

Section 1: Mesopotamia and Egypt

As we examine and compare the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, keep in mind one of critical enduring questions: *Who is God?* How did these civilizations view God (or their gods) and their relationship to the divine?

The civilizations of both Mesopotamia and Egypt grew up in river valleys and depended on their rivers to sustain a productive agriculture in otherwise arid lands. In fact, Mesopotamia is the Greek word for "land between the rivers." Most historians consider Mesopotamia to be the first civilization. It developed between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (present-day Iraq).



While both Mesopotamia and Egypt developed around rivers, they were radically different. At the heart of Egyptian life was the Nile which rose predictably every year. This brought soil and water, which nurtured Egyptian agricultural life.

Click [here](#) to read a *Hymn to the Nile*. How does the writer portray the Nile?



In contrast to the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers also rose annually but unpredictably, sometimes actually submerging a farmer's crops and ruining them.

Mesopotamia was also an open environment without any serious natural obstacles—this made Mesopotamia far more vulnerable to invasion than the much more protected space of Egypt which was surrounded by deserts, mountains, seas and cataracts. For long periods of time, Egypt was secure from external attack in ways that Mesopotamia could only have envied.

While a civilization's environment certainly shapes the culture, most historians are reluctant to endorse the idea that the geographic or environmental context wholly shapes a culture. Christians believe that human beings are more than environment. Rather, humans are created in the image of God with a soul. Humans are not material beings alone but spiritual beings as well. They are not fully determined by their circumstances, their context or even their culture. Indeed, Scripture instructs, and Regent's College of Arts and Sciences promotes, challenging culture with Christian Truth, values and wisdom.

While avoiding the idea of geographical determinism, we see in this case of Mesopotamia and Egypt that a connection or link between the physical setting and culture existed. This can certainly be seen in the religious outlook of both civilizations to which we now turn.

Section 2: The Mesopotamian Outlook

Religion was the overarching center of Mesopotamian culture. All other cultural activities functioned in subordination and in light of religion. Like many ancient civilizations, Mesopotamia was polytheistic, a belief in many gods and goddesses. Important decisions by kings were done in consultation with the gods. The gods and goddesses could not be seen with the naked eye but they were everywhere. They controlled the entire universe. Along with gods, demons also inhabited the earth. While gods made the rains come and kept the planets in motion, demons might bring disease, sandstorms and other problems. Mesopotamians sought protection from the gods by offering sacrifices. Individual Mesopotamians or groups often gave special attention or reverence to a single god or group of gods.

But Mesopotamian gods were unpredictable. The gods had little love for humanity. One Mesopotamian writer asked:

"What is good for oneself may be offense to one's god. What in one's heart seems despicable may be proper to one's god. Who can know the will of the gods in heaven? Who can understand the plans of the underworld gods? Where have humans learned the way of a god? He who is alive yesterday is dead today." (Perry, *Western Civilization*, 12)

Some documents from Mesopotamia portray an understanding of life that saw the world as dangerous, volatile, and often violent. Many viewed humankind as caught in an inherently disorderly world. The gods were unpredictable and quarrelsome. The afterlife did not offer much hope. The afterlife was characterized by life in a dreary underworld. Mesopotamians lived in a world of anxiety and this permeated their worldview. As one Mesopotamian poet complained: "I have prayed to the gods and sacrificed, but who can understand the gods of heaven? Who knows what they plan for us? Who has ever been able to understand god's conduct?" (Robert Strayer, *Ways of the World*, 81).

The Epic of Gilgamesh captures this Mesopotamian outlook.

Click **here** to view an introductory video about this classic piece of literature. Click **here** to access some excerpts of the Epic.

Test your understanding of the materials by taking this brief self-assessment:

Quiz Group



Section 3: The Egyptian Outlook

By contrast, the Egyptian outlook, at least at the elite level, was more cheerful and hopeful. The pyramids reflect the belief that the pharaohs and other high ranking people might enjoy eternal life after death. Indeed, a key part of Egyptian religion was the afterlife. Pyramid tombs, mummification, funerary art all show the Egyptian desire for endless life. Priests would recite incantations to ensure the continuation of life for the deceased.



Click **here** to read a pyramid text. How is the afterlife of the pharaoh depicted?

At first, the Egyptians believed only the pharaoh and the royal family could live forever in an afterlife. More and more Egyptians came to believe they could gain access to the afterlife—nobility and commoner alike. Prayers that had been reserved for the pharaoh were recited by priests at the funeral of commoners.

Click **here** to read an excerpt from the *Book of the Dead*. What might it suggest about the religious thinking of Egyptians?

Like the Mesopotamians, Egyptians were polytheistic, worshipping many gods. Religion was also central to Egyptian culture. They appealed to the gods for help with crops, in battle and in day to day life. Egyptians believed the gods manifested themselves in animal shapes; therefore, Egyptians often worshipped animals. In addition, the power of nature could be the embodiment of gods—the sky, earth, the Nile, a storm.

Test your understanding of the materials by taking this brief self-assessment:

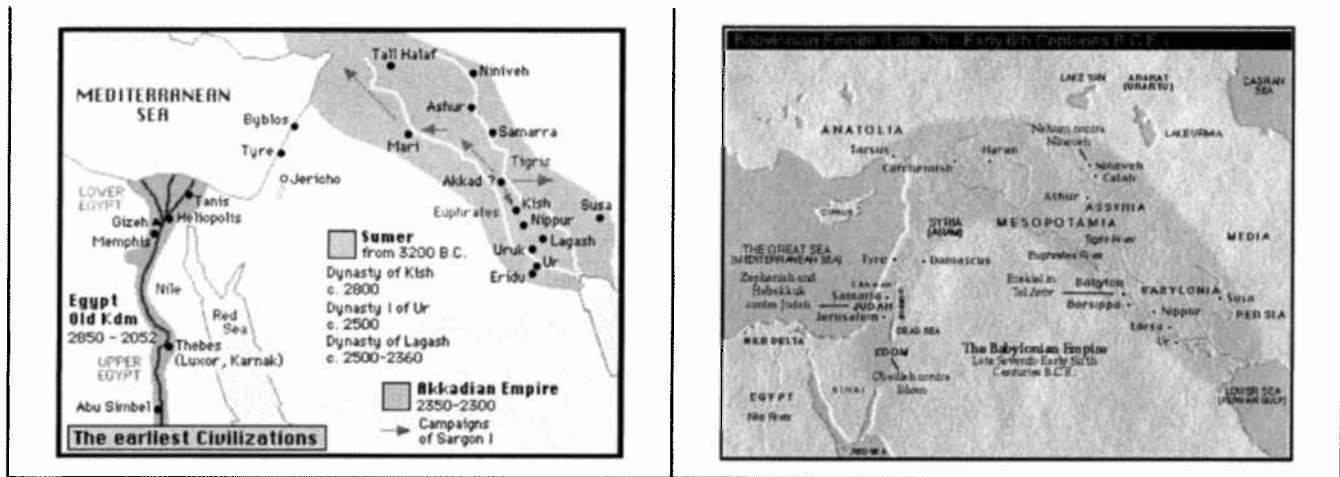
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Section 4: Mesopotamian Political and Social Life

Mesopotamian history was marked by constant warfare and conquest. The first civilization to arise in Mesopotamia was known as Sumer. The Sumerians organized themselves into a dozen or more separate and independent city-states. Each city had its own gods. Each city-state was ruled by a king, who claimed to represent the city's patron deity and who controlled the affairs of the walled city and surrounding rural population. City-states frequently engaged in warfare over boundaries and water rights. These conflicts eventually left Sumerian cities vulnerable to outside forces. Stronger people from northern Mesopotamia conquered Sumer's warring cities. First the Akkadians, later Assyrians, and then Babylonians created larger empires that encompassed all or most of Mesopotamia.

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One of the oldest discovered and deciphered law codes in the world is from Mesopotamia. The *Code of Hammurabi* provides a look into the social and economic life of the Babylonian Empire during the reign of Hammurabi (r. ca. 1795-1750 B.C.).

Click [here](#) to read the document. What insight can we gain into the social and economic life of Mesopotamia from this document? What can we infer about some of the problems that ancient Mesopotamia faced?



Section 5: Egyptian Political and Social Life

In contrast to constant warfare of Mesopotamia, Egyptian Civilization lasted 3000 years. These years were, for the most part, marked by unity and independence. Egyptian civilization stretched 1000 miles along the Nile River. Rather than the urbanized living of the Mesopotamia city-states, most Egyptians lived in agricultural villages near the Nile.

While Mesopotamia political rulers differed from city-state to city-state, political life in Egypt was centered on the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh was believed to be a god in human form. Pharaoh was considered to be the embodiment of the god Horus. He was an absolute ruler whose word was the law of the land. Pharaoh's power extended to all areas of Egyptian life. All Egyptians were subservient to the ruler and there was no concept of political liberty. The Egyptians believed the pharaoh controlled the floodwaters of the Nile, which kept Egypt fertile and prosperous. When the pharaoh died, he was believed to join his fellow gods.

Test your understanding of the materials by taking this brief self-assessment:

Quiz Group



Section 6: The Environments of Mesopotamia and Egypt

The different geographic environments of Mesopotamia and Egypt affected their cultural outlooks. These differing environments also presented unique challenges and advantages to each region. In Sumer, a series of canals and ditches were developed to irrigate crops. Intensive irrigation, however, led to increased salinization (salt content) of the Sumerian soil. Deforestation and soil erosion led to decreased crop. By 2000 BC some reports claimed that "the earth turned white" as salt accumulated in the soil (Robert Strayer 82). Ecological deterioration weakened Sumerian city-states and facilitated their conquest by foreigners such as the Akkadians.

Egypt had a more long-term sustainable environment. Rather than dams and ditches, Egyptians simply regulated the natural flow of the Nile. This system was easier for the Egyptians but it depended on the Nile's annual flooding. When there were poor floods, disaster could follow such as starvation and social upheaval. This was particularly true since the annual floods were believed to be regulated by the god-man Pharaoh. The Bible indicates how important the annual flooding was to the social, environmental and political systems of Egypt.

In Genesis, we read about the story of Joseph. Pharaoh has a dream about seven fat cows followed by seven skinny cows. He hears that Joseph is able to interpret dreams. He calls Joseph out of prison and tells him the dream.

Read Genesis 41: 25-45 (NIV):

²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine.

²⁸ "It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, ³⁰ but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. ³² The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.

³³ "And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. ³⁶ This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine."

³⁷ The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. ³⁸ So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"

³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

Joseph in Charge of Egypt

⁴¹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." ⁴² Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, "Make way!"^[c] Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

⁴⁴ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt."

⁴⁵ Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt.

This story in Genesis demonstrates the importance of adequate preparation for famine in Egyptian life. Being able to prepare for famine was so important to Pharaoh that he raised Joseph to second-in-command. While the Nile's annual flooding provided Egypt with rich soil and productive crop yield, disaster would follow if the Nile failed to flood. In fact, around 2200 BC, the Nile repeatedly failed to flood. This discredited the pharaoh, which led to the disintegration of the country into independent provinces for about 200 years. The pharaoh was restored in 2000 BC but the two hundred year

disunity indicates the powerful influence of the Nile on Egyptian life.

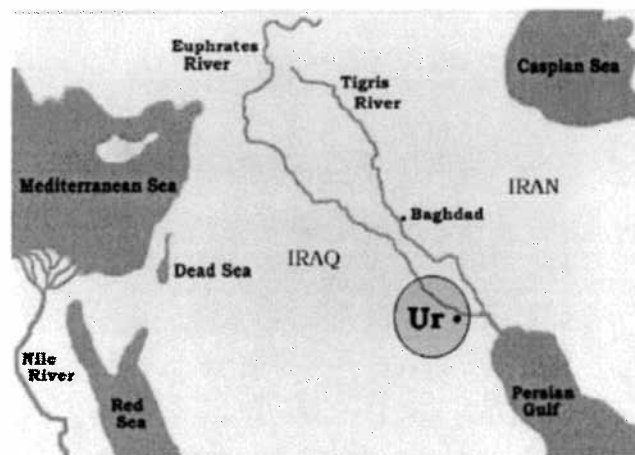
Mesopotamia and Egypt did interact with one another. Egyptians grew wheat and barley, which are believed to have derived from Mesopotamia. Some historians have even argued that Egyptian pyramids are based on Mesopotamian models.

Section 7: Israel, Mesopotamia and Egypt

This link between Mesopotamia and Egypt is supported by the biblical account as well. Abraham was originally a Mesopotamian from Ur. He migrated to Canaan, a land between the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Hebrews, descendants of Abraham, eventually migrated to Egypt where they were enslaved. After the Exodus and the establishment of Israel, Jewish history was still tied to Mesopotamia and Egypt. Israelites were constantly concerned with their neighbors to both the North and South. Their position meant that Israel had to depend on God for their security and prosperity. Since Assyria (and later Babylonia) and Egypt were bitter enemies, Israel was in a precarious situation since they lay between these civilizations. God used these civilizations to call the Israelites back to obedience. The Assyrians invaded Israel on multiple occasions. Later, the Babylonians captured and brought a large portion of the Israelite population to Babylonia in a period of Jewish history known as the Babylonian Captivity.

Some of the ethical law codes of Mesopotamia match that of the Hebrews documented in the Old Testament. Some of these laws are found in the *Law Code of Hammurabi*. In addition, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* details the story of a great flood. This account of the flood differs from the Old Testament interpretation but it does indicate a shared history.

Click [here](#) to read the Gilgamesh account of the flood. As you read the account, think about how this account differs from the Genesis account. How does YAHWEH differ from the Mesopotamian gods?



Next Steps:

After completing all the readings for this week, proceed to the *Commentary* section of this course (if needed) and then engage in the dialogue under *Conversation*.

Bibliography:

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