

## DPS Biblical Archeology Study – Teacher’s Guide

# 4. Mesopotamia & Egypt

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#### a. Inscriptions and Writings: Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III



It is the most complete Assyrian obelisk yet discovered, and is historically significant because it displays the earliest ancient depiction of an Israelite. It was erected as a public monument in 825 BCE at a time of civil war.

The second register from the top includes the earliest surviving picture of an Israelite: the Biblical Jehu, king of Israel. It describes how Jehu brought or sent his tribute in or around 841 BCE.

Jehu severed Israel’s alliances with Phoenicia and Judah, and became subject to Assyria. The caption above the scene, written in Assyrian cuneiform, can be translated:

“The tribute of Jehu, son of Omri: I received from him silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king [and] spears.”

## **b. Mesopotamia & Egypt - a geology shapes theology**

### **i. Outline of Early Mesopotamian History**

#### 1. Proto-Literary Period.

Our earliest samples of writing begin around 3500 B.C. This writing is found in the form of round cylinders which were impressed with a message and then baked. There are two main uses:

- a. Religious and cultic uses.
- b. Cooking recipes.

This tells us something about the people of the ancient world. They are essentially like modern people. Even though the product of differing cultures and times, they have the same basic needs and desires.

The earliest writing was in the form of pictographs where a single picture would represent a single object. These developed into ideographs and from there to a system of wedge-shaped characters made on soft tablets of clay with a triangular stick or cunios. This writing became known as cuneiform.

#### 2. The Early Dynastic Period.

From 3000 B.C. to about 2300 B.C. various city-states gained supremacy over their neighbors, establishing short periods of suzerainty.

- Kish – located in central Mesopotamia near Babylon.
- Erech – Neighbor to Ur.
- Ur – City from which Abraham came.
- Lagesh – 35 miles northeast of Erech.

It was during this period that Gilgamesh became king of Erech (2650 B.C.). Myths and legends grew of his exploits. The “Gilgamesh Epic” recounts his quest for immortality and his conflicts with monsters and enemies along the way.

This was the “golden age” of Sumerian civilization. Its works of art were unparalleled in later ages.

*“So far as we know, the fourth millennium before Christ saw Sumerian art at its zenith. By the First Dynasty of Ur, if there is any change, it is in the nature of a*

*decadence, and from later ages we have nothing to parallel the treasures of the prehistoric tombs.*" (C. Leonard Wooley, *The Sumerians*, 1965, pg 44).

As there were advances in the arts, so there were also advances in the modes of war. Infantry tactics developed which involved phalanxes of soldiers carrying short spears and supported by lightly armed skirmishers.

### 3. Sargon the Great (Died 2330 B.C.).

A text written in the 7th century B.C. describes Sargon's birth and early life in terms very similar to that of Moses. According to this legend, his mother placed him in a pitch-covered basket in the Euphrates River. By chance a farmer drawing water to irrigate his field found the basket and raised the child as his own. Sargon went on to become the cup bearer to the king of Kish and eventually overthrew the king and placed himself on the throne, taking for himself the name "Sargon."

### 4. The Third Dynasty of Ur.

This was to be the last Sumerian dynasty to rule in Mesopotamia. It would rule from 2100 to 2000 B.C. Under these kings, Sumer was restored to much of her former glory. All branches of the arts saw a period of renaissance as economic prosperity became the order of the day.

#### The Ziggurat.

The Ziggurat of Ur was a giant, semi-pyramidal structure of brick covering an area of 200 by 140 feet. It was composed of three terraced stages and crowned by a small shrine towering 90 feet above the city.

Although it looked something like the pyramids of Egypt, the purpose of the ziggurat was widely different. It was believed to be a sunbathed ladder to the gods, connecting heaven and earth.

One cannot help but wonder if a ziggurat was what was referenced in the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. Ziggurats were not unique to Ur. They were found throughout Mesopotamia.

*Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. And it came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly." And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:1-4).*

The phrase *whose top will reach into heaven* can be translated, “its top unto the heavens” and have the sense, not of a means to get into the sky, but a temple which would allow the worshiper to approach God on his own terms.

c The Fall of Ur.

Near the close of the 21st century, a people known as the Amurru (Biblical Amorites) began to move into Mesopotamia from the northwest, conquering the cities of Babylon, Isin and Larsa. The armies of Sumer managed to hold them off for a time, but then the Elamite provinces in the east declared their independence. Many of the provincial governors took this opportunity to revolt. Thus weakened, Ur fell to the assault of Elam and her king carried off into captivity.

With the destruction of Ur, the dominance of the Sumerian people came to a close. But their culture lived on as it was adopted by the Assyrians in the north and the Amorites in the south. These and succeeding kingdoms adopted the Sumerian pantheon as well as their cuneiform methods of writing, adapting it to their own languages.

**ii. Contrast between Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian Theology**

Mesopotamia	Egypt
Legalistic in their religious outlook, looking more to the letter of the law.	More of an ethical outlook on life with a focus on the spirit of the law.
Art and literature reflects a gloomy, pessimistic outlook on life.	Demonstrates a cheerful resignation to the problems of life.
Euphrates and Tigris flooded unexpectedly and often killed those who were caught. These rivers came to be feared.	The Nile flooded on a regular cycle and the Egyptians came to expect and depend upon its flooding. They eventually began to worship the Nile.

Surrounded by hostile forces on all sides. People lived in constant fear of invasion.	Egypt has natural boundaries in the sea and the desert which usually kept out invaders.
Lived from day to day always in fear of invasion and death.	Looked forward to immortality and a life after death.
Selfish and practical.	Giving and idealistic.

**Discussion Questions:**

stories can be found in does it make you feel to know that so many details of the biblical How Mesopotamia and Egypt? Does it surprise you ancient the history, archeology, and geography of theology was shaped apparently the geography and natural events have an influence on how that ?in the ancient world