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## Mesopotamia in Greek and Biblical Perceptions

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## 10 Conclusion



## Facts and Fiction

As said in the introduction, one of the reasons to compare what Greek and biblical authors have written about Assyria and Babylonia, their inhabitants and their history, is to investigate if encounters between Assyrians or Babylonians and Greeks in the archaic period have left behind traces in Greek literature. In the archaic period, the Greeks came into contact with Assyrians and Babylonians in the Levant, i.e. in Palestine, Phoenicia and western Syria. Yet, it is difficult to identify elements in what the Greeks knew, or thought to know, about Mesopotamia that are demonstrably from the archaic period and of Levantine origin. In this study, comparing what Greek and biblical authors have written about Mesopotamia and its inhabitants is used as a means to identify such elements: it is sometimes possible to trace elements in the knowledge about the Assyrians and Babylonians in Greek literature that date from the archaic period by their similarity to biblical traditions from the period of the late monarchy and the Babylonian exile.

Comparing what biblical and ancient Greek authors wrote about Mesopotamia and its inhabitants yields a long list of similarities and an even longer list of differences, but similarities do not always point to a common source. For example, both biblical and Greek authors consider Mesopotamia as a country of populous and impressive cities with rich temples and large walls and buildings. Of course, no attentive traveller or observer from the sixth or fifth century could have failed to notice that Mesopotamia was more urbanised than most other areas and that its cities were much larger than those of Greece and Judah. A similarity like this is to be expected. Other similarities are more puzzling. For example, most biblical and a few Greek authors call the inhabitants of Babylonia Chaldeans. The Babylonians never called themselves Chaldeans, nor did the Assyrians call them that. A similarity such as this is unexpected. It calls for an explanation and perhaps points to a common source. These idiosyncrasies, which are not based on actual facts, and which are not rooted in Assyrian or Babylonian idiom, are important to determine whether dependencies between Greek and biblical literature exist.

Speaking or writing about foreign nations, regions or cities is only possible if they have names. Geographical and ethnic names are the first subject that has been

studied (chapters two and three). As a rule, geographical and ethnic names in Greek literature more closely follow Assyrian or Babylonian than Hebrew or Aramaic idiom. For example, Σύρ(ι)οι and Συρία are clearly of Assyrian, not of Hebrew or Aramaic origin (loss of the initial vowel), and Βαβυλών is derived from the longer form *Bāb-ilāni*, which is found in Akkadian, but has no equivalent in Hebrew and Aramaic, which use the shorter form Babel.

The Greeks called the Assyrians Σύροι, Σύριοι or Ἀσσύριοι and their country Συρία or Ἀσσυρία. Σύρ(ι)οι and Συρία reflect the neo-Assyrian pronunciation (loss of the initial **a**), which shows that they were borrowed in the eighth or seventh century, before the fall of the Assyrian empire. Clearly, they are not of Hebrew or Aramaic origin, because these languages retain the initial vowel (Hebr. *ʾaššūr*, Aram. *ʾa(t)tūr*). Ἀσσύριοι is probably of Babylonian or West-Semitic (?Phoenician) origin.

Exceptions to the rule that the Greeks use Assyrian or Babylonian names for regions or peoples from Mesopotamia are names such as ‘Chaldeans’, ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Aturia’. Μεσοποταμία and Ἀτουρία, which are clearly of Aramaic origin, are only found in literature from the Hellenistic period onwards, but Χαλδαῖοι and Χαλδαϊκή in the meaning ‘Babylonians’ and ‘Babylonia’ are names from an earlier period that probably have a West-Semitic origin.

From the archaic period on, the name of southern Mesopotamia is in Greek Βαβυλωνία and its inhabitants are called Βαβυλώνιοι, but sometimes Χαλδαῖοι and Χαλδαϊκή are found in texts from the fifth and fourth centuries. The latter forms correspond with Hebrew *kaśdīm* and *ʾereṣ kaśdīm*. Both are derived from Akkadian *kaldu*, which in Assyrian and Babylonian never refers to (the inhabitants of) Babylon or the whole of Babylonia, but only to (the inhabitants of) the most southern parts of Babylonia. Therefore, it is almost certain that Χαλδαϊκή and Χαλδαῖοι in the sense ‘Babylonia’ and ‘Babylonians’ betray West Semitic influence from a period not later than the mid-fifth century. However, Βαβυλώνιοι is more common than Χαλδαῖοι, and it is found in older texts. It is uncertain whether Χαλδαῖοι was already in use before the fifth century.

The names of the most important Mesopotamian cities, Nineveh and Babylon, and perhaps a few other ones, must also have been known to the Greeks and the Judeans early in the first millennium. Greek and biblical authors were both highly impressed by their size and splendour, but the similarities between Greek and biblical depictions of these cities are not very specific. They are wealthy, populous, and, above all, very large. Most of what Greek and biblical authors say about Nineveh, Babylon and other Mesopotamian cities must have been common knowledge in the Ancient Near East and perhaps even in the Mediterranean.

In describing how large Mesopotamian cities were, the author of Jonah and Aristotle both speak of three days: in Jonah it is said that Nineveh was 'a three days' walk across', and in Aristotle's *Politica* it is said that, when Babylon was captured, many people in the city were not aware of it until three days later. Obviously, these three days are not to be taken as exact measurements, but they only want to give an impression of the size of the most important Mesopotamia cities. It is impossible to pinpoint the origin of this motif of three days.

As seen in chapter four, both in the Bible and in Greek and Roman literature from the Hellenistic period, the Assyrians and Babylonians are regularly mentioned as manufacturers and merchants of textiles, especially luxury textiles, coloured cloth and embroidery. According to Flavius Josephus, the veil in the temple was 'a Babylonian curtain, embroidered with blue, and fine linen, and scarlet, and purple, and of a contexture that was truly wonderful' (Jos. BJ 5.212). Of course, this reputation was deserved: the Assyrians and Babylonians really made expensive and brightly coloured textiles.

In Antiquity, the Assyrians and Babylonians were known as great sorcerers and astrologers. Many Greek authors and even some Hellenistic Jewish authors admired Babylonian astrology and philosophy, but biblical authors were less enthusiastic. They often depicted Assyrian and Babylonian magic and astrology as something evil and dangerous. Of course, Babylonian love for divination, magic and astrology really existed, a fact which was apparently known to Greek and biblical authors.

As seen in chapters seven and eight, biblical and Greek literature mention the names of many Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs, but most of the time different ones. Surprisingly few Mesopotamian kings are mentioned both in biblical and Greek historiography. For example, Semiramis is not found in the Bible, and Ashurbanipal plays only a minor role, while they are the most famous Assyrian kings in Greek historiography. At the other hand, Nebuchadnezzar, who is perhaps the most famous Babylonian king in the Bible, is mentioned under his own name only in a few Greek texts, and never became very famous in Greek literature. Neither is Ninos known from the Bible. Both in Antiquity and in modern times, the biblical Nimrod and the Greek Ninos have been identified, but it has been shown that Ninos is Greek invention, a typical empire builder and city founder, the eponymous hero of Nineveh, and that he cannot be identified with a historical king from cuneiform literature. The biblical character Nimrod is probably based on Ninurta of Sargon and Naram-Sin. The most prominent monarch that is mentioned both in biblical and Greek historiography is Sennacherib.

Sennacherib is not only one of the Assyrian kings that are mentioned in biblical and Greek historiography, but there are even similar stories told about him: the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib's army in the books of Kings and Isaiah and the victory of the Egyptian pharaoh Sethos over the Assyrian king, also by divine intervention, in Herodotus' Histories. It is unlikely that the biblical story is taken from Herodotus, or the other way around, because the differences are too great. It seems more likely that both stories are based on the same event, a setback that the Assyrian army suffered in the south of Palestine. Herodotus or his source must have heard this story in Egypt. There is another story about Sennacherib that was widely known, the story that he was murdered by his sons. This story is found in the Bible, but it is not known from Greek historiography, although the failed murder attempt of Semiramis by her sons from her first marriage, and the murder of Semiramis by Ninyas, are perhaps echoes of the story of Sennacherib's death.

It has become clear that comparing what Greek and biblical authors have written about the Assyrians and Babylonians does not yield many traces of knowledge or misconceptions that are demonstrable from the archaic period or the Levant.

Similarities between the Greek and biblical descriptions are few. A number of these similarities are based on reality. Ancient Mesopotamia was more urbanised than most areas and countries in Antiquity; Nineveh and Babylon were larger than any city in the Ancient Near East or the Mediterranean before the rise of Rome; the Babylonians were well versed in astronomy and their preoccupation with astrology, divination and magic is obvious from many of their own, cuneiform documents; the Assyrians and Babylonians were active as cloth merchants and they traded in luxury textiles and embroidery. It is hardly remarkable that these facts were known both to many of the authors of biblical books and Greek historians who wrote about the Near East and its empires. It is possible, and sometimes even likely, that Greeks first heard of these regions, cities and kings and of the customs of the Assyrians and Babylonians in the archaic period in the Levant, or perhaps in Egypt, but it is also possible that they heard them in another period or place. These similarities are not specific enough to pinpoint their origin.

More significant are the use ethnic names and the story of Sennacherib. The story of Sennacherib's defeat, which is found in Herodotus and Kings, originates from the southern Levant or Egypt. Herodotus or his source must have heard it in Egypt. And the use of 'Chaldeans' in the meaning 'Babylonians' betrays West Semitic influence from a period not later than the mid-fifth century. The Greeks must have heard of the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Chaldeans often in Egypt and Syro-Palestine from the eighth century on. Greeks usually used the ethnic names Syrians (Σύριοι) and Babylonians (Βαβυλώνιοι), but sometimes also Chaldeans (Χαλδαῖοι). The use of Chaldeans in the meaning Babylonians is foreign to Assyrian and Babylonian, but at home in Hebrew and Aramaic (although the l in 'Chaldeans' is in accordance with the Akkadian pronunciation). This is an element of demonstrably western origin, but not necessarily from the archaic period.

## **Images**

In the Bible, the Assyrians and Babylonians are depicted as aggressive and warlike nations. Resistance against the kings and armies of Assyria and Babylonia is as a rule futile and in vain. Their military successes have made them rich and wealthy, but often also proud and arrogant. In Greek literature, the Assyrians are depicted as



rich, luxury loving and sluggish. Their kings idle away in their harems and behave like women, instead of fighting their neighbours and enlarging their empire. Only Ninus, the first king, and Semiramis, his wife and successor, were brave. Yet, even Semiramis' audacity and courage aroused mixed feelings, because fighting and exercising power were regarded as appropriate for men, not for women.

As said in the third chapter, both Greeks and Judeans were awed by the cities of Mesopotamia, their temples and their waterworks, their wealth and their enormous size. Yet, the images that Greek and biblical authors created of these cities is very different. To most biblical authors, Mesopotamian cities are something of their own world. They are large, rich and impressive, but also threatening, full of sorceries, decadence and bloodshed. To most Greek authors, these cities are something of the past, large and impressive, but also decaying and even dying. The greatness of their founders is long gone, and Nineveh and Babylon have become examples of opulence and wealth, but also of decadence and weakness.

Ruling a large empire requires officials. In Greek and Judean eyes, the Assyrian and Babylonian empires had a large bureaucratic apparatus. Biblical authors had some knowledge of Assyrian and Babylonian administration: they mention a number of high officials, such as the Tartan, the Rabsaris and the Rabshakeh (see chapter four). But more often, Greek and biblical sources speak simply of high officials or eunuchs (Gr. εὐνοῦχοι, Hebr. *sarīšīm*). They were seen as a normal part of palace life and they perform the same roles in Greek and biblical literature: they attend the king and queen (Esther, Xenophon, Ktesias), they are entrusted with the education of high-born children (Daniel, Plato), and sometimes they conspire against the king (Esther, Ktesias, Nikolaos). Of course, these were the roles that officials and eunuchs really must have performed at the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian courts. Yet, the existence of these officials may have created the image of a palace bureaucracy that the Greeks and Judeans did not know in such a size.

As said before, Mesopotamia is usually represented as a decadent society in Greek literature. The kings of Assyria and Babylonia, except Ninus and Semiramis are weak, dissolute and effeminate. This image, which was created in the early fourth

century by Ktesias of Knidos, prevails in Greek historiography after Ktesias. It is clearly a counter-image: Assyrian effeminacy, abandonment and decadence are the opposite of Greek manliness, discipline and restraint. In the Bible, Babylonia and Assyria are usually represented as warlike nations, but the image of Babylonia as a decadent society is also found, especially in the words of deutero-Isaiah, who lived in Babylon in the mid-sixth century, and in the book of Daniel, which was written in the Hellenistic period. In deutero-Isaiah, decadence is probably a consequence of excess and wealth and a sign of the expected doom of Babylon. Yet, there also seems to be a historical connection between the Greek image and that of deutero-Isaiah, because these images of Babylon as a decadent society originated in the eastern parts of the Near East, perhaps even in the city of Babylon itself, where both Ktesias and deutero-Isaiah have lived. It did not develop in the Levant, where people remembered the power of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies. It is not found in biblical historiography from the monarchical period or from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, nor in the *Historiae* of Herodotos, who never visited Mesopotamia, but only heard about Assyria and Babylonian in Egypt and perhaps in the Levant.

Clearly, the Greek and biblical images of the Assyrians and Babylonians are very different, but in deutero-Isaiah and especially in biblical books from the Hellenistic period such as Esther and Daniel, the Assyrians and Babylonians are often depicted in a way that is reminiscent of the Greek (Ktesian) image.

## **Historiography**

As said in the introduction, a second reason to compare Greek and biblical images of Mesopotamia is to gain a better understanding of the relation between Greek and biblical historiography. The nature of biblical historiography, its dependence on Greek examples such as Hesiod and Herodotos, and even the question whether it is possible to speak of biblical historiography at all have been the subject of much theological discussion. Some scholars think that historiography in the Bible has been modelled after Greek examples, while others think that biblical historiography is rooted in Ancient Near Eastern culture, and largely independent of Greek models. One of the few subjects that were of interest both to Greek and biblical historians are the kings, the armies and the customs of the Assyrians and Babylonians, and

studying how biblical and Greek historiography describe these nations and their history can elucidate the relation between Greek and biblical historiography.

In the preceding chapters, it has been argued that biblical historiography has its roots in the Ancient Near East. This is especially clear in the second books of Kings, which is part of the deuteronomistic history, and which is based on royal or priestly records, a (synchronic) chronicle or other annalistic sources from the period of the late monarchy. Synchronic chronicles are also known from Mesopotamia and such chronicles have probably served as an example to the authors of the first Judean or Israelite historiographic works. Chronicles, annals or king lists have never played an important role in Greek historiography. Yet, there are other elements in biblical historiography that show more similarity to ancient Greek historiography. These similarities are mainly found in genealogies (chapter five) and in texts that are interested in ancestors, founders and inventors of cultural accomplishments from primeval times (chapter seven).

Both in Greek and in biblical historiography, genealogies are sometimes used as a means to describe relations between nations or tribes or peoples. Examples are the *Table of Nations* (Genesis 10), the genealogy of the sons of Abraham and Keturah, and the genealogy of Io. These genealogies contain eponymous heroes, and the Greek ones also heroines, such as Aigyptos, Mizraim (Egypt), Danaos, Javan (Greece, Ionia), and Libya. In these genealogies three brothers are sometimes found at important points. Examples are Shem, Ham and Japheth (Noah's sons), Doros, Xuthos and Aiolos (Hellen's sons), and Ludos, Musos and Kar (Atys's sons). Triads are even found where two or four brothers would have been easier, which suggests that three was a desired number. Strife between twins is another motif that is sometimes found in classical and biblical founding myths. Examples are the struggles between Romulus and Remus, Danaos and Aigyptos, and Jacob/Israel and Esau/Edom. But more important than these literary devices is the fact that Greek and biblical genealogies have the same form and function.

As said in chapter five, the core of the Table of Nations was written between 650 and 550, probably in the period between the fall of Assyria and the establishment of

Babylonian supremacy. Its geographical horizon is limited to North Africa and the Ancient Near East, bounded in the northwest by the Aegean, in the northeast by the land of the Medes, and in the south by Arabia and Nubia. It is impossible to say what its original context was, but its function must have been historiographic or ethnographic: it divides and classifies the peoples of the earth. It is a segmented genealogy. Such use of segmented genealogies is also found in Greek literature, for example in the Hesiodic corpus (*Theogony*, *Catalogue of Women*) and the works of mythographers such as Pherekydes. It is possible that the use of genealogies for historic and ethnographic purposes in biblical and Greek literature has a common origin. If this is so, this influence has found its way by the spoken word, and not by textual transmission: form and function of the *Table of Nations* and Io's genealogy may be the same, but the names are different, the role of Egypt is different, and the geographical horizon of the Greek ethnic genealogies is more restricted. Therefore, direct influence or textual transmission are not very likely.

As said in chapters seven and nine, an author who was interested in the origin of peoples and nations and the invention of cultural institutions such as kingship, and cultural achievements such as husbandry, made a number of additions to Genesis: the story of Lamech and his children, the Nimrod legend and the story of the Sons of God. He shares his interest in culture heroes and foreign founders with Greek historians and mythographers such as Akousilaos, Hellanikos and Pherekydes.

In these biblical and Greek texts, we find founders of cities, nations or religious institutions who came from a foreign country and introduced ideas or ways of life in their new homelands. These foreign founders, as they are called, came from Egypt, Phoenicia or Babylonia and went to Canaan, Assyria or Greece, where they founded cities and introduced new religions, ideas and inventions. Among them are Abraham, Belos, Danaos, Kadmos and Moses. They show that the Israelites and the Greeks saw themselves as young nations, compared with the Egyptians and Babylonians. Among these foreign founders is also Nimrod, the founder of Nineveh and Kalhu. According to Genesis, he invented kingship and introduced city building in Assyria. Nimrod symbolises the cultural dependence of Assyria on Babylonia.

In Greek historiography and philosophy, Egypt is sometimes regarded as the origin of civilisation. Danaos, who came from Egypt, and Kadmos, whose father Agenor came from Egypt, introduced new inventions and ideas in Greece, Belos went from Egypt to Mesopotamia and founded the order of the Chaldeans, and even Moses is sometimes mentioned in this context. In biblical historiography, Egypt is as a rule seen in a more negative light, but even here, Moses, who bears an Egyptian name, and Nimrod, a son of Egypt's brother Cush, seem to support the idea that civilisation to some extent originated in Egypt, or at least in Africa.

Although Nimrod and Ninos do not have the same origin, they are both depicted as the first king to create an empire. Of Ninos this is explicitly said by historians such as Diodoros and Justinus, and of Nimrod Genesis tells us that he was the first mighty warrior and the first to rule by force. The institution of kingship and the creation of the first empire seem to have been regarded as Mesopotamian achievements, both by Greek historians and by biblical authors.

Yet, the differences seem to outweigh the similarities. There is a wide gap between biblical and Greek historiography and this difference is clearly seen in historical texts that mention the Assyrians and Babylonians. In the Bible, historical texts in which the Assyrians and Babylonians appear are found mainly in the second book of Kings, which is annalistic. Of each Judean and Israelite monarch, the year of his ascension, the length of his reign and the most memorable events of his reign are related. Of course, incursions of Assyrian and Babylonian kings are important events, and they are mentioned for the reigns of many kings. The accounts of some of these campaigns such as the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib and the conquests of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar are more detailed, but this does not affect the backbone of Kings being formed by a chronicle or by extracts from royal annals, which must have been chronologically sound. It seems that the authors of Kings are not interested in characterisations of the Assyrians or their kings and even less in the origins of the Assyrian empire or in descriptions of Assyrian mentality and culture. They wrote a political history of the past with a theological explanation of the events. The contrast with Greek historiography is striking. Herodotos seems mainly interested in Assyrian customs and habits, especially those that are exotic or

strange in Greek eyes. Other Greek historians are interested in the foundings of important cities such as Nineveh and Babylon (and sometimes of less known cities such as Arbela and Kalah), in the origin of the Assyrian empire (the first real empire in history according to many Greek and Roman historians), and in the origin and characterisation of its rulers. What came after was deemed of less interest, except the fall of Nineveh. This interest in origins is not found in the Deuteronomistic History, but it is found in Genesis.

The core Table of Nations (late seventh or early sixth century) and the some other parts of Genesis, especially texts that are concerned with foreign founders and the invention of cultural institutions such as husbandry and kingship, such as Lamech's story and the Nimrod legend, show more similarity with Greek historiography, especially the works of Herodotos and early mythographers such as Hellanikos and Pherekydes. These similarities include the use of genealogies as a means to describe relations between nations, a preference for the number three, and similar thoughts about foreign founders, the origins of civilisation and the invention of imperialism. Yet, the similarities are not very specific. There are hardly any names or events that are found both in Greek and biblical traditions. This suggests that any exchange of ideas was not by textual transmission, but by oral transmission of stories and ideas. It seems unlikely that the authors of Genesis had read Herodotos (Wesselius) or the Hesiodic *Ehoiai* (Van Seters).

There is also a difference in outlook. The subject of biblical historiography is the history of Israel and Judah. Assyrians and Babylonians are only mentioned in so far as they played a role in the history of Israel or Judah. But what is said about them is based on contemporary sources and on a reliable chronology. Greek historiography seems more interested creating an image of the Assyrians and Babylonians, but this image is only slightly based on any real, reliable knowledge of Mesopotamia and its history. Knowledge of Mesopotamian geography increased in the Hellenistic period, but the knowledge of its history only to a very limited extent. Greek historians could not free themselves of the explanations and misconceptions inherited from an earlier period. Real knowledge of the history of Mesopotamia and interest in their culture are found together for the first time in Antiquity in the works of

Christian historians such as Eusebios of Caesarea, but they do not reach a synthesis. Eusebios' writings, and those of his successors, seem more firmly anchored in Greek historiography than in biblical historiography, and they hardly seem to notice the reliability of the knowledge of the history of the Assyrians and Babylonians in the Bible.

Biblical books from the Hellenistic period have not been discussed in this study. The authors of Daniel, Judith and other texts from the late Persian or Hellenistic period may have read Herodotus or other Greek works, or at least have had some indirect knowledge of Greek historiography. Books such as Daniel and Judith show less knowledge of ancient Near Eastern history and stem from a different cultural environment than for example the second book of Kings. Neither are Hellenistic historians such as Eupolemos and Artapanos discussed. Their works show even more similarity to Greek historiography. What remains of what they have written is more narrative and less annalistic in character and they are known as individual authors, while the phenomenon of individual authorship is almost absent from biblical historiography. Biblical and Jewish historiography are Near Eastern in origin and have only gradually absorbed new ideas from Greek historiography.

This overview shows that there is only a tenuous historical relation between biblical and Greek historiography. History writing is an autochthonous development in Judah, based on the ancient Near Eastern tradition of chronicle writing, but perhaps it was influenced by ideas that have spread from the West, like the use of segmented genealogies, the preoccupation with the origin of peoples and nations, and with inventions and first finders.