

CHAPTER 2

The Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Civilization

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Through the ages Jews have believed that the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) was revealed by God to Moses on Mt Sinai. This doctrine guarantees the validity of the Five Books of Moses. All the laws contained in the Pentateuch are from the mouth of the Almighty; the theology found in these sacred books is accurate in every detail. Such fundamentalism has served as the foundation of the Jewish system of belief and practice through the ages. Yet, as we noted, such a conviction is challenged by the findings of modern Biblical scholarship and archaeological discovery.

Today most modern scholars – Jewish and non-Jewish – are convinced that the ancient Israelites were influenced by the civilization of the ancient Near East and that the Hebrew Bible reflects features of the Babylonian epics and Near Eastern law codes. When the Hebrew Bible and these Mesopotamian documents are placed alongside one another, the texts are strikingly similar. As a result, the modern view is that the ancient Israelites reformulated and demythologized the epics of the Sumerians and the Akkadians in writing an account of their own origins.

What do you think? Is the traditional belief in *Torah MiSinai* (the Torah was revealed on Mount Sinai) correct? Looking at the material in this chapter, do you think that the evidence of scholarship over the last hundred years is overwhelming? And, most importantly, if the traditional Jewish belief in Sinaitic revelation is overturned, what implications does this have for Jewish belief and observance? This is a most pressing question for modern Jews. If the Torah was written by ancient Israelites living at different times, is it entirely a human creation? Or was it divinely disclosed? Is Scripture inspired in any way? And how is one to know? As we will see, Conservative, Reform,

Reconstructionist and Humanistic Jews have rejected this traditional doctrine, and as a result have felt at liberty to modernize the faith. In your opinion, is such a reformulation of Judaism justified in the light of modern Biblical scholarship?

THINGS TO DO

- Look at a book such as James Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Princeton, 1998, and compare the Biblical texts with parallels from ancient Near Eastern epics. Try to decide whether the Biblical writer was influenced by the myths of the ancient Near East.
- Did the ancient Israelites attempt to demythologize Mesopotamian epics? See if you can discern whether this was the aim of the Biblical writers. Look at books written about the ancient Near East, and see what they say about this issue.
- Read modern scientific theories concerning the origin of the universe. Ask if you can speak to a member of staff in the physics or astronomy department at your college or university for some guidance about what you should read. Is the Bible consistent with such theorizing? You might want to ask religious professionals – a minister, priest or rabbi – what they think.
- Have a look at Google.com for websites such as www.meta-library.net and www.infidels.org dealing with the clash between science and religion to get some ideas about this subject.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Ask a science teacher to speak to the class about modern theories concerning the origin of the universe.
- Organize a debate concerning the clash between science and the Bible. One group should defend the traditional view that the Bible gives a true account of creation; the other should seek to show that science gives a more accurate picture.
- Invite an Orthodox or Hasidic rabbi to speak about the traditional belief in *Torah MiSinai*. See what he thinks about the challenges posed by science to the accuracy of the Biblical narrative.
- Ask a local Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist rabbi to speak to the class about the impact of contemporary Biblical scholarship on Jewish belief and practice.