrary, but scarcely to such a degree. When Nabonidus, about a millennium later, refers to the destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib, he stresses Marduk's wrath against that god's favorite city, with the implication that the city got what it deserved.⁶⁵ The Chronicle Weidner is a long way behind the spirit of even that stock interpretation, not to mention the Deuteronomistic formulation in such passages as Judg. 2:6 ff.

VI. OMENS AND LETTERS TO THE GODS

As we have seen, Mesopotamia developed a twofold check on the authority of her rulers. One was societal: it was inherent in the role of the assembly. The other was religious: divine bounds must not be transgressed. By extension, any major undertaking on the part of the ruler required divine sanction, in addition to approval by the assembly. How was such sanction ascertained?

The attitude of the gods was signified in the form of directions or oracles (*tērētu*) obtained through the me-

⁶⁴ The mention of Babylon in this context is an obvious anachronism which serves to circumscribe the time and place of the composition.

⁶⁵ Nabonidus Stele, col. 16, l. 36. For an instructive Hittite parallel, in a "Pestgebet" of Mursilis, cf. Götz, *Kleinasien*, Vol. 91.

dium of omens. These could be contrived with the aid of sacrifices (*tērēt nīqī*), the organs of slaughtered animals, for instance, furnishing the signs that the seer (*bārū*) went on to interpret; or they were based on observations of natural phenomena which the diviner (*mašmašu*) was trained to decipher.⁶⁶ Since the need to know what lay in store was imperative and constant, particularly in regard to the state, divination became a vital factor in the civilization of Mesopotamia and one of its outstanding characteristics. No step of any consequence could be risked without proper word from the *bārū* or the *mašmašu*.

These priests did not arrive at their decisions arbitrarily. They were guided by detailed and elaborate manuals in which virtually every possible contingency had been systematically recorded. The basis of the discipline was circumstantial association. Let us suppose that some memorable event (E) had been observed originally under a particular set of extraneous circumstances (C). Since coincidence is not admitted, any time in the future that C comes up again, E is anticipated. C is of course capable of infinite variety. These innumerable variations must be filed away for reference, not unlike our fingerprints. Now when a client calls upon his seer, that analyst identifies the problem from the omen, checks the omen readings against the file, and comes up with the answer.

The omen material is worthless as science but invaluable as raw source material. It utilizes a mass of plain facts as the basis for peculiar constructions. Stripped of these constructions, the facts stand out in stark simplicity. And since some of the events thus treated are taken from

⁶⁶ Cf. Ungnad, *AFO*, 14 (1941-44), 251 ff.; Oppenheim, *Orientalia*, 5 (1936), 199 ff.

history—recent history in the first instance—the omens give us an independent version of the given historical happenings and personalities.⁶⁷ They are especially useful as a check on results obtained elsewhere.

We know now that the recording of omens for future reference was an established practice by the end of the 3d millennium. The Sargonid age and the individual members of that dynasty were fully exploited. The volume of Old Babylonian omens in the Yale collection published by A. Goetze a few years ago shows how intensively the field was cultivated in that relatively early period.⁶⁸ The use to which such compendia were put may be illustrated by an example from Mari. Among the Mari letters there is one which contains a rather detailed reading of an omen on behalf of the viceroy Yasmaḥ-Addu.⁶⁹ If the *bārū* who performed the service (ca. 1700 B.C.) had been unable to consult his own reference library, he might have got almost the same results by borrowing one of Dr. Goetze's copies.⁷⁰

There are two points about the omens that need to be stressed in the present connection. One is the fundamental fact of the ruler's abject dependence in all matters on the will of the gods. This fact, which the omens point up to an overwhelming extent, would be sufficient in itself to refute the assumption that Mesopotamia, in common with

⁶⁷ See especially, Goetze, *JCS*, 1 (1947), 253 ff.

⁶⁸ *YOS*, Vol. 10.

⁶⁹ *ARM*, 4, 54; cf. also, *ibid.*, 5, 65, and the comment of W. von Soden, *Orientalia*, 22 (1933), 209.

⁷⁰ Some parallels to *ARM*, 5, 65, have been cited by von Soden, *loc. cit.* In commenting on *ARM*, 4, 54, von Soden (*op. cit.*, p. 204) would change the editor's translation of *tarik* from "est [de couleur] sombre" to "ist geschlagen." This is not quite adequate. The term means primarily "pinched," or "jammed," hence "bruised," or "blood-shot," and hence in a specific sense "dark" as opposed to "clear" (*nawer*).

Egypt, viewed her kings as divine. A god incarnate does not take his cue from the liver of a sheep. The other point to be emphasized is this: it is a fact that some of the kings of the Dynasty of Akkad, the 3d Dynasty of Ur, and certain other places and periods have their names written with the determinative for god and appear to enjoy other prerogatives of divinity. Yet the omens single out precisely these same rulers as human to a fault.⁷¹—in the way they died or in the manner in which they brought disaster upon their land. Their claim to divinity is thus found to rest on superficial attributes. We cannot be sure what the attributes may have signified in those scattered instances, but we know that the practice was not widespread and that it could not have been far-reaching in scope.⁷² Above all, the mere concept of a deified ruler is incompatible with the basic features of Mesopotamia's civilization and out of keeping with its over-all character.

The problem of the ruler's divinity has an obvious bearing on the local idea of history. For history will be viewed one way if the ruler is a mere mortal, and another way if he is accepted as a god. Where government is in human hands throughout, but the state is ultimately theocratic, much will depend on the power attributed to the immortal sovereign. Because no individual god in the Mesopotamian pantheon was really omnipotent, the

⁷¹ This applies to rulers of the Dynasty of Akkad and of Ur III—kings who are elsewhere represented as deified. As for Naram-Sin, who is likewise included in the deified group, there is ample independent information to the effect that he, above all others, was the very archetype of the ill-fated ruler, the "Unheilsherrscher" of Güterbock's penetrating analysis (cf. *ZA*, 42, 75). For a recent refutation of the deification theory, see Fish, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 34 (1951), 37 ff. On the question in general, cf. the references given in n. 9, above.

⁷² There is, for instance, not the slightest hint of such a practice in Assyria, where we would normally be inclined to look for it first.

purposes of the cosmic society were difficult to fathom. The mortal ruler was forever intent on pleasing the cosmic powers. Often he found himself obliged to appease them. There were times when the need was urgent to establish direct contact with the distant gods. In a literate society distances can be neutralized through writing. It is logical, therefore, in these circumstances that the kings of historic Mesopotamia should write to their gods, even as they were themselves petitioned by their own subjects. Such letters to the gods add a significant touch to the underlying idea of history.⁷³

Let us first cite, once again, some instances from the recently published Mari archives. In one of these, Ishme-Dagan of Ashur relates that his campaigns in hostile lands had caused concern to his personal god, or *lamassu*. Accordingly, he had written his *lamassu* to tell him not to worry.⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that it is the god who is being reassured, although it may be merely a case of a writer whistling in the dark. The converse is naturally more common and orthodox, as witness our second instance, which is a letter from Ishme-Dagan's brother, Yasmaḥ-Addu, a young prince whom we have met before.⁷⁵ Obviously in trouble, Yasmaḥ-Addu reviews for his god the last three generations in the history of Mari. In all that

⁷³ Cf. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East* (1947), pp. 61 f.

⁷⁴ *ARM* Vol. 4, No. 68, ll. 17 ff. It should be pointed out, however, that in the opinion of von Soden (*Orientalia*, 22, 205), the *La-ma-si* of this passage can only be a proper name. Von Soden does not give his reasons for this conclusion, but it must be admitted that the form presents certain technical difficulties no matter which way it is interpreted. But the eventual solution would not affect our argument in that the Mari evidence for letters to the gods is sufficient even if this particular text is left out of account altogether.

⁷⁵ *ARM*, 2, 3. The document was recognized as a letter to a god by B. Landsberger; cf. *JNES*, 11 (1952), 130.

time, his family has proved righteous and god-fearing, whereas the competing dynasty violated the rules of god and man. Parenthetically, the opponents whom Yasmah-Addu accuses had a prior right to the throne of Mari and were eventually restored to power despite our writer's appeal to heaven. Presently, however—and this is our third instance—the successor, in turn, has to address a message to his own protector, the river god.⁷⁶ We happen to know that this last appeal, like the one before it, proved of no avail, inasmuch as Hammurabi took over Mari in due time. Under the circumstances, it would have been impossible to disabuse Hammurabi of the conviction that his particular brand of piety was the most efficacious of all.

The first two of the three instances just cited may throw a new light on Assyrian historiography. The writers in question were sons of Shamshi-Adad, one of the most influential kings in the early career of Ashur. The question now arises whether the practice of Shamshi-Adad's family to address the gods sporadically, in times of special need,⁷⁷ did not lead eventually to routine reports addressed to the gods at regular intervals.

The annals left us by later Assyrian rulers, from the 14th century on, were periodic accounts by definition. It has always been assumed that they were intended for posterity in general. Perhaps their most striking feature is the boastful, even bombastic, tone which the kings, writing in the first person, invariably employ. These royal writers are egocentric in the extreme.⁷⁸ Yet there

⁷⁶ See G. Dossin, *Syria*, 19 (1938), 126.

⁷⁷ In turn, that practice has older Sumerian antecedents; cf. A. Falkenstein, *ZA*, 49 (1939), 1 ff.

⁷⁸ Cf. e.g., Mowinkel, *Gunkel Festschrift*, p. 287; D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (1924), pp. 1 ff.

is something about the whole pattern that does not ring true. The normal attitude of the Mesopotamian ruler when facing his gods was one of modesty and humility. The annals were certainly not meant to be concealed from the gods. Why do they display, then, so much seeming arrogance?

I believe that by establishing a link between the annals and the letters to the gods—there is, of course, the further and long-known connection with building inscriptions⁷⁹—we may be in a position to revise the common estimate of the Assyrian royal accounts. In point of fact, there is a concrete link between the annals and the letters to the gods. The parade example is the detailed report by Sargon II about his eighth campaign.⁸⁰ Although ad-

⁷⁹ See Olmstead, *Assyrian Historiography*, pp. 2, 64. Yet the building inscription is not of itself a logical forerunner of the annalistic account. Since the annals are first found among the Hittites, and since the Assyrian annals follow shortly thereafter, Güterbock has made out a good case in favor of deriving the Assyrian practice from the Hittites; cf. *ZA*, 44, 98 f. Goetze, *Hethiter, Churriter und Assyrer*, pp. 181 f., has contributed the further observation that the Assyrian annals incorporate mythical-epic motifs which are foreign to Hittite historical writings, but might ultimately be traced to the Hurrians. Furthermore, Goetze (*ibid.*) and others, especially Laqueur, *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung*, 7 (1931) pp. 489–506, have realized that the Assyrian and the Hittite annals show an awareness of the need for giving the deity an account of the ruler's conduct. Specific connection with the letters to the gods, however, has not been suggested so far. If the present suggestion proves valid, then the characteristic tone of the accounts might have been borrowed. But even this last supposition would now seem doubtful. We cannot, accordingly, discount the possibility that all the basic features were Mesopotamian after all, although their full potential could not be realized without Hurrian or Hittite assistance.

⁸⁰ F. Thureau-Dangin, *Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon*, 1912. After this paper had been presented at Yale, in the form in which it is here given, I came upon the statement by A. Moortgat (Moortgat and Scharff *Ägypten und Vorderasien im Altertum* (1950), pp. 429 f.), which voices independently conclusions very similar to mine. Moortgat, too, would see in the Assyrian annals not so much the boasts by vain-glorious rulers as the glorification of the might of the god Ashur. And although the letters to the gods are mentioned in passing, the conclusions which Moortgat offers are based primarily on the testimony of art.

dressed to the gods, this is not the petition of a man in trouble but a proud account of successes achieved. Later on this report is entered, in condensed form and without the epistolary trimmings, in the composite edition of Sargon's annals.

Is there any reason to assume that this expedition alone required exceptional treatment? The facts related in this case do not depart from the pattern of other Assyrian expeditions. Furthermore, Shamshi-Adad V, a century earlier, had addressed a report about one of his campaigns to an unnamed deity, receiving this time an itemized acknowledgment from his divine addressee.⁸¹ In other words, this kind of reporting was by no means unusual. Is it possible that the kings of Assyria, when annual reports had become customary, first composed these reports in the form of letters to their acknowledged sovereign, to be abridged in due course for purposes of a year-by-year edition?

On further examination it will be found, I think, that there is nothing inconsistent with such an assumption, whereas additional arguments can be adduced in its favor. This much, however, is worth noting: if the annals link up ultimately with letters to the gods, their egocentrism can no longer be ascribed to mere conceit. The missions

Our two modes of approach thus complement each other. The letters to the gods, however, suggest the ultimate form of the annals in addition to accounting for their characteristic tone.

⁸¹ E. F. Weidner, *AFO*, 9 (1933-34), 102 f. For these and other examples cf. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule*, pp. 61 f., and Labat, *Le Caractère religieux de la royauté assyro-babylonienne* (1939), pp. 273 f. One of the most striking instances of this genre has come down to us from Ashurbanipal; see *CT*, Vol. 35, Nos. 44-5 and T. Bauer, *Das Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* (1933), Pt. II, pp. 83 f. (Der Gottesbrief). The colophon is highly instructive, for it reads (rev. II. 23-6): "Message of Ashur[banipal . . .] to Ashur who dwells in E[hursaggalkurkurra], that he may accept [his] prayer, strike down his foe, slay [. . .]."

recorded were the god's missions. They could not be undertaken except with divine sanction as signified by the omens. The words which the king used to report them were the words of the god's original mandate. The tone was exaggerated because, in phrasing the utterances of a god, man is tempted to resort to superlatives. It was boastful because the authority and valor of a god were involved in the last analysis, and not the achievements of his worshipful servant.

Thus, if the foregoing hypothesis is valid, Assyrian historiography suffered not so much from the conceit of the ruler as from his excessive piety. The material is voluminous, the language picturesque, the detail abundant—yet the coefficient of reliability is low. By the same token, Babylonia, which never had formal annals, let alone annals stylized into letters to the gods, was in a position to render a more objective performance. This is true certainly of the so-called Babylonian Chronicle. It is jejune history, to be sure, but history nevertheless in "its sobriety of presentation and its coldly impartial statement of fact."⁸² That even this superior work does not approach the high level of biblical historiography is a fact too obvious to need special emphasis.

VII. THE IDEA OF HISTORY IN THE WISDOM LITERATURE

Before this rapid survey is completed there is still one last witness to be heard from. The idea of history is not likely to have been ignored by the branch of literature that deals largely with ideas. Ancient Near Eastern sources

⁸² Olmstead, *Historiography*, p. 62.

devoted to speculative or didactic matters are commonly classified as wisdom literature. Extant wisdom material from Mesopotamia includes some independent works and a number of incidental passages which bear in one way or another on the problem before us. What does this testimony add up to, and how does it compare with the circumstantial evidence that has been abstracted so far?

We have seen that the ancient Mesopotamian was forever uneasy about the relation of his society to nature.⁸³ Because he endowed the powers of nature with most of the failings of mankind, he lacked full confidence in his gods.⁸⁴ They were unpredictable, hence mankind was doomed to be restless and insecure. The one thing that the past revealed above all others was the impermanence of all things. This note is struck with singular clarity in the Epic of Gilgamesh:

Since the days of yore there has been no [permanence];
The resting and the dead, how alike they are!
Do they not compose a picture of death,
The commoner and the noble,
Once they have drawn near to [their fate]?
The Anunnaki, the great gods, foregather;
Mammetum, authoress of destiny, with them the fates
decrees:

Death and life they determine;

Yet of death the days are not revealed.⁸⁵

All is thus ephemeral and uncertain. Everything is in the hands of the gods, but man is kept in ignorance of their plans.

⁸³ This point is properly stressed by Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* and introduction to *Intellectual Adventure*; also by Jacobsen, *ibid.*

⁸⁴ The Babylonian Theodicy expresses this thought by the phrase *neš milik [ilim]* "impenetrable is the resolve [of the god]," *ZA*, 43, 50, 58.

⁸⁵ Tab. X, col. 6, pp. 32 ff.; cf. *ANET*, p. 93.

The king, as a faithful shepherd, must strive to maintain the existing equilibrium at all costs. Any misadventure may be proof that the gods have been offended. Normally, the balance can be restored through elaborate efforts at purification and expiation. At times, it may even be expedient to set up a substitute king in order to divert the divine wrath from the established ruler.⁸⁶ There are occasions, however, when none of the known remedies will produce the desired effect. Although the king appears blameless, his land remains afflicted. The wisdom sources deal with this subject under the theme of the Righteous Sufferer.

We now know this motif from three major recensions. One of these, "I shall praise the lord of wisdom," is extant only in copies of the 1st millennium B.C.⁸⁷ Another, the so-called Acrostic Dialogue or Babylonian Theodicy⁸⁸ may perhaps go back to the end of the 2d millennium. The third, which has just been published, takes us back to Old Babylonian times.⁸⁹ The three together serve to demonstrate that the problem of unjust suffering was forever alive in Mesopotamia.

For all their differences in form, approach, and phraseology, all three compositions have this conclusion in common: although the blameless may be exposed to suffering, deliverance is sure to come to him in the end. The ways of the gods are indeed inscrutable, but the truly meritorious need never despair of ultimate salvation. The emphasis, in short, is not so much on the trials of the

⁸⁶ Cf. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, pp. 263 f.

⁸⁷ The Akkadian title is *Ludlul bel nemeqi*; for this work, see especially S. Langdon in *Babyloniaca*, 7 (1923), 163 ff. See also, O. R. Gurney, *AFO*, 11 (1936-37), 367; R. J. Williams, *JCS*, 6 (1952), 4-7.

⁸⁸ We owe to Landsberger, *ZA*, 43, 32-76, the fundamental treatment of this composition.

⁸⁹ See Nougayrol, *RB*, 59 (1952) pp. 239-50.

sufferer as on the miracle of final deliverance.⁹⁰ Our three versions of the Mesopotamian counterpart of Job, spread though they are over a total span of more than a millennium, are in full agreement on this significant affirmation.

Is there a connection between the theme of Job and the idea of history? The established popularity of this subject in the literature of Mesopotamia, not to speak for the moment of outside echoes, suggests that the protagonist may have had an historical prototype.⁹¹ At all events, the story of a Job is one of the strongest arguments why history should be studied. There have been kings in the past whom the gods deserted. Some never recovered, but others were eventually restored to grace. The Dynasty of Akkad was highly instructive in this respect. Old Sargon,⁹² as the omens epitomize him, was "one who encountered darkness, but the light emerged for him."⁹³ On the other hand, the remaining rulers of that dynasty were either assassinated or lived to see their power extinguished.⁹⁴ A study of the past may help one to emulate

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² The fact that Sargon was a usurper (originally cupbearer of Ur-Zababa, cf. Jacobsen, *Sumerian King List*, p. 107, n. 217) detracts in no way from his traditional stature. He was not, however, a legitimate king in the accepted sense of the term, which is no doubt the reason for his assuming the name *Sarru(m)-kén*, "the king is legitimate." What his real name may have been we do not know any more than we know the name of the northern neighbor of Sumer before Sargon had made "Akkad" famous. Incidentally, another known usurper is familiar to us by the name of Sargon II of Assyria. The question arises, therefore, whether Sargon I of Assyria bore that name from the start in honor of the most celebrated of Mesopotamian rulers (note that his grandson's name was Naram-Sin), or whether he assumed it later on in his life for some specific purpose; say, to break away from the more humble title of *rubā'um* (see above, n. 22) and to have himself honored as *Sarrum* "king," as many of his lesser contemporaries were doing.

⁹³ See Goetze, *JCS*, 1, 255 f.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256 ff.

the successful and avoid the mistakes of the ill-fated. The main purpose, then, of such a study is to master the formula of deliverance, for one never knows when such knowledge may prove vital.

The symbol of Job was not the only one that was held up as a source of solace. The hero of the Flood was another comforting example, for no one in the entire history of mankind had ever emerged triumphant from greater peril. In this case, however, the Mesopotamian wisdom literature goes back a step to the father of Utnapishtim, the local Noah. For it was apparently parental wisdom that had stood Utnapishtim in such good stead. And so it is Shuruppak, the eponymous hero of the Flood city, substituting for Utnapishtim's father, who figures as the fountainhead of proverbial wisdom in Sumerian and Akkadian literature alike.⁹⁵

The links between the heroes of the Flood and proverbial literature on the one hand, and between the Job image and the theme of deliverance on the other, combine to give a new meaning to the famous verse in Ezek. 14:14. According to that statement, Noah, Dan(i)el, and Job were the only men to emerge unscathed, because of their righteousness, from universal upheavals. Noah and Job, in Mesopotamian garb, are now known to us as celebrated wisdom personalities. Daniel's counterpart in Sumerian or Akkadian sources has yet to be identified. But the prominence of this particular theme is independently attested in Ugaritic.⁹⁶ Moreover, the biblical

⁹⁵ For this specific figure in the Sumerian wisdom material cf. Kramer, *JCS*, 1, 33, n. 208; the same name appears in an introduction to Akkadian proverbs in *KAR*, No. 27 obv. (marked rev. (?) in the copy), 1.

⁹⁶ See Spiegel *Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (1945), pp. 305-55. On the location of *Hrnm*, the traditional home of the Ugaritic Daniel, see new Albright, *BASOR*, 130 (1953), 28 f. The prominence of the biblical Daniel in the

Book of Daniel has a Babylonian setting, quite aside from the fact that Ezekiel, who cites all three names in the same breath, knew his Babylonian culture at first hand. In other words, the Mesopotamian origin of the three heroes of Ezekiel is assured beyond all doubt. The prophet's statement merely testifies to the great popularity of the underlying tradition.

How each of these heroes had proved worthy of his extraordinary distinction is not made clear. The popular explanation may perhaps be indicated in an old omen which says: "If he has abhorred sin, his god will walk with him."⁹⁷ In any case, the use of these themes in the wisdom literature suggests that they had come to symbolize the lesson of the past at the intellectual level. That lesson may be summed up as follows: the history of the heroes of old who survived great trials and disasters could, at best, help to safeguard against recurrences. At worst, it might bring a measure of comfort in the disclosure that, even in a capricious cosmos, someone is likely to be singled out to save civilization.⁹⁸

Yet, circumscribed as such views may be, they were obviously looked upon as much too broad for official purposes. The average king, at least in late Assyrian

apocalyptic literature, notably the Book of Enoch, is brought out by Spiegel, *op. cit.*, pp. 336 ff. All in all, it appears certain that the Mesopotamian original of Daniel must be disguised under some other name. I would suggest with due reserve that the person in question was Adapa, who appears as an *aphallu* ("sage") in the Chronicle Weidner and has otherwise some claim to being the patron of history.

⁹⁷ ZA, 43, 98, l. 31: *šumma hašitam izir ilšu itišu ittanallak*. Note the close parallel between this saying and the biblical statement about Enoch (Gen. 5:23), where a virtually identical verbal form is used.

⁹⁸ This thought lends added force to the Ezekiel passage just cited. It should be stressed again in this connection that the three sages cited by Ezekiel were ancient Babylonian heroes of the magnitude of Noah himself, each of whom was qualified, by reason of his own extraordinary experience, to bring mankind a measure of comfort in times of cosmic distress.

times, was too chauvinistic for philosophic appraisals.⁹⁹ This is well illustrated by the concluding paragraph of the so-called Synchronistic History: "The scholar who apprehends all that is written, may he ponder it and sing the praises of the land of Ashur for all time. But as for the land of Sumer and Akkad, may he expose its wickedness to all the quarters." It is not a case of "my country right or wrong." It is rather an instance of "my country is always right and the other country always wrong."¹⁰⁰

In summary, Mesopotamian civilization was faced with the same two major problems that each civilization must solve for itself. One was the relation of the individual to society, and the other was the relation of society to nature.¹⁰¹ The Mesopotamian solution of the first problem proved most successful and productive. The solution of the other problem, however, was a less constructive achievement. Since the gods were unsure of themselves, no values were really enduring. The need to avoid harm gave a negative meaning to the pursuit of happiness. Ritual rather than ethics, form far more than content, promised the best protection against the schemes of heaven. Because the king and the priest alike were slaves to the mistrust and fear of nature, they were jointly the captives of the forms calculated to protect mankind from nature. In the end, this emphasis on form became a barrier to further progress. The collapse of Nineveh and of Babylon was due not so much to the heavy blows on the

⁹⁹ That such appraisals, however, were not lacking in intellectual circles is attested by a composition universally misnamed the "Babylonian Dialogue of Pessimism"; cf. Langdon, *Babyloniaca*, 7, 195 ff. I expect to show elsewhere that this work is instead a splendid parody exposing weak leaders who seek to explain their inefficiency by recourse to threadbare clichés. See JCS, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1954).

¹⁰⁰ The Assyrian Chronicle, CT, 34, 41, col. 4, ll. 23 ff.

¹⁰¹ See above, n. 83.

part of the Scythians, the Medes, and the Persians as to the crushing weight of the internal structure.

The Mesopotamian idea of history cannot but mirror the uneven advance of the major components of the parent civilization. It suffers from the limitations of its constituent elements. Other cultures, enriched and forwarned by the Mesopotamian experience, were to carry the study of history many strides forward. Along that course, however, the contribution of Mesopotamia marks a significant early milestone; a milestone in the progress of the idea of history as well as of the history of ideas.

[For further significant studies see now S. N. Kramer, "Sumerian Historiography," *Israel Exploration Journal*, V (1953), pp. 217-32, and J. J. Finkelstein, "Mesopotamian Historiography," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963), pp. 461-72.]

Authority and Law in Mesopotamia

I

THE OUTSTANDING FEATURE OF KINGSHIP IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA is the ruler's subservience to the gods throughout the long recorded history of that composite civilization. Thus in the Sumerian myth of cultural norms the attributes of kingship are listed in fourth place, after three separate divine groupings.¹ Old Assyrian inscriptions state explicitly that the real king was the god Ashur, whereas the mortal ruler was merely the god's agent (*iššakku*).² Other times and places likewise provide abundant evidence of similar recognition of the gods' overriding authority.³

Such a climate is clearly unfavorable to persistent deification of the temporal ruler. In point of fact, this practice, although often alleged, has never been established beyond dispute. It is true that some of the kings of Akkad, in common with those of the Third Dynasty

¹ S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (1944), 64 ff., 116.

² B. Landsberger and K. Balkan, *Bulleten* 14 (1950), 231; cf. *Orientalia*, 20 (1951), 483.

³ I have dealt with this general subject in a paper entitled "The Idea of History in Ancient Mesopotamia," which is scheduled for publication in the near future; [see now above, pp. 270 ff.]