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Babylonian Influences on Israelite Culture

Let us for the moment leave religion out of the question and ask: *May we assume an influence of Babylon on Israel's culture?* To this question we may with complete certainty answer yes. The influence is evident and must in fact have been enormous.

In Israel there were, above all, Babylonian systems of measure, weight, and coinage. Babylonian was the striking preference of Israelite culture—even of the literature—for particular numbers (e.g., 7 and 12), a preference that in Babylonia is explained by the fact that particular numbers are characteristic of particular astral deities. And Israel's tendency to group literary creations according to these numbers has been proved for Babylon: the great Babylonian creation epic was written on seven tables,¹ and the national epic of *Gilgamesh* on twelve.²

1. [Ed.] *Enuma elish*; for the text, see Foster, *Before the Muses*, 436–86; Foster, “Epic of Creation”; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 228–77.

2. [Ed.] For the text of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, see George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; and Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 39–153; for analysis,

The Code of Hammurabi has delivered new surprises:³

- The Babylonian also followed the precept: “An eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (CH §§196, 198, 200; Exod 21:24–25).
- Like the Israelite, he performed the ceremony of adoption by pronouncing the words: “You are my son” (CH §§170–171; Ps 2:7); and he denied his subjection to another by saying: “You are not my father or my lord” (CH §§192, 282; Hosea 1–2).
- When Laban and Jacob negotiated with each other, the legal basis of their compact was Babylonian law: in a case involving the death of a sheep by wild beasts, the damage is borne by the owner (CH §§244, 266; Gen 31:39).
- And the one who accuses another of theft has the right to institute a search of the other’s house before witnesses (CH §9).
- The same is true in the case of barrenness: the Babylonian married woman, like the ancient Hebrew woman, can give her husband a maid so that she may raise up children (CH §144; Genesis 16). The story of Hagar the slave, who became a mother in this way and exalted herself over her mistress (Genesis 16),⁴ is a parade example of Babylonian law (CH §146).

see Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*.

3. [Ed.] For the text of the Code of Hammurabi, see Richardson, *Hammurabi’s Laws*; and Roth, “The Laws of Hammurabi.”

4. [Ed.] For further analysis, see Gunkel, “The Hagar Traditions”; and Gunkel, *Genesis*, 183–92.

But enough of details! We see sufficiently from these few examples that Israel did not remain free from Babylonian influence.

In the same way, we can mention the periods in which Babylonia especially affected Israel. The most important is the period of the height of the Assyrian empire, about 660 BCE, when the Babylonian gods, as gods of the Assyrian realm, were esteemed in the entire ancient Near Eastern world as the mightiest deities. That is the period when even Egyptian cities bore official Babylonian names and when the Babylonian gods were revered by the state of Judah.⁵ Their emblems and altars stood in Yahweh's temple on Zion at that time. And the Judeans again came under Babylonian influence when Nebuchadnezzar deported all "the officers and the mighty of the land" to Babylonia (2 Kgs 24:15), and so brought them into the immediate sphere of Babylon. Postexilic Judaism was completely subjugated by the influence of this world culture in all domains of external life. In the centuries following the exile, the people had actually forgotten their native language and adopted the Aramaic language, which then dominated



Hammurabi Stele

5. [Ed.] See van der Toorn et al., editors, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Old Testament*; Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*; and Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*.

the entire Semitic cultural world. It had finally become, in this way, a completely different people, who were bound to the ancient Israelite people by only a slender thread.

But much weightier than deductions from these later eras is a fact that we know from the Tell Amarna letters, namely, that Canaan was already most thoroughly permeated by Babylonian influence before the settlement of Israel. Accordingly, when Israel entered Canaan and soaked in ancient Canaanite culture, it came indirectly under the dominion of Babylonian civilization. It is no surprise to us, therefore, if the oldest stories—such as those just mentioned about Jacob and Laban, and Hagar and Sarah—presuppose Babylonian legal conditions.

And this influence never completely ceased, for Israel's territory lay on the great commercial roads, which led from Babylonia to Egypt. Merchants traveled on these great international roads with their goods; the conquerors with their armies; but also ideas, myths, legends, and religions. And that the Babylonian religion traveled in this way to Canaan is not simply assumption but something that we can confirm by examples: Mt. Sinai is probably named after the Babylonian moon-god *Sîn*;⁶ and Mount Nebo, where Moses died, is named after the Babylonian *Nebô*.⁷

On the other hand, it would certainly be very perverse if we described Israel as *nothing more* than a Babylonian province. With its primevally ancient civilization that rivaled the Babylonian, Egypt surely lay much too near for it not to

6. [Ed.] For this and other possibilities, see Maiberger and Dohmen, "ynys *sinay*," 218–20.

7. [Ed.] The Babylonian deity's name is now commonly written Nabû; Gunkel's identification is disputed by Millard, "Nabû," 609.

have had a similar effect. Egyptian policy had indeed, at various times, reckoned Canaan and Syria as part of its own sphere of influence. One need only recall the role that Egypt and Egyptian life played in the story of Joseph to recognize how much ancient Israel had concerned itself with Egypt. But that the Hebrews, together with the allied Phoenicians and Arameans, had something of their *own* in their culture is evidenced most clearly by the fact that they possessed their *own writing*; they wrote in neither Egyptian nor Babylonian.⁸ And it is well known that tendencies towards affinity reveal themselves in all civilizations most clearly in their writing. Accordingly, one must guard here as well from exaggeration.



Babylonian god Nabu

8. [Ed.] See Peckham, "Phoenicia and the Religion of Israel"; and Greenfield, "Aspects of Aramean Religion."