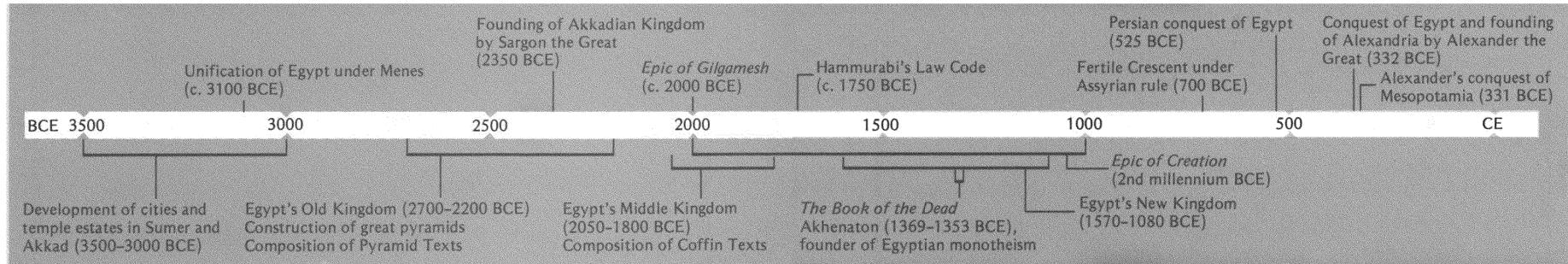


## Mesopotamia and Egypt



had oscillated between two great civilizations: the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian. Ancient Egypt controlled key cities, such as Lachish and Megiddo, whereas Mesopotamian empires ruled a large part of the region. Throughout the second millennium BCE, nomadic tribes kept interrupting the even tenor of garrison life in Egyptian and Mesopotamian outposts.

Of the various ancient civilizations that once dominated the arena of history, only to succumb to internal and external forces, four left records extensive enough to permit an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices that died with them. The religious traditions of the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations<sup>1</sup> merit inclusion in a survey of world religions because of the incalculable influence that they have exerted on the Western religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In these ancient and “pagan” beliefs lay the roots of Western culture and religion.

### Mesopotamian Religion

#### Historical Background

Archeological evidence suggests that during the third millennium BCE the Sumerians emerged as an established people in the area of Mesopotamia, in the southern part of modern Iraq. This was not their true starting point, however. The Sumerians (named after their city of Sumer) were a non-Semitic, non-Indo-European people\* of unknown origin who invaded the Tigris-Euphrates valley either from the south

\*The terms *Semitic* and *Indo-European* refer to language families, not cultural groups. The Indo-European family includes the vast majority of the extinct and living languages spoken from India to Ireland. The Semitic family, a much smaller grouping that includes Arabic and Hebrew, has been disproportionately influential in world history through its associations with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

by sea or from the east across the mountains, some time in the fourth millennium BCE. The ensuing struggle between the indigenous population and the Sumerians lasted for almost two thousand years, until Sargon the Great (a Semitic king) united Mesopotamia under his rule around 2350 BCE and pressed northward and westward into what is presently Syria and Turkey.

The story of King Sargon's success and of the dynasty that he founded is intriguing, particularly in that the theme of the “exposed child” rescued by chance would recur in the stories of Moses, Perseus, Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, and others. Briefly, the baby Sargon was abandoned by his mother, set adrift in a reed basket on the river. But the baby was rescued by the king's gardener, and through the love goddess Ishtar, Sargon eventually triumphed. As the chronicler records:

Sargon, the mighty king, king of Agade, am I.  
 My mother was a changeling (?), my father I knew not.  
 My changeling mother conceived me, in secret she bore me.  
 She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid.  
 She cast me into the river which rose not over me.  
 The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water.  
 Akki, the drawer of water, lifted me up. . . .  
 Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me.<sup>2</sup>

King Sargon's dynasty survived for some two centuries, until a group called the Gutians arrived around 2150 BCE to ravage and rule the area. They, in turn, were succeeded a century later by a Semitic group called the Amorites, who united all of Mesopotamia under one of their rulers shortly after 1800 BCE. He was the great and powerful King Hammurabi of Babylon, whose fame derives from an impressive legal code or juridical document attributed to his administration. The Code of Hammurabi stipulated that in his kingdom, among other