CHAPTER 1

The Ancient World

Philip R. Davies

From the twenty-first century, we look at the ancient world through two pairs of eyes. One pair looks back over the sweep of human history to the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome, which played their successive roles in shaping our modern world. The other set of eyes looks through the Bible, seeing the ancient world through the lenses of Scripture, not only directly from its pages but also through two millennia of Christian culture that long ago lodged itself in the imperial capitals of Rome and Constantinople yet saw its prehistory in the Old Testament and its birth in the New. The museums, galleries and libraries of Western Christendom bulge with representations of scenes from a biblical world dressed in ancient, medieval or modern garb.

Although the rediscovery of ancient Egypt, for which we should thank Napoleon, preceded by a century and a half the unearthing of the ancient cities of Mesopotamia – Babylon, Nineveh, Ur, Caleh – these cities captured the modern imagination because they were *known to us from the Bible*. These discoveries heralded the phenomenon of 'biblical archaeology', and the kind of cultural imperialism that brought ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Egypt into the 'biblical world'. Although the 'Holy Land' was a small region of little consequence to these great powers, the biblical vision of Jerusalem as the centre stage of divine history has been firmly embedded in our cultural consciousness. The 'biblical world' can therefore mean both the real world from which the Bible comes and also the world that it evokes. In this chapter we shall look primarily at the former, with a final glimpse of the ancient world *in* the Bible.

How does one introduce 'the ancient world' in a short space? Obviously with the aid of great deal of generalization and selectivity. What follows is obviously painted with a very broad brush, focusing on major motifs such as kingship, city and empire – institutions that are not only political, but also economic and social configurations. The growth and succession of monarchy, cities and empires both dominated the world of the Bible but also occupy much of its attention. The climax of this ancient world's history is the interpenetration of two spheres: the 'ancient Near East' and the 'Greek',

effected by Alexander's conquest of Persia. The 'kingship', by then lost to the Greeks, was revived in an ancient Near Eastern form, Greek-style cities sprang up, and a civilization called 'Hellenism' developed. This great cultural empire fell under the political governance of Rome, under which it continued to flourish, while Rome itself, after years of republic, adopted a form of age-old ancient Near Eastern kingship.

A Historical Sketch

The worlds of the eastern Mediterranean and the ancient Near East were contiguous both geographically and chronologically. The eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean lay at the intersection of a maritime world and a large stretch of habitable land from Egypt to Mesopotamia, the so-called 'Fertile Crescent', curving around the Arabian desert to the south-east and fringed on the north by various mountain ranges (see Figure 1.1). Egypt and the cities of Phoenicia were engaged in sea trading with each other and with various peoples that we can loosely call 'Greek' (Minoans, Myceneans, Dorians, Ionians and Aeolians) from very early times. The Greeks colonized parts of Asia Minor and islands in the eastern Mediterranean, and the Phoenicians founded colonies in North Africa and eventually Spain also. What was exchanged in this trade included not only wine, olive oil, papyrus, pottery and cedar wood, but 'invisibles' such

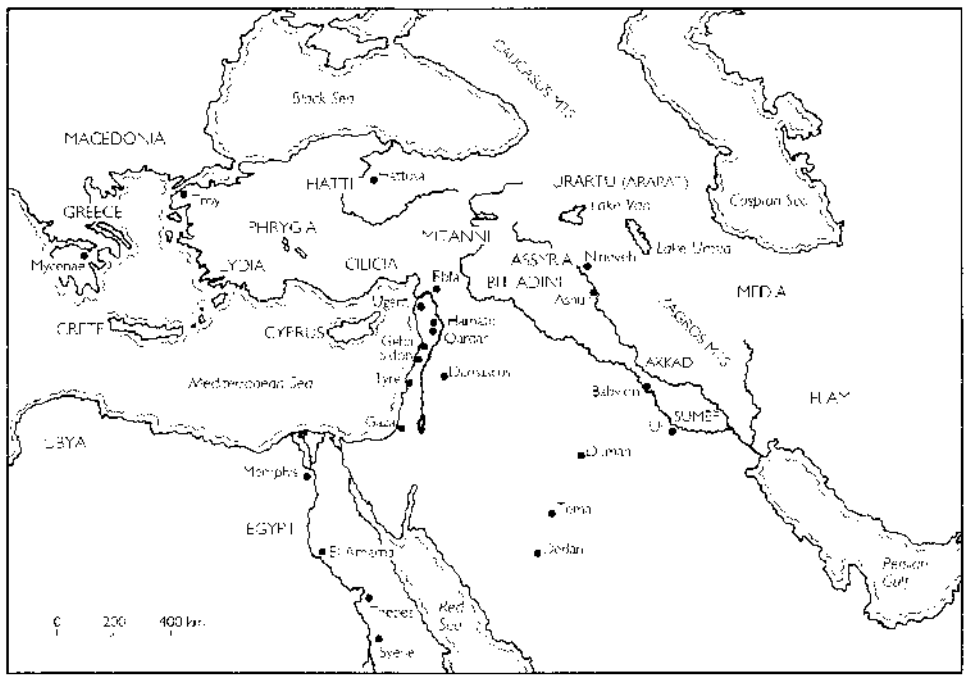

Figure 1.1 The Fertile Crescent

as the alphabet, stories, myths and legends. Traders (including tribes who specialized in trading caravans, such as the Ishmaelites and Edomites) and their wares penetrated eastward via Damascus and the Euphrates and across southern Palestine to the Red Sea. During the second millennium BCE, Egypt was in control of Syria and Palestine; but during the Iron Age and up to the advent of Alexander, its grip loosened and political power lay well away from the Mediterranean, in Mesopotamia.

The ancient Near East

The word 'civilization' derives from the Latin *civitas*, 'city', and civilization is inseparable from urbanization. Cities mark the emergence of human diversity, a proliferation of social functions. They also mark a differentiation of power, for cities and their activities (in the ancient Near East at any rate) represent a form of social cooperation that is always governed by a ruler: major building projects, organized warfare, taxation, bureaucracy. In Mesopotamia, as throughout the ancient Near East (except Egypt) during the Bronze Age (*c.*3000–1200 BCE), cities were individual states, each comprising not only the fortified nucleus but also a rural hinterland of farms and villages, forming an interdependent economic, social and political system. Within the 'city' proper lay political and ideological power: administration, military resources, temples, the apparatus of 'kingship'. Economically, the ancient city was a consumer rather than a creator of wealth, its income drawn mostly from the labours of the farmers, who were freeholders, tenants or slaves. Farmers comprised well over nine-tenths of the population; but they have left us little trace of their mud-brick houses, their myths and legends, their places of worship, their daily lives. Their houses have mostly disintegrated, their stories, customs and rituals left only in their burials, and whatever has survived of their material culture. We see them only occasionally as captives in war on an Assyrian relief or as labourers in Egyptian scenes of building enterprises. (We glimpse them in the Bible, but not fully; we know mostly about kings, priests, prophets and patriarchs.) They subsisted as the climate permitted; their surpluses went to their ruler, the king and to the gods (the temple and priests), who were usually under royal control. In return, the ruler defended them (as far as he could) from attack and invasion, which could also destroy their harvest and their livelihood.

We know more of the rulers than the ruled: we can visit the remains of cities and walk through the ruins of palaces and temples; we can read texts from ancient libraries, which reveal rituals and myths, lists of omens, prayers and tax receipts, accounts of battles and the boastful inscriptions of royal achievements such as buildings, laws or military campaigns. Inevitably, our history of the ancient world is a skewed one: we know who commissioned a pyramid (and was entombed in it), but not a single name of one of the thousands who constructed it.

Whatever had preceded the advent of kingship is lost to history. One of the earliest preserved texts, the Sumerian King List (the surviving tablet is dated 2125 BCE), opens with the words, 'After the kingship descended from heaven . . .'. The gods handed laws to the kings, who, in their own words, always ruled justly, served the gods and destroyed their enemies. Kings of course, were frequently usurped, even assassinated, but

kingship always persisted. No other system ever seems to have been envisaged (even among the gods). Warfare was endemic, since it constituted a justification for kingship and the existence of standing armies; it also provided a source of wealth in booty and slaves. In Mesopotamia, as in most of the ancient Near East, cities fought each other for supremacy. The Sumerian King List describes this process as follows: 'Erech was defeated; its kingship was carried off to Ur . . .'. The successive supremacy of Mesopotamian cities is sometimes reflected in the mythology: our text of the Babylonian Creation Epic (from the twelfth century BCE) features Marduk and his city of Babylonia; but it adapts older Sumerian epics, and in turn an Assyrian copy replaces Marduk with the Assyrian god Asshur.

Egypt was in some ways dissimilar to Mesopotamia. It was a politically unified country (theoretically, a union of two countries, Upper and Lower Egypt), not a group of city-states. Unlike the lands 'between the rivers', it was seldom threatened from outside, though in due course it did succumb to Assyria, Persia, Alexander and Rome. It enjoyed a stable agricultural economy, since the annual flooding of the Nile was more reliable than the flooding of the Tigris–Euphrates basin (which often inundated cities). The pharaoh reigned supreme as the son of the god Amon, the king of a large society of gods. Hence the chief religious preoccupations were the sun and the underworld; in the Egyptian cosmos, the sun sailed (how else did one travel in Egypt?) daily into the underworld and back, just as the pharaoh and at least the upper classes would pass, after their death and judgement, into that world where Osiris ruled.

Egypt and Mesopotamia formed the two ends of the 'Fertile Crescent' and each exerted a strong influence on the lands between. Palestine was under Egyptian control until the end of the Bronze Age (thirteenth century BCE), when some kind of crisis, possibly economic, saw a collapse of the political system. Mesopotamia, where a Semitic population had overlain the non-Semitic Sumerians in the late third millennium, gave a cultural lead to the largely Semitic peoples of Syria and Palestine. The language of Mesopotamia, Akkadian, became the literary *lingua franca* of the entire Fertile Crescent in the second millennium, as we know from the letters written by kings of Palestinian city-states to the Pharaoh Akhenaton in the fourteenth century BCE and found in his capital at Tell el-Amarna.

In the thirteenth century, an influx of what were called 'Sea Peoples', which included Philistines, settled in Palestine, having been repelled from Egypt by the Pharaoh Merneptah. These peoples, whose origins lay somewhere among the coasts or islands of the Eastern Mediterranean, quickly absorbed the indigenous culture, but the Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, Ashdod and Ekron remained powerful and politically independent for several centuries (giving, of course, their name to the land of 'Palestine'). At this time, new territorial states also arose in Syria and Palestine, including Israel and Judah. But a new age of empire soon arrived.

Empires are a natural extension of the social processes that governed kingship: patronage, in which protection was offered by the 'patron' to the 'client' in return for services (in our own day, the best-known example of the patron is the 'Godfather'). Chiefs and kings ruled in precisely this way, and it was by making other kings into clients that empires were constructed, by extracting loyalty in the form of tribute and political allegiance. However, as the trappings of kingship tend to expand, they require

more income, and also empires consume huge amounts of wealth. City-states had tried to establish military superiority over each other for the purpose of extracting economic surplus, and this is how empires begin, with the extraction of wealth by annual subscription, often requiring a military threat or even military action. This typically gives way to more direct administration of territories as provinces (the history of the British Empire is an excellent illustration). Trading had always been an instrument of royal administration and a source of income (including imposing duties on the passage of goods). This too was more effective if directly stimulated and controlled by the 'king of kings'.

The first great empire builders of the ancient world were the Assyrians, and they drew the map of the ancient Near East early in the first millennium. All empires face external and internal threats, more or less continually and in the end they succumb, as did Assyria late in the seventh century. To the extent that empires create any kind of political or economic system, they persist under new ownership. The Assyrians' immediate successors, the Neo-Babylonians, took over the Assyrian Empire, though they learnt very little in doing so. (The Persians, by contrast, learnt much.)

Assyria was under-populated, landlocked and culturally dominated by Babylonia. It expanded aggressively in two waves between the tenth and seventh centuries, subduing its neighbours and driving westwards towards the Mediterranean coast where lay material wealth, manpower and trade opportunities. Its system of patronage, making vassals of the rulers of territories it wished to control, was inscribed in treaties in which the commitments of each side were made public and sealed with an oath. Such a format is clearly visible in the 'covenant' (treaty) of the book of Deuteronomy, where Yahweh is the patron and Israel the client. However, the Assyrians did not invent the vassal treaty: before them, the Hittites and others had used it. Patronage is an age-old mechanism.

Assyria found itself converting vassals into provinces, as it did in Israel after it put down yet another rebellion, killed the king, effected some population transfers and carved out three provinces. Judah was left, however, with a vassal king. In the ruins of the city of Ekron (Tell Miqneh) lie the remains of a very large olive oil production installation, from the mid-to-late seventh century, producing over a million litres a year. It is likely that Judah's own production was also integrated into a larger economic system. The Ekron facility shows us how the Assyrians managed an empire, and also how Judah's political independence was nominal.

Kingdoms, cities and empire, however, are not simply political machines; they also create and sponsor cultural activities. The ruler of Assyria in the mid-seventh century was Ashurbanipal, who could probably read and write (very unusual for a king) and who spent much of his life accumulating a library of classical Mesopotamian literature, without which we would know much less about the literature of ancient Mesopotamia than we do. His collection was assigned to different rooms according to subject matter: government, religion, science, each room having a tablet near the door that indicated the general contents of each room. Libraries were already a well-established institution of the great cities of the Near East and have been excavated at Ebla, Mari, Nuzi and Ugarit.

His cultural activities did not prevent Ashurbanipal from extending his empire, but it fell a few decades later. The Neo-Babylonian kings (of whom Nebuchadrezzar

is the best known) inherited an empire that the Medes and Persians in turn overcame less than a century later, when Cyrus marched into Babylon as the ruler appointed by Marduk. The Persians were faced with a highly diverse empire, and a highly expensive one. Rule of the empire was confined to the Persian aristocratic families, while the territories were divided into satrapies and subdivided into provinces, where their inhabitants were encouraged to enjoy cultural autonomy. The satraps were mostly Persian, but governors of provinces would often be local. The Persians were not Semitic, like most of the peoples from Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine, and the religion of the rulers (from the beginning or almost) was different from what had previously been known in the Fertile Crescent: Zoroastrianism. Here was a monotheistic system (though with a dualistic aspect) which has no deification of the female but believes in a judgement of souls after death, and afterlife in heaven and hell.

We actually know more about the Persian Empire from Greek sources than Persian ones. The Persians engaged with the Greeks, first, as a major trading presence but then in a struggle with the Greek colonies of Ionia, leading to a Persian attack on Greece itself (480 BCE), and ultimately to the campaigns of Alexander of Macedon. The Greek account of that war is contained in the *Histories* of Herodotus (440) who also tells us about the history and customs of the people of the empire. In addition, Xenophon wrote the *Anabasis*, a story of the march home by Greek mercenaries who had been enlisted by a rival to Artaxerxes (another Cyrus) to try and take the throne (401–399 BCE). He also wrote a life of Cyrus the Great, the *Cyropaedia*.

The classical world

The political system of Greece evolved later than Mesopotamia or Egypt and urbanization did not begin until about 800 BCE. Greece was never a politically united system: its cities fought for dominance, formed leagues and alliances, traded extensively and founded colonies elsewhere. The cities were at first ruled by kings or by aristocrats, who also controlled religious activities: there was no separate priestly caste. Increasingly, political and religious power was shared by more of the inhabitants of the individual cities. The absence of a powerful kingship or priesthood constitutes a highly important distinction between Greece and the ancient Near East, which remained in most aspects dominated by totalitarian categories of thought and culture. Yet, having never achieved political unity or stability, the Greek cities gave way to Philip of Macedon who united them under his kingdom and whose son Alexander went on to conquer the Persian Empire. The change that this brought within these territories was more than merely political. The entire Fertile Crescent, together with Persia itself, as far as the borders of India, plus Egypt and Sicily, were to be hugely influenced by Greek culture. Greek colonies were implanted, and colonial cities, modelled after the self-ruling Greek city (the *polis*), but now multi-ethnic, flourished almost everywhere. Antioch and Alexandria were among the most important of these new foundations, but cities that were already long established also sought this status (including Jerusalem itself, a policy that precipitated the Maccabean wars).

The older civilizations of the Near East were all torn between resistance, reasserting their own history and customs, and embracing the new. Histories of Egypt and Babylon from the earliest times were written by Manetho and Berossus – but in Greek! Yet cultural influence was not in one direction only: Alexander and his successors adopted much of the style of traditional ancient Near Eastern monarchies, while religions such as the cult of Demeter, of Mithras and Isis and philosophical systems penetrated the Eastern Mediterranean where they had a mass appeal in a world where religious affiliation was more elective than in the ancient Near East. In the realm of religion, syncretism was rife: not only gods and goddesses but legendary heroes were blurred together: Tammuz and Adonis, Thoth and Hermes, Samson and Heracles, David and Orpheus, Isis and Demeter. With Alexander the Great two worlds that already knew each other not only collided but also began to mix – though socially 'Greeks' made little effort to mix with the 'locals' who lived alongside them in the cities. Politically, his empire quickly shrank and split into smaller kingdoms, governed by his generals – largely following the contours of earlier civilizations: Egypt (the Ptolemies) and Syria–Mesopotamia (the Seleucids), with Palestine, as before, sandwiched between the two and passing in 199 BCE from the control of the Ptolemies to the Seleucids.

There was never a 'Greek Empire': the 'Hellenistic' world in some ways perpetuated the older Near Eastern monarchies but in a quite different cultural guise. The Hellenistic monarchies had ambitions, but were no match for the organized ambition of Rome (even when Rome was torn by civil war, as it was in the first century BCE). Rome had also fallen under the Greek spell, and perhaps rather like Assyria with Babylon, it found cultural self-confidence only once it had achieved political hegemony over its more illustrious neighbour. Like the Greek cities, Rome had once been ruled by a monarch but had developed into a republic. Victory over Carthage (202 BCE) won it control of most of the Mediterranean, and having consolidated Italy under its rule (by the third century BCE), it annexed Macedonia and Egypt in the second century, and quickly extended its influence over the remainder of Alexander's former empire, except for Babylonia, which had been gained by the Parthians in 250.

Like Assyria, centuries earlier, Rome's problem was manpower. Although it followed the policy of granting citizenship liberally (including to freed slaves), it never had the resources to assimilate conquered territories, and generally proceeded by creating clients from local rulers and using local elites to govern. Here again is something of a repetition of the original Assyrian practice; certainly, it again exemplifies the patron–client mechanism. Thus, for example, in Palestine, the dynasty of Herod the Great ruled as client kings (with the euphemism *socius*, 'ally') until finally direct Roman rule was imposed as a result of that dynasty's failures and of popular unrest. Even so, while Roman armies and a Roman governor were present, administration here was left largely in the hands of the local aristocracy.

Under Rome, the Jews of Palestine lost their temple in 70 CE and their land in 135. But Jews were, like some other nationalities in an increasingly mobile population, already a largely dispersed *ethnos* (a recognized national identity) and now without temple or priesthood, the religion was severely threatened. Having enjoyed a favoured status under the Romans since the time of Julius Caesar, they lost it under Hadrian (135 CE). The rabbis

struggled to impose their authority in the face of assimilation and the growing influence of Christianity. However, the triumph of Christianity under Constantine (who died in 337) also may have secured protection, yet with a rather ambivalent status, for Jews and the great era of rabbinic Judaism ensued, culminating in the completion of the Talmuds. Yet it was Babylonia, under the Parthians' successors, the Sassanids, that became the intellectual and religious centre of Judaism, while Christianity divided, as had the empire, into eastern and western domains, ruled respectively from Constantinople and Rome.

The impression of a succession of world empires from Assyria to Rome is, of course, a simplification: there were always revolts, gaps, and power vacuums. Empires decay and shrink as new ones grow. There is a certain continuity from one empire to another, but also (as in the case of Macedonia) clear discontinuities also. As for gaps: at two junctures in the long history just reviewed, Palestine enjoyed brief moments of independence from the imperial powers, and both were crucial. As mentioned earlier, in the tenth century between the decline of Egypt and the rise of Assyria, Israel, Judah and several other small kingdoms arose and briefly flourished here, until they all succumbed to Assyria. Again, in the second century BCE, between the decline of the Seleucid kingdom and the arrival of Roman control, Judah gained independence under the Hasmoneans, and expanded its territory to include Idumea, Galilee and parts of Transjordan, consolidating Judaism as a dominant religion of Palestine, at least outside the Hellenistic cities. The spread of Judaism and of Christianity – and thus their ultimate survival – were due entirely to the existence of the great empires, while kingship and city remain highly potent symbols in both religions ('king' is still a popular epithet for the Jewish and Christian god), reminding us of the ancient world from which they draw political and social conventions.

Social and Cultural Configurations

The ancient Near East

If the political life and history of the ancient world are usually described in terms of the deeds and territories of rulers and their servants, social and cultural life requires a broader vision. There is only a limited extent to which rulers control daily life. First of all, they do not necessarily control even all the territory they claim. The patron–client relationship operated at a series of levels, and even kings ruled through their own clients, such as local landowners or tribal leaders, or even warlords. Indeed, ancient monarchies often relied upon the loyalty of such powerful local 'barons'. Apart from slaves, at the bottom of the hierarchy were the farmers, whose world was largely circumscribed by their own (extended) family and village, with its own dialects, stories and customs. Kinship, not nationality, held these societies together, and genealogy was the normal way of expressing social liaisons and loyalties, even when such kinships are not really biological – as any reader of the Bible can quickly see. A village would be bound to the urban centre, where its ruler lived, where some religious festivals would be attended, markets held, and where security might be sought in time of war. Beyond that, identity

was largely meaningless: the inhabitants of the city of Dan, for example, would hardly see themselves as essentially 'Israelite' or 'Aramaean': they might from time to time be controlled (paid taxes) to a ruler in Samaria or Damascus or Hazor; they belonged permanently only to their village and beyond that, its mother city. It was through marriage, collaboration in times of harvest or assembly for major religious events that social bonding was maintained.

The life of the farmer depended on the climate and the weather. Without rain at the right time, or too much rain, or locusts, or indeed a ravaging army devouring and despoiling the crops, death was likely. If the local patron fulfilled his obligations, surplus might be distributed, but if food had to be acquired by incurring debt, slavery and forfeiture of land could result. In systems where the land was in theory the property of the king, and farmers were his 'servants' (as in Egypt), individual freedom was sacrificed to greater security. But in less secure and prosperous lands than Egypt (which did not have to rely on local rainfall, since the Nile annually flooded), the success of the harvest was the dominating concern, and ownership of one's own land was not always a benefit; it could be a liability. Popular religion was therefore understandably about fertility; gods of war or dynastic gods were of little relevance: reproduction was the giver of life. The Bible may decry the goddesses and 'abominations' of the 'Canaanites' at their local shrines, but the female figurine is the commonest of artefactual remains from Iron Age Palestine, including the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The religious preferences of the urban elites were different: they worshipped at their temples the god of the city and of the king, and the gods of their professions, such as the god of writing (Nabu, Thoth).

The culture and values of village farmers were transmitted from parent to child, justice was administered by parents and village elders, and through communal festivities (religious celebrations, story-telling, births, weddings and funerals). However much rulers claimed to control the administration of law or temples, or the proper conduct of the cult, such influence was probably weak. Such control would have gained the ruler little benefit. Occasionally a ruler imposed a new cult (Akhenaton, Nabonidus), but these reforms had as much to do with politics as religion; neither was long-lasting and neither had any great effect on the rural populace.

As noted earlier, urbanization stimulated the emergence of dedicated professions, mostly associated with the ruler: soldiers, temple personnel, administrators, but also certain artisans. The feeding of the ruler's own retainers was paid for from the produce taken from the land, whether owned by the ruler or the temple or owned privately, in which case produce was taxed. It is unlikely that the farmers retained much surplus, but owners of extensive land could accumulate wealth. Armies could pay their way by securing booty and slaves – if victorious; but on campaign they lived off the land (some farmers' crops), and they still required regular sustenance at other times. Temple personnel may have been as important in securing divine favour for good weather, freedom from illness or security in war, but to our modern eyes they were unproductive. In short, a small elite lived at the expense of a large underclass. However, we must not conclude that there was an antagonism between rural and urban populations; the evidence we have is of a real symbiosis of the two.

The country did come to the city, and the social heart of the city was the gate, or rather the space immediately inside the gate. Here was the ancient equivalent of the

Greek *agora* and the Roman *forum*. It was where legal hearings were conducted before elders, where (probably) prophets would have delivered their speeches, where markets were held, where representatives of the king would be present to speak or hear. It was also a place where people met and where rural and urban culture mixed, where travellers sought accommodation and refreshment. Here more than anywhere else in the city, the unity of the city and its surrounding countryside was evident.

It is needless also to say that ancient societies were patriarchal (as many still are today) and polygamous – but only where economics and availability permitted. In practice, monogamy was determined by these and not moral factors, and the poorer men must have been largely monogamous. Women's functions were confined largely to the household, but included agricultural labour. Like the rest of the household, a woman was subject to the authority of the (male) family head (father or elder brother) until married, when that authority was transferred (in return for payment of a dowry) to her husband. On being widowed, she often depended on the generosity of her children. Women did not normally inherit in ancient Near Eastern societies, though there is evidence that they could in Sumeria and also in Egypt.

In most ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies, women played important roles in religious cults: in Greece and Rome as priestesses, in the Near East more usually as intermediaries (prophetesses); in the religious life of the village, women also played various roles as religious specialists. Everywhere we have to bear in mind the contrast between the public and official place of women as reflected in the literature, and the reality, in which individual women might in fact exercise effective control of their own husbands as well as their children. Our knowledge, unfortunately, must always be patchy since our only sources are archaeological and literary. But from literary sources such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (see below) and the biblical books of Ruth, Proverbs and Song of Songs, attitudes to females and the limits of female behaviour were complex and cannot easily be generalized.

The classical world

The world of the Greeks was not monolithic. They all spoke the same language, and worshipped the same gods, but the cities had their own laws and customs. From the fifth century BCE onwards, wealth and political power were not confined to a small elite as in the ancient Near East. There was no scribal class, no priestly class, literacy was more widely spread and, apart from the usual economic tasks (in which slaves – up to a quarter of the population – and women carried much of the burden), Greeks engaged in the political life of their city, in athletics, games, horse-riding, music, theatre and dining. Boys were educated at schools. But women, too, were sometimes educated, and many Greek (male) writers praise the delights of educated female companions. Nevertheless, classical Greece was also patriarchal, stressing the role of women as bearers of children and ornaments to their husbands, and in fact Athens was less liberal in this respect than Sparta, where, for example, women came to own a good deal of property. Women were not citizens and did not participate in political life. Their role was in the home, where they were excluded from the banquets enjoyed by their hus-

bands. And the Athenian tragedies, perhaps surprisingly, focus very often on the fate of women (Clytemnestra, the Trojan women, Antigone, Elektra and many others). In the Graeco-Roman world reflected in the New Testament, there are no women priests or leaders, but women are depicted among the followers of Jesus, and among influential leaders in Christian communities. Priscilla is always named with Aquila, four times in Acts and the Pauline letters. 1 Corinthians 1:11 refers disparagingly to the 'house of Chloe'; and Revelation fulminates against a 'Jezebel'. If Christianity was indeed especially popular among women (including the upper classes), it would not be surprising to find women leaders. But other religious cults also appealed especially to women, including the mystery cults. Again, then, it is impossible to generalize about the role that women could play in classical society.

The advent of (partial) democracy in Athens, for example, had been achieved by wresting power from oligarchy and vesting it in the citizenry. From Homeric times to the sixth century BCE, Athens, a typical example, experienced monarchy, then aristocracy, then tyrants, then democracy. The laws of Solon in 594 were a crucial stage in this last transition, as a result of which the citizen was politicized (the root of 'politics' aptly being *polis*), so that in the famous speech of Pericles (as Thucydides tells it, at any rate), the term *idiotes*, meaning non-political person, became pejorative. Every citizen participated, or was expected to participate, in the running of the city, and this involved the exercise of reason and judgement. It involved weighing priorities, and it involved the assessment of human motivation. Decisions were now taken in a way that focused the attention of every member of the assembly on his own personal responsibility.

The Greek city, then, had citizens: it was 'owned' and run by those who lived in or near it (excluding women and slaves!). Citizens were expected to participate in administration, in judgement, in determining political and economic policy. This, whatever the other similarities between Greek and ancient Near Eastern cities, made a vital difference to their character. If the words 'totalitarian' and 'democratic' are too blunt (and unqualified) to express the contrast, they point to that difference. The overwhelming role of kingship and state, not only with its entrenched bureaucracy but also its heavy ideological apparatus, is absent in Greece, and the stratification of producers and consumers of wealth, ruler and ruled, in the ancient Near East does not apply as absolutely in Greece or in Rome. The intellectual achievements of Greece (see below) cannot be explained without reference to the elevation of human judgement, both corporate and individual, in the organization of life, rather than the gods and their royal representative on earth.

The Ancient World of Ideas

The ancient Near East

One important cultural configuration of the ancient Near East was the scribal class. The bureaucratic apparatus required a class of persons who were official guardians and producers of knowledge, writing everything from royal propaganda to economic records, including myths, annals, prayers – anything that required recording

permanently on clay, wood or papyrus. Their competence included diplomacy (hence knowledge of more than one language) and record-keeping (archives, libraries). They might well be thought of as the ancient civil service, indispensable to the running of any state. Yet they also formed an intellectual class, who regarded writing and reading as a divine gift that enabled knowledge, whether political, ethical or metaphysical, to be explored and classified. Apart from maintaining the necessary instruments of state government, these people took upon themselves the role of the intelligentsia, exploring knowledge, including natural science (e.g. cosmology), social sciences (e.g. history and social policy) and ethics ('wisdom'). They systematized myths, created lists of astronomical observations and omens (which they also tried to correlate), and thought incessantly about the meaning of human life and the battle for control of human existence with the gods who determined everything. Their specialized range of skills required them to provide an education for their apprentices, and examples of their textbooks and their exercises have been found in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It will have been these people in Israel and Judah who were responsible for the contents of the Hebrew Bible.

The culture of the ancient Near East was religious and we have no literature at all that reflects an awareness of the world as an autonomous system, or one subject to ultimate human control. The existence and power of the gods were everywhere taken for granted. Only with the scientific philosophy of the Greeks of Asia Minor does speculation begin about immanent laws of nature and how they can be understood. Astronomical observation was highly developed already in Babylonia and geometry was certainly well advanced among the builders of the pyramids, both 2,500 years before Thales of Miletus (624–547 BCE). But the Mesopotamian astronomers regarded the heavenly bodies as signs of events on earth. The difference is in the abandonment of mythology, just as in the political sphere divine kingship was rejected in favour of a more 'democratic' form of government. The same is true of history: while Herodotus seeks to know the 'causes' of the war between Persia and Greece, Near Eastern cultures produced myths of origin, ancient 'king lists' of a mythological character, texts celebrating royal military campaigns, buildings or victories, and – the closest approximation to what we would call 'history' – the Babylonian Chronicles. In the Hellenistic period, however, national histories proliferate, drawing on whatever ancient sources (including mythology) were available. The biblical history from Genesis to Kings has features in common with these Hellenistic histories but the dating of the biblical literature is still disputed; it is not ruled out that the work as a whole belongs to the early Persian period, i.e. the time of Nehemiah, who was a contemporary of Herodotus; indeed, some have claimed to detect the influence of Herodotus, though the general opinion regards the biblical work as at least based on older historiographical documents.

The intellectual and artistic range of ancient Near Eastern scribal literature is impressive, and can be exemplified in the very old, originally Sumerian, *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The oldest long poem in the world, it tells the story of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (Erech) *c.*2700 BCE, two-thirds divine and one-third mortal. It opens:

> He saw the great Mystery, he knew the Hidden:
> He recovered the knowledge of all the times before the Flood.

> He journeyed beyond the distant, he journeyed beyond exhaustion,
> And then carved his story on stone.

Gilgamesh starts as an oppressor of his subjects, who cry to the gods and in response a wild companion is provided for him, Enkidu. Enkidu becomes civilized through a temple woman and loses his strength; but she introduces him to Gilgamesh. The two fight but then become friends and decide on a great adventure, to kill the demon guardian of a forest and destroy the trees. Enkidu forces Gilgamesh to slay the demon, who curses him: may he die before Gilgamesh. Later in Uruk, Gilgamesh refuses the advances of the goddess Ishtar, who in revenge obliges the chief god Anu to send a raging bull against his city. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull and the gods decree death for Enkidu. Enkidu first curses all those he has known, then, realizing how he has enjoyed life, blesses them and is dragged off to the underworld before he dies. Gilgamesh's grief is increased by awareness of his own mortality and on the advice of another mysterious woman, Siduri, he seeks the gift of eternal life from the one human granted it, Utnapishtim, survivor of the great Flood, whom he reaches after a fabulous journey and hears his story. Gilgamesh is told that if he can stay awake six days and seven nights he will achieve immortality; he fails, falling asleep instantly for seven days. Utnapishtim offers Gilgamesh a plant to restore youth, which Gilgamesh retrieves from the ocean floor but does not eat immediately. On the way home he stops to sleep and a snake devours the plant. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk and dies.

The story is a reflection upon many facets of human life. Urbanization (civilization) is still a recent achievement, and the dialectic of wild and tamed is nicely conveyed through the main characters. The taming of Enkidu may be a metaphor for the cultivation of the land, the domestication of herds and crops, but is also about the civilizing influence of women (likewise, Siduri teaches Gilgamesh). Women may seduce, but they also have their own wisdom. Mortality is another theme, threatening not only oneself, but one's friendships. Mortals cannot live forever; but they can compensate by being remembered and by building cities; the city and kingship are yet another theme. Yet the city must also be left in the quest for what is valuable: security does not bring wisdom: it must be sought out, at risk, if necessary. This too is probably a metaphor for human life, in which there is ultimately no security. The epic teaches that life is a journey towards wisdom as much as towards death, and while immortal fame may be acquired, the value of life and of the quest is friendship. As Siduri says to Gilgamesh, 'Fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of humans.' The poem also criticizes tyranny and ambition and celebrates the virtues of the pleasures of human companionship, love, food, and drink. Gilgamesh begins as a tyrant, but it is his friendship for Enkidu that tames and teaches him.

Classic texts like these were copied and preserved in the major cities of the Fertile Crescent, such as Ugarit, Ebla and Mari. They point us to the existence of a widely known Akkadian 'canon' that also included laws (such as the codes of Hammurabi) and divinatory texts as well as other myths such as the *Creation Epic* that, like *Gilgamesh*, also began as a Sumerian story and migrated via Babylon to Ashurbanipal's library,

where the best-preserved copies were found. The 'Akkadian canon' continued to be copied well into the Graeco-Roman period, and its contents would no doubt have been familiar in the scribal schools of Palestine. These texts were not only copied but studied, stimulating the ongoing debate about the meaning and values of life and the universe (see the poem of Job). We find motifs from *Gilgamesh* in the Eden story of Genesis 2–3 (immortality, the snake), in Ezekiel 28 and 31 (the semi-divine figure), and in Ecclesiastes' recommendation to enjoy life while it lasts, illustrating an intellectual stream that flows through the Bible too – as witness also the obvious affinities between the laws in Exodus and those of Hammurabi and the collections of prophetic oracles from Mari and Nineveh. The book of Job, too, has its antecedents in Mesopotamia, while the book of Proverbs contains sayings identical to those in the Egyptian Wisdom of Amenemope, written in the fourteenth century BCE. It is not necessary, or possible, to date such parallels to a specific time or place: they were accessible everywhere.

Gilgamesh also claims to be a written account by the ancient king himself of his exploits and discoveries, which points us to another widespread cultural phenomenon of the ancient world: revealed wisdom from the past. It inspired the blossoming of apocalyptic literature, especially during the Graeco-Roman period. Apocalypses are revelations or heavenly secrets typically given to an ancient figure who then writes them down; the writing is then 'discovered' at a later time. They typically reveal the origins and ends of the world and of history and the answers to the problems of evil. Among the techniques of apocalypses are heavenly journeys and descriptions of the heavenly mechanisms that govern earthly phenomena. Some of these ingredients can already be seen in *Gilgamesh* (see the quotation above), but an even more important influence was manticism, the culture of divination.

One of the obsessions of Mesopotamian culture was divination, predicting the future. This activity generated hundreds of writings in which observations about omens and their consequences were recorded, in the belief that there was a system by which the future could be intimated to humans through signs, known to a professional guild. Dreams, heavenly phenomena, sacrificial entrails and many other devices were used. An excellent instance of this tradition is Matthew's *magoi* who come 'from the east' following a star that would predict a Jewish Messiah. Although the Old Testament deplores divination, we have Enoch (a figure based on an antediluvian ruler from the third millennium BCE Sumerian King List), who 'foresees' the future and writes it down for future generations. Daniel, too, is trained in the mantic lore of Babylon and by direct divine revelation unlocks secrets of the future. Apocalypses also typically deal with the final resolution of the problem of evil, however that is seen. Usually evil is personified in a wicked king or emperor (Daniel, Revelation) or angel (Enoch). In Jewish and Christian belief the figure of Satan emerges as an amalgam: the ancient snake, the fallen archangel, the head of a legion of evil spirits, the 'tempter' of individuals (as in the book of Job). 'Evil' was often equated with 'death', the great obsession of much of Graeco-Roman religion, and the age-old theme of *Gilgamesh*, immortality, was thus integrated into a new religion in which the triumph of good over evil, the abolition of sin and the defeat of death were all brought together in a synthesis, much of which seems to be the work of Paul, who as a Greek-speaking Jewish Roman citizen personifies almost the whole cultural background of the ancient world. Seen in this light, the triumph of

Christianity is not surprising: it covered almost every religious question and problem, with the added sparkle of a 'divine man', not the hero of an ancient myth but of recent history.

The classical world

In fifth-century Athens the intellectual tradition was not vested in a class, but in citizens themselves. The individual existed as a separate, clearly defined entity, aware of individual selfhood and moral responsibility for their actions. Rather than Greek philosophy, which has already been briefly compared with ancient Near Eastern thinking, Athenian tragedy offers a striking illustration of the Greek 'world of ideas'. Its roots lie in religious ceremony, its stories are drawn from myth and the gods are involved in the action, and this may be precisely why its subject matter is about the human. Athenian tragedy is about people, and what they do to each other. It deals with human relationships and decisions in relation to family and to politics: loyalty to the gods, the race, the family and the city often conflict. Athenian politics was not essentially about principles but about the management of conflicting claims, about individual cases, about expediency.

Because citizens had to do public service, they were interested in moral dilemmas, moved by the impulses of pity and fear, and concerned about the bases of choices in matters of moral conduct. What made a person guilty or not? Or a course of action wise or not? Here the gods themselves are little more than glorified humans, morally speaking. Whether Zeus himself comes to be seen as a transcendental guarantor of order, or a personality of desperate conflict (a precursor of the Wagnerian Wotan?), his own instinct is at war with what he is supposed to represent. In Athens what is right is decided by the democratic court, by public opinion, and not by regal or divine decree, not by verdict of the elders, and perhaps only to an extent by traditional laws and within the household. And that is why it is in Greece and not the ancient Near East (nor the Bible) that ethics was born.

The ancient world in the Bible

How is the ancient world seen in the Bible? What is the place of the universe in its various schemes? We might start with the stories of Genesis 10 and 11, which both account for the spread of humanity across the world after the Flood. In Genesis 10, the so-called 'Table of Nations' assigns nations and territories to the descendants of Noah (a scheme still reflected in our modern use of 'Semitic' and 'Hamitic'). Here everything is orderly and divinely willed. In Genesis 11, humanity is scattered from Babel (Babylon) to curb its ambition, and the proliferation of language symbolizes the disunity of the human race ever since. But the following genealogy focuses on Shem and narrows down to Terah, the father of Abraham, who is then called by God. One nation is chosen, and the ensuing story is about the descendants of Abraham (indeed, only some of them). Thereafter other nations play only incidental roles. This chauvinism would have

been characteristic of any ancient society, but because of the influence of the Bible, the idea of a 'chosen race' has embedded itself in our culture.

In the so-called 'historical' and prophetic books of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, the world is divided into the land, near neighbours and other nations. With Ammon, Moab, Edom and Aram, there is a recognition of kinship, though perhaps precisely because of this they are quite distinctly distanced from membership of 'Israel'. One looks hard to find a friendly face painted on any of these nations. The prophetic books are full of 'oracles against foreign nations' (a curiosity that is quite hard to explain), and while oracles against Israel and Judah are also plentiful, there are usually compensating calls for repentance or promises of future restoration or prosperity. The nations as a whole are often depicted as being used by Yahweh to punish his own people, but also to then incur punishment for the punishment they inflict. In the Priestly writings (e.g. Leviticus) where the key is holiness, the region beyond the camp of 'Israel' is beyond the reach of the divine presence, a place to which the unclean are sent, a place corresponding perhaps to the chaos that lies outside the divinely created cosmos. In writings from the second century (1 Maccabees, Jubilees) the sense of an Israel besieged on all sides by all other nations, whether militarily or culturally, is strong. It is not unfair to say that in the discourse of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, the outside world is hostile. It threatens Israel politically and religiously, because it worships 'gods of wood and stone'. It may be that the book of Jonah is, among other things, a protest against this attitude, portraying both foreign sailors and the king and people of Nineveh as responsive to the word and deeds of Yahweh.

There is one curious exception: Persia. Nowhere are we told anything about the religion of Persia, though in Isaiah 45 proclaims Cyrus as the 'anointed' of Yahweh, and it is Cyrus who in 2 Chronicles 36:22 has his 'spirit stirred' by Yahweh to decree the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps behind this is the recognition that the religion of Zoroaster was seen as compatible or complementary with that of Judah or that, writing under the Persians, the biblical authors felt free to criticize only preceding empires, this is significant, and supported by the fact that while Persian kings can be portrayed as pawns of their courtiers (Esther, Dan. 6), they are never wicked.

A fundamental antinomy exists in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament about empire and its embodiment of all worldly power. In Daniel, we find, on the one hand, the notion that the kings of the world rule in orderly succession under the overall direction of the 'Most High' (Chapters 1–6). Yet in the later chapters, the successive kings, depicted in the guise of monsters, rebel and have to be destroyed. In the New Testament, written for those generally loyal to Rome, the Roman victim Jesus is portrayed rather as persecuted by the Jews; Paul uses the empire, and his citizenship, to spread his gospel, and seems to accept the empire as ordained by God. Yet in the book of Revelation, Rome is the great 'whore of Babylon'. In these cases, it is the experience of persecution that makes the difference. But if we probe, we find that throughout the Bible the world-rejecting and the world-affirming lie side by side, as does the representation of the world as orderly and as chaotic. In one view, a benign divine providence sustains everything; in the other, a final intervention will be needed at the end to establish justice.

Further Reading

Austin, M. M. (ed.) (1981). *The Hellenistic World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Boyce, Mary (1979). *Zoroastrians*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Braudel, Fernand (2001). *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World*. London: Allen Lane.
Burckhardt, J. (1998). *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*. New York: St Martin's Press.
Liverani, Mario (2005). *Israel's History and the History of Israel.* London: Equinox.
Marks, John H. (1985). *Visions of One World: Legacy of Alexander*. Guildford, CT: Four Quarters.
von Soden, Wolfram (1994). *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/London: Gracewing.
Walbank, F. W. (1993). *The Hellenistic World*, rev. edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.