

CHAPTER 1

Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

According to the Jewish tradition, God revealed the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (known as the Torah) to Moses on Mt Sinai. This has been a cardinal principle of the Jewish faith. According to the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, it constitutes the eighth of the thirteen basic principles of Judaism. Maimonides argued that anyone who rejects this belief is denied a place in the World-to-Come. Through the centuries, Jews have embraced this tenet, convinced that the 613 laws contained in the Pentateuch must be strictly followed. (You will find a list of all these laws in Chapter 64 of the textbook.) With the emergence of rabbinic Judaism in the Hellenistic period, the rabbis sought to draw out the implications of these laws: their deliberations resulted in the expansion of the Biblical legal code. Today there are thousands of laws, theoretically based on the 613 Scriptural commandments which are regarded as binding on the Jewish community (see Chapter 23.)

Does this view make sense in the light of what we now know about the history of the ancient Near East? In this chapter we have seen that the Sumerians and the Akkadians – who lived before the ancient Israelites – worshipped their own gods, and formulated myths to explain the origins of the universe. There are striking similarities between these epics of the ancient Near East and what is found in Scripture. Is this all a coincidence? Or did the ancient Israelites borrow from these Babylonian myths when describing the origin and history of the Jewish nation?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to the Google search engine <Google.com>. Here you will find a great deal of information about the ancient Near East. Try out various websites, such as <www.historyguide.org> dealing with: Mesopotamian civilization, Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonian gods, Hammurabi, *Enuma Elish*, Ugarit. You will find an enormous amount of material about the ancient Near East in the lists of websites. Look first for general information; then you can go on to specialized topics.
- Stay in Google. But click on images: now put in various subjects, such as Sumerian, Akkadian, *Enuma Elish*, Hammurabi, Ugarit. Here you will find a wide range of images which will provide a pictorial background for understanding the ancient Near East.
- Go to Amazon.com. Here you will find a wide range of books dealing with various aspects of the ancient Near East including those listed in the Further Reading list. Try out various subjects such as Babylonian epic, Babylonians, Sumerians, the ancient Near East, Ugarit. You can then check to see if the books that interest you are in your local library. Or you may even want to buy some!

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Project the maps of the ancient Near East included in this book on an overhead projector or use them to make a powerpoint presentation. Make sure the students have a grasp of the geographical relationship between countries in the ancient Near East.
- Divide the students into small discussion groups to explore the question of whether Moses could have been the author of the Five Books of Moses. Once they have had a full discussion of this central issue, ask them to report back what they have concluded.
- Explore with your students the implications of rejecting the belief that Moses was the author of the Five Books of Moses. If this tenet is rejected, does this mean that the authority of the Torah is undermined? Can one still believe in divine revelation? Is the Bible still relevant in the modern world if this belief is discarded?
- If your local museum has a section devoted to the ancient Near East, take a group of students there, or encourage them to go themselves.