CHAPTER IX

Babylonia

I. FROM HAMMURABI TO NEBUCHADREZZAR

Babylonian contributions to modern civilization—The Land between the Rivers — Hammurabi — His capital — The Kassite Domination—The Amarna letters—The Assyrian Conquest—Nebuchadrezzar—Babylon in the days of its glory

CIVILIZATION, like life, is a perpetual struggle with death. And as life maintains itself only by abandoning old, and recasting itself in younger and fresher, forms, so civilization achieves a precarious survival by changing its habitat or its blood. It moved from Ur to Babylon and Judea, from Babylon to Nineveh, from these to Persepolis, Sardis and Miletus, and from these, Egypt and Crete to Greece and Rome.

No one looking at the site of ancient Babylon today would suspect that these hot and dreary wastes along the Euphrates were once the rich and powerful capital of a civilization that almost created astronomy, added richly to the progress of medicine, established the science of language, prepared the first great codes of law, taught the Greeks the rudiments of mathematics, physics and philosophy,[1] gave the Jews the mythology which they gave to the world, and passed on to the Arabs part of that scientific and architectural lore with which they aroused the dormant soul of medieval Europe. Standing before the silent Tigris and Euphrates one finds it hard to believe that they are the same rivers that watered Sumeria and Akkad, and nourished the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

In some ways they are not the same rivers: not only because "one never steps twice into the same stream," but because these old rivers have long since remade their beds along new courses,[2] and "mow with their scythes of whiteness"[3] other shores. As in Egypt the Nile, so here the Tigris and the Euphrates provided, for thousands of miles, an avenue of commerce and—in their southern reaches—springtime inundations that helped the peasant to fertilize his soil. For rain comes to Babylonia only in the winter

months; from May to November it comes not at all; and the earth, but for the overflow of the rivers, would be as arid as northern Mesopotamia was then and is today. Through the abundance of the rivers and the toil of many generations of men, Babylonia became the Eden of Semitic legend, the garden and granary of western Asia.*

Historically and ethnically Babylonia was a product of the union of the Akkadians and the Sumerians. Their mating generated the Babylonian type, in which the Akkadian Semitic strain proved dominant; their warfare ended in the triumph of Akkad, and the establishment of Babylon as the capital of all lower Mesopotamia. At the outset of this history stands the powerful figure of Hammurabi (2123-2081 B.C.) conqueror and lawgiver through a reign of forty-three years. Primeval seals and inscriptions transmit him to us partially—a youth full of fire and genius, a very whirlwind in battle, who crushes all rebels, cuts his enemies into pieces, marches over inaccessible mountains, and never loses an engagement. Under him the petty warring states of the lower valley were forced into unity and peace, and disciplined into order and security by an historic code of laws.

The Code of Hammurabi was unearthed at Susa in 1902, beautifully engraved upon a diorite cylinder that had been carried from Babylon to Elam (ca. 1100 B.C.) as a trophy of war.† Like that of Moses, this legislation was a gift from Heaven, for one side of the cylinder shows the King receiving the laws from Shamash, the Sun-god himself. The Prologue is almost in Heaven:

> When the lofty Anu, King of the Anunaki and Bel, Lord of Heaven and Earth, he who determines the destiny of the land, committed the rule of all mankind to Marduk; . . . when they pronounced the lofty name of Babylon; when they made it famous among the quarters of the world and in its midst established an everlasting kingdom whose foundations were firm as heaven and earth—at that time Anu and Bel called me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, the worshiper of the gods, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, *to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, . . . to enlighten the land and to further the welfare of the people.* Hammurabi, the governor named by Bel, am I, who brought about plenty and abundance; who made

* The Euphrates is one of the four rivers which, according to *Genesis* (ii, 14), flowed through Paradise.

† It is now in the Louvre.

II. THE TOILERS

Hunting — Tillage — Food — Industry — Transport — The perils of commerce — Money-lenders — Slaves

Part of the country was still wild and dangerous; snakes wandered in the thick grass, and the kings of Babylonia and Assyria made it their royal sport to hunt in hand-to-hand conflict the lions that prowled in the woods, posed placidly for artists, but fled timidly at the nearer approach of men. Civilization is an occasional and temporary interruption of the jungle.

Most of the soil was tilled by tenants or by slaves; some of it by peasant proprietors.[25] In the earlier centuries the ground was broken up with stone hoes, as in neolithic tillage; a seal dating some 1400 B.C. is our earliest representation of the plough in Babylonia. Probaby this ancient and honorable tool had already a long history behind it in the Land between the Rivers; and yet it was modern enough, for though it was drawn by oxen in the manner of our fathers, it had, attached to the plough, as in Sumeria, a tube through which the seed was sown in the manner of our children.[26] The waters of the rising rivers were not allowed to flood the land as in Egypt; on the contrary, every farm was protected from the inundation by ridges of earth, some of which can still be seen today. The overflow was guided into a complex network of canals, or stored into reservoirs, from which it was sluiced into the fields as needed, or raised over the ridges by *shadufs*—buckets lifted and lowered on a pivoted and revolving pole. Nebuchadrezzar distinguished his reign by building many canals, and gathering the surplus waters of the overflow into a reservoir, one hundred and forty miles in circumference, which nourished by its outlets vast areas of land.[27] Ruins of these canals can be seen in Mesopotamia today, and—as if further to bind the quick and the dead—the primitive *shaduf* is still in use in the valleys of the Euphrates and the Loire.[28]

So watered, the land produced a variety of cereals and pulses, great orchards of fruits and nuts, and above all, the date; from this beneficent concoction of sun and soil the Babylonians made bread, honey, cake and other delicacies; they mixed it with meal to make one of their most sustaining foods; and to encourage its reproduction they shook the flowers of the male palm over those of the female.[29] From Mesopotamia the grape and the olive were introduced into Greece and Rome and thence into western Europe; from nearby Persia came the peach; and from the shores of the Black Sea Lucullus brought the cherry-tree to Rome. Milk, so rare in the distant Orient, now became one of the staple foods of the Near East. Meat was rare and costly, but fish from the great streams found their way into the

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Meanwhile others pried into the earth, struck oil, and mined copper, lead, iron, silver and gold. Strabo tells how what he calls "naphtha or liquid asphalt" was taken from the soil of Mesopotamia then as now, and how Alexander, hearing that this was a kind of water that burned, tested the report incredulously by covering a boy with the strange fluid and igniting him with a torch.[30] Tools, which had still been of stone in the days of Hammurabi, began, at the turn of the last millennium before Christ, to be made of bronze, then of iron; and the art of casting metal appeared. Textiles were woven of cotton and wool; stuffs were dyed and embroidered with such skill that these tissues became one of the most valued exports of Babylonia, praised to the skies by the writers of Greece and Rome.[31] As far back as we can go in Mesopotamian history we find the weaver's loom and the potter's wheel; these were almost the only machines. Buildings were mostly of adobe—clay mixed with straw; or bricks still soft and moist were placed one upon the other and allowed to dry into a solid wall cemented by the sun. It was observed that the bricks in the fireplace became harder and more durable than those that the sun had baked; the process of hardening them in kilns was then a natural development, and thenceforth there was no end to the making of bricks in Babylon. Trades multiplied and became diversified and skilled, and as early as Hammurabi industry was organized into guilds (called "tribes") of masters and apprentices.[32]

Local transport used wheeled carts drawn by patient asses.[33] The horse is first mentioned in Babylonian records about 2100 B.C., as "the ass from the East"; apparently it came from the table-lands of Central Asia, conquered Babylonia with the Kassites, and reached Egypt with the Hyksos.[34] With this new means of locomotion and carriage, trade expanded from local to foreign commerce; Babylon grew wealthy as the commercial hub of the Near East, and the nations of the ancient Mediterranean world were drawn into closer contact for good and ill. Nebuchadrezzar facilitated trade by improving the highways; "I have turned inaccessible tracks," he reminds the historian, "into serviceable roads."[35] Countless caravans brought to the bazaars and shops of Babylon the products of half the world. From India they came via Kabul, Herat and Ecbatana; from Egypt via Pelusium and Palestine; from Asia Minor through Tyre, Sidon and Sardis to Carchemish, and then down the Euphrates. As a result of all this trade Babylon became, under Nebuchadrezzar, a thriving and noisy market-place, from which the wealthy sought refuge in residential suburbs. Note the contemporary ring of a rich suburbanite's letter to King Cyrus of Persia (ca. 539 B.C.): "Our

estate seemed to me the finest in the world, for it was so near to Babylon that we enjoyed all the advantages of a great city, and yet could come back home and be rid of all its rush and worry."[39]

Government in Mesopotamia never succeeded in establishing such economic order as that which the Pharaohs achieved in Egypt. Commerce was harassed with a multiplicity of dangers and tolls; the merchant did not know which to fear the more—the robbers that might beset him on the way, or the towns and baronies that exacted heavy fees from him for the privilege of using their roads. It was safer, where possible, to take the great national highway, the Euphrates, which Nebuchadrezzar had made navigable from the Persian Gulf to Thapsacus.[37] His campaigns in Arabia and his subjugation of Tyre opened up to Babylonian commerce the Indian and Mediterranean Seas, but these opportunities were only partially explored. For on the open sea, as in the mountain passes and the desert wastes, perils beset the merchant at every hour. Vessels were large, but reefs were many and treacherous; navigation was not yet a science; and at any moment pirates, or the ambitious dwellers on the shore, might board the ships, appropriate the merchandise, and enslave or kill the crew.[38] The merchants reimbursed themselves for such losses by restricting their honesty to the necessities of each situation.

These difficult transactions were made easier by a well-developed system of finance. The Babylonians had no coinage, but even before Hammurabi they used—besides barley and corn—ingots of gold and silver as standards of value and mediums of exchange. The metal was unstamped, and was weighed at each transaction. The smallest unit of currency was the *shekel*—a half-ounce of silver worth from $2.50 to $5.00 of our contemporary currency; sixty such *shekels* made a *mina*, and sixty *minas* made a talent—from $10,000 to $20,000.[38a] Loans were made in goods or currency, but at a high rate of interest, fixed by the state at 20% *per annum* for loans of money, and 33% for loans in kind; even these rates were exceeded by lenders who could hire clever scribes to circumvent the law.[39] There were no banks, but certain powerful families carried on from generation to generation the business of lending money; they dealt also in real estate, and financed industrial enterprises;[40] and persons who had funds on deposit with such men could pay their obligations by written drafts.[41] The priests also made loans, particularly to finance the sowing and reaping of the crops. The law occasionally took the side of the debtor: e.g., if a peasant mortgaged his farm, and through storm or drought or other "act of God" had no harvest from his toil, then no interest could be exacted from him in that year.[42] But for the most part the law was written with an eye to protecting property and preventing losses;

it was a principle of Babylonian law that no man had a right to borrow money unless he wished to be held completely responsible for its repayment; hence the creditor could seize the debtor's slave or son as hostage for an unpaid debt, and could hold him for not more than three years. A plague of usury was the price that Babylonian industry, like our own, paid for the fertilizing activity of a complex credit system.[43]

It was essentially a commercial civilization. Most of the documents that have come down from it are of a business character—sales, loans, contracts, partnerships, commissions, exchanges, bequests, agreements, promissory notes, and the like. We find in these tablets abundant evidence of wealth, and a certain materialistic spirit that managed, like some later civilizations, to reconcile piety with greed. We see in the literature many signs of a busy and prosperous life, but we find also, at every turn, reminders of the slavery that underlies all cultures. The most interesting contracts of sale from the age of Nebuchadrezzar are those that have to do with slaves.[44] They were recruited from captives taken in battle, from slave-raids carried out upon foreign states by marauding Bedouins, and from the reproductive enthusiasm of the slaves themselves. Their value ranged from $20 to $65 for a woman, and from $50 to $100 for a man.[45] Most of the physical work in the towns was done by them, including nearly all of the personal service. Female slaves were completely at the mercy of their purchaser, and were expected to provide him with bed as well as board; it was understood that he would breed through them a copious supply of children, and those slaves who were not so treated felt themselves neglected and dishonored.[46] The slave and all his belongings were his master's property: he might be sold or pledged for debt; he might be put to death if his master thought him less lucrative alive than dead; if he ran away no one could legally harbor him, and a reward was fixed for his capture. Like the free peasant he was subject to conscription for both the army and the *corvée*—i.e., for forced labor in such public works as cutting roads and digging canals. On the other hand the slave's master paid his doctor's fees, and kept him moderately alive through illness, slack employment and old age. He might marry a free woman, and his children by her would be free; half his property, in such a case, went on his death to his family. He might be set up in business by his master, and retain part of the profits—with which he might then buy his freedom; or his master might liberate him for exceptional or long and faithful service. But only a few slaves achieved such freedom. The rest consoled themselves with a high birth-rate, until they became more numerous than the free. A great slave-class moved like a swelling subterranean river underneath the Babylonian state.

We do not find among the Babylonians such signs of monotheism as appear in Ikhnaton and the Second Isaiah. Two forces, however, brought them near to it: the enlargement of the state by conquest and growth brought local deities under the supremacy of a single god; and several of the cities patriotically conferred omnipotence upon their favored divinities. "Trust in Nebo," says Nebo, "trust in no other god";[71] this is not unlike the first of the commandments given to the Jews. Gradually the number of the gods was lessened by interpreting the minor ones as forms or attributes of the major deities. In these ways the god of Babylon, Marduk, originally a sun god, became sovereign of all Babylonian divinities.[72] Hence his title, Bel-Marduk—that is, Marduk *the* god. To him and to Ishtar the Babylonians sent up the most eloquent of their prayers.

Ishtar (Astarte to the Greeks, Ashtoreth to the Jews) interests us not only as analogue of the Egyptian Isis and prototype of the Grecian Aphrodite and the Roman Venus, but as the formal beneficiary of one of the strangest of Babylonian customs. She was Demeter as well as Aphrodite—no mere goddess of physical beauty and love, but the gracious divinity of bounteous motherhood, the secret inspiration of the growing soil, and the creative principle everywhere. It is impossible to find much harmony, from a modern point of view, in the attributes and functions of Ishtar: she was the goddess of war as well as of love, of prostitutes as well as of mothers; she called herself "a compassionate courtesan";[73] she was represented sometimes as a bearded bisexual deity, sometimes as a nude female offering her breasts to suck;[74] and though her worshipers repeatedly addressed her as "The Virgin," "The Holy Virgin," and "The Virgin Mother," this merely meant that her amours were free from all taint of wedlock. Gilgamesh rejected her advances on the ground that she could not be trusted; had she not once loved, seduced, and then slain, a lion?[75] It is clear that we must put our own moral code to one side if we are to understand her. Note with what fervor the Babylonians could lift up to her throne litanies of laudation only less splendid than those which a tender piety once raised to the Mother of God:

> I beseech thee, Lady of Ladies, Goddess of Goddesses, Ishtar, Queen of all cities, leader of all men.
> Thou art the light of the world, thou art the light of heaven, mighty daughter of Sin (the moon-god). . . .
> Supreme is thy might, O Lady, exalted art thou above all gods.

in this way.[108] "Sacred prostitution" continued in Babylonia until abolished by Constantine (ca. 325 A.D.).[109] Alongside it, in the wine-shops kept by women, secular prostitution flourished.[110]

In general the Babylonians were allowed considerable premarital experience. It was considered permissible for men and women to form unlicensed unions, "trial marriages," terminable at the will of either party; but the woman in such cases was obliged to wear an olive—in stone or *terra cotta*—as a sign that she was a concubine.[111] Some tablets indicate that the Babylonians wrote poems, and sang songs, of love; but all that remains of these is an occasional first line, like "My love is a light," or "My heart is full of merriment and song."[112] One letter, dating from 2100 B.C., is in the tone of Napoleon's early messages to Josephine: "To Bibiya: . . . May Shamash and Marduk give thee health forever. . . . I have sent (to ask) after thy health; let me know how thou art. I have arrived in Babylon, and see thee not; I am very sad."[113]

Legal marriage was arranged by the parents, and was sanctioned by an exchange of gifts obviously descended from marriage by purchase. The suitor presented to the father of the bride a substantial present, but the father was expected to give her a dowry greater in value than the gift,[114] so that it was difficult to say who was purchasd, the woman or the man. Sometimes, however, the arrangement was unabashed purchase; Shamashnazir, for example, received ten *shekels* ($50) as the price of his daughter.[115] If we are to believe the Father of History,

> those who had marriageable daughters used to bring them once a year to a place where a great number of men gathered round them. A public crier made them stand up and sold them all, one after another. He began with the most beautiful, and having got a large sum for her he put up the second fairest. But he only sold them on condition that the buyers married them. . . . This very wise custom no longer exists.[116]

Despite these strange practices, Babylonian marriage seems to have been as monogamous and faithful as marriage in Christendom is today. Premarital freedom was followed by the rigid enforcement of marital fidelity. The adulterous wife and her paramour, according to the Code, were drowned, unless the husband, in his mercy, preferred to let his wife off by turning her almost naked into the streets.[117] Hammurabi put-Cæsared Cæsar: "If the finger have been pointed at the wife of a man be-

cause of another man, and she have not been taken in lying with another man, for her husband's sake she shall throw herself into the river"[118]—perhaps the law was intended as a discouragement to gossip. The man could divorce his wife simply by restoring her dowry to her and saying, "Thou art not my wife"; but if she said to him, "Thou art not my husband," she was to be drowned.[119] Childlessness, adultery, incompatibility, or careless management of the household might satisfy the law as ground for granting the man a divorce;[120] indeed "if she have not been a careful mistress, have gadded about, have neglected her house, and have belittled her children, they shall throw that woman into the water."[121] As against this incredible severity of the Code, we find that in practice the woman, though she might not divorce her husband, was free to leave him, if she could show cruelty on his part and fidelity on her own; in such cases she could return to her parents, and take her marriage portion with her, along with what other property she might have acquired.[122] (The women of England did not enjoy these rights till the end of the nineteenth century.) If a woman's husband was kept from her, through business or war, for any length of time, and had left no means for her maintenance, she might cohabit with another man without legal prejudice to her reunion with her husband on the latter's return.[123]

In general the position of woman in Babylonia was lower than in Egypt or Rome, and yet not worse than in classic Greece or medieval Europe. To carry out her many functions—begetting and rearing children, fetching water from the river or the public well, grinding corn, cooking, spinning, weaving, cleaning—she had to be free to go about in public very much like the man.[124] She could own property, enjoy its income, sell and buy, inherit and bequeath.[125] Some women kept shops, and carried on commerce; some even became scribes, indicating that girls as well as boys might receive an education.[126] But the Semitic practice of giving almost limitless power to the oldest male of the family won out against any matriarchal tendencies that may have existed in prehistoric Mesopotamia. Among the upper classes—by a custom that led to the *purdah* of Islam and India—the women were confined to certain quarters of the house; and when they went out they were chaperoned by eunuchs and pages.[127] Among the lower classes they were maternity machines, and if they had no dowry they were little more than slaves.[128] The worship of Ishtar suggests a certain reverence for woman and motherhood, like the worship of Mary in the Middle Ages; but we get no glimpse of chiv-

alry in Herodotus' report that the Babylonians, when besieged, "had strangled their wives, to prevent the consumption of their provisions."[129]

With some excuse, then, the Egyptians looked down upon the Babylonians as not quite civilized. We miss here the refinement of character and feeling indicated by Egyptian literature and art. When refinement came to Babylon it was in the guise of an effeminate degeneracy: young men dyed and curled their hair, perfumed their flesh, rouged their cheeks, and adorned themselves with necklaces, bangles, ear-rings and pendants. After the Persian Conquest the death of self-respect brought an end of self-restraint; the manners of the courtesan crept into every class; women of good family came to consider it mere courtesy to reveal their charms indiscriminately for the greatest happiness of the greatest number;[130] and "every man of the people in his poverty," if we may credit Herodotus, "prostituted his daughters for money."[131] "There is nothing more extraordinary than the manners of this city," wrote Quintus Curtius (42 A.D.), "and nowhere are things better arranged with a view to voluptuous pleasures."[132] Morals grew lax when the temples grew rich; and the citizens of Babylon, wedded to delight, bore with equanimity the subjection of their city by the Kassites, the Assyrians, the Persians, and the Greeks.

VI. LETTERS AND LITERATURE

Cuneiform—Its decipherment—Language—Literature—The epic of Gilgamesh

Did this life of venery, piety and trade receive any ennobling enshrinement in literary or artistic form? It is possible; we cannot judge a civilization from such fragments as the ocean of time has thrown up from the wreckage of Babylon. These fragments are chiefly liturgical, magical and commercial. Whether through accident or through cultural poverty, Babylonia, like Assyria and Persia, has left us a very middling heritage of literature as compared with Egypt and Palestine; its gifts were in commerce and law.

Nevertheless, scribes were as numerous in cosmopolitan Babylon as in Memphis or Thebes. The art of writing was still young enough to give its master a high rank in society; it was the open sesame to governmental and sacerdotal office; its possessor never failed to mention the distinction in narrating his deeds, and usually he engraved a notice of it on his cylinder seal,[133] precisely as Christian scholars and gentlemen once

loyal to a religion that offered them so little consolation. Nothing could be known, said the priests, except by divine revelation; and this revelation came only through the priests. The last chapter of that revelation told how the dead soul, whether good or bad, descended into Aralu, or Hades, to spend there an eternity in darkness and suffering. Is it any wonder that Babylon gave itself to revelry, while Nebuchadrezzar, having all, understanding nothing, fearing everything, went mad?

X. EPITAPH

Tradition and the *Book of Daniel*, unverified by any document known to us, tell how Nebuchadrezzar, after a long reign of uninterrupted victory and prosperity, after beautifying his city with roads and palaces, and erecting fifty-four temples to the gods, fell into a strange insanity, thought himself a beast, walked on all fours, and ate grass.[167] For four years his name disappears from the history and governmental records of Babylonia;[168] it reappears for a moment, and then, in 562 B.C., he passes away.

Within thirty years after his death his empire crumbled to pieces. Nabonidus, who held the throne for seventeen years, preferred archeology to government, and devoted himself to excavating the antiquities of Sumeria while his own realm was going to ruin.[169] The army fell into disorder; business men forgot love of country in the sublime internationalism of finance; the people, busy with trade and pleasure, unlearned the arts of war. The priests usurped more and more of the royal power, and fattened their treasuries with wealth that tempted invasion and conquest. When Cyrus and his disciplined Persians stood at the gates, the anticlericals of Babylon connived to open the city to him, and welcomed his enlightened domination.[170] For two centuries Persia ruled Babylonia as part of the greatest empire that history had yet known. Then the exuberant Alexander came, captured the unresisting capital, conquered all the Near East, and drank himself to death in the palace of Nebuchadrezzar.[171]

The civilization of Babylonia was not as fruitful for humanity as Egypt's, not as varied and profound as India's, not as subtle and mature as China's. And yet it was from Babylonia that those fascinating legends came which, through the literary artistry of the Jews, became an inseparable portion of Europe's religious lore; it was from Babylonia, rather than from Egypt, that the roving Greeks brought to their city-states,

and thence to Rome and ourselves, the foundations of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, grammar, lexicography, archeology, history, and philosophy. The Greek names for the metals and the constellations, for weights and measures, for musical instruments and many drugs, are translations, sometimes mere transliterations, of Babylonian names.[172] While Greek architecture derived its forms and inspiration from Egypt and Crete, Babylonian architecture, through the *ziggurat,* led to the towers of Moslem mosques, the steeples and campaniles of medieval art, and the "setback" style of contemporary architecture in America. The laws of Hammurabi became for all ancient societies a legacy comparable to Rome's gift of order and government to the modern world. Through Assyria's conquest of Babylon, her appropriation of the ancient city's culture, and her dissemination of that culture throughout her wide empire; through the long Captivity of the Jews, and the great influence upon them of Babylonian life and thought; through the Persian and Greek conquests, which opened with unprecedented fulness and freedom all the roads of communication and trade between Babylon and the rising cities of Ionia, Asia Minor and Greece—through these and many other ways the civilization of the Land between the Rivers passed down into the cultural endowment of our race. In the end nothing is lost; for good or evil every event has effects forever.