

History
UNFOLDING

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA



MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

The Birthplace of Civilization

The incomplete historical record can never do justice to some mysteries. And certain kinds of questions always seem to lie just a bit beyond the historian's reach. The story of ancient Mesopotamia is a case in point.

For example, what exactly is it that allows us to call a society a "great civilization"? In part, value judgments of all sorts are involved here. Yet most of us seem to feel that an important dividing line was crossed in ancient Mesopotamia, that the world's first civilization did emerge there. That dividing line is defined by some combination of technology, complex social organization, a written language, and other cultural achievements. And all of these did come together in Sumer about 5000 years ago.

But even if we agree on a definition, can we ever understand fully what caused this birth of civilization? Here, the incomplete historical record offers us only clues, not a definitive answer. Yet just exploring those clues might be enough—if it leads us to reflect more deeply on what history is and what we mean when we call a society "civilized."

This set is meant to help students focus their thoughts and imaginations on exactly these kinds of questions. The 12 visual displays included in it deal with a number of the central themes in the history of ancient Mesopotamia. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Land Between the Rivers

The three illustrations here focus on the natural setting in which the first of Mesopotamia's civilizations, Sumer, came into being.

Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Canals, levees, ziggurats, and bronze weapons and tools were only a part of what made Sumer the first great civilization. Its cultural and intellectual achievements may be more important—and far longer-lasting in their impact. The illustrations here are meant to help students glimpse some of that achievement.

The Bible's Mesopotamia

Until the mid-1800s, much of what the West knew of Mesopotamia was derived from the stories in the Old Testament. The illustrations here refer to three examples of this. They will help students assess the accuracy and the point of view of the biblical account of the ancient world.

Mesopotamia's Later Empires

Unlike Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia was surrounded by hostile outsiders who faced few natural barriers and who often intruded upon the more settled societies there. This resulted in a steady rise and fall of empires and a good deal of political instability as compared with Egypt. But it also meant a constant infusion of new ideas, making Mesopotamia a kind of melting pot of the ancient world.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will better understand the features that lead historians to call a society a civilization.
2. Students will understand how natural setting and human effort combined to bring civilization into being in Mesopotamia.

Land Between the Rivers

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

Settled farming villages appeared in many parts of the world as far back as 10,000 years ago. But it took thousands of years longer for the first real civilizations to arise. The term “civilization” is not easy to define. It refers to a more complicated way of life than that of a village where people all know one another and where daily tasks are fairly simple and easily learned. History’s first civilization arose over 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia. There, such features of civilization as cities, trade and merchants, written language, sciences, kings, and organized religious and political systems appeared. Buildings called “ziggurats” (the ruins of one are shown here) were temples to the gods that controlled the fate of the city-states of this civilization, known as Sumer.

Illustration 2

“Mesopotamia” is Greek for “the land between the rivers.” The rivers in this case were the Tigris and Euphrates. This map can help explain why civilization could develop here. Each year, the rivers flooded, carrying silt from the nearby mountains. This kept the land extremely fertile. But the flat topography meant that floods could bring vast destruction as well as fertile new soil. Only with a system of levees and canals could the waters be controlled and the land put to use. Such a system required a high degree of cooperation and skillful organization. Villages had to unite to work together. Out of this need for cooperation, civilization was born.

Illustrations 3A & 3B

Sumer’s flat, empty plain was good for raising barley and wheat, and for grazing sheep, goats, and other animals. But it lacked key resources, such as timber and the copper and tin need to make bronze. This meant that Sumer had to carry on a great deal of trade. It exchanged agricultural goods for minerals and timber with peoples in the Zagros Mountains, Asia Minor, and along the Mediterranean coast. This trade encouraged the growth of cities, usually at temple sites along the trade routes. These cities, in turn, became political and religious centers for their surrounding regions. Illustration 3A shows Sumerian merchants haggling. Illustration 3B shows a clay figure of the Sumerian goddess Inanna (or Ishtar) on a throne. The city-states of Sumer were built both for trade and for the priests and temples needed to appease Sumer’s unpredictable deities.

Lesson 1—Land Between the Rivers

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. The ruins shown here are of one of the oldest structures in the world. This was a temple known as a “ziggurat.” Ziggurats first appeared about 5000 years ago in the ancient Mesopotamian society of Sumer. They were stepped, pyramid-like structures with several levels, outside staircases, and a shrine at the top. Not much of the exterior of this structure still exists in this photo from the early 1900s. Can you guess why? From what you see here, what problems would archaeologists have in learning much about ziggurats and Sumerian society in general?
2. Many ziggurats were made mainly of sun-dried or baked mud bricks. From this photo, can you guess why the Sumerians used this type of building material so often? What else about Sumer and ancient Mesopotamia does this photo help to show?
3. Ziggurats were both like and unlike the great pyramids of ancient Egypt. From what you know about both kinds of structures, can you explain how they were like and unlike each other?

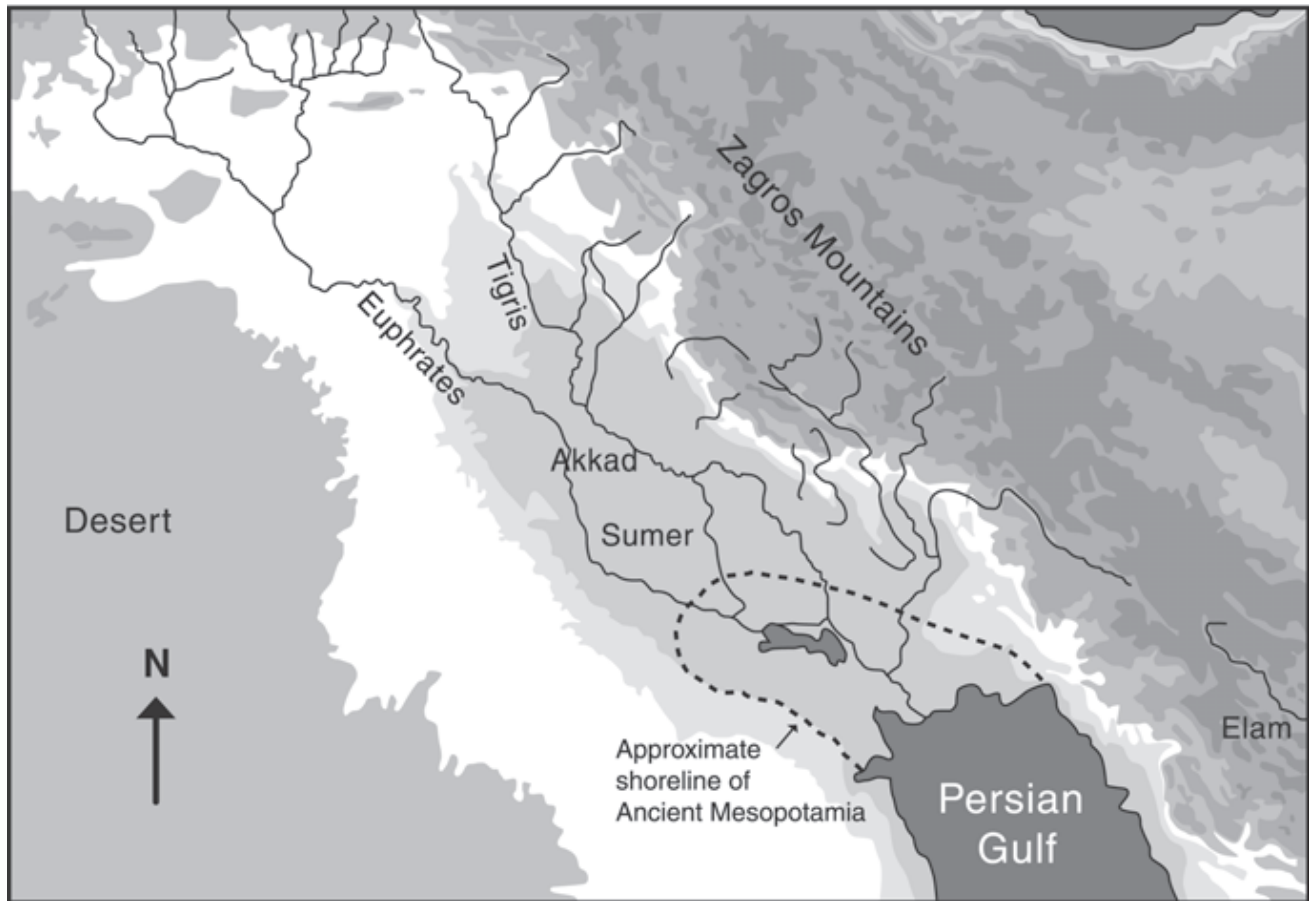
Follow-up Activity

1. **Background:** The earliest farming villages in the Middle East actually appeared in the more hilly areas north and east of the flat, dry lands where Sumer would later arise. Farming on the dry lands of Sumer itself could not take place until the inhabitants learned to build systems of levees and canals. Cooperating to do this is what helped unite villages into larger city-states and bring Sumerian civilization into being.

Research: To do this activity, you need to read more about the land along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where Sumer arose. You also need to learn more about the climate in this region, the seasons of the year, and the flooding of the rivers.

Activity: Pretend you are a Sumerian and you want some nearby villages to unite and build a system of canals and levees. Write out a speech to convince these villages to do this. In this speech, use what you have learned from your research. Give your speech to the class and discuss it with them.

Illustration 2



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Discussing the Illustration

1. This map shows the region where Sumer and the other early civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia arose. In what part of the world is this region located?
2. “Mesopotamia” is a Greek word for “land between the rivers.” From this map, can you explain why this region might have been given this name?
3. As the photo of the ziggurat showed (Illustration 1), the land of Sumer was flat and dry. But the soil was also very rich and fertile, and it was constantly being renewed and expanded each year. What features in this map help to show why this would have been especially true in this region?
4. Actually, people could not really take advantage of the fertile lands between the two rivers until they learned to cooperate and build a system of canals and levees. From what you know of the climate and topography of this region, can you explain why this was so?

Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** Create a bulletin-board display on the geography of ancient Mesopotamia. Use the map shown here (or your own version of it) as the key element in the display. Then look through illustrated history books and other sources for photos or drawings of as many of the following as you can find:
 - The flat lands near the Tigris and Euphrates
 - The desert lands west of Sumer and Akkad
 - The Zagros Mountains
 - The foothills east and north of Sumer and Akkad
 - The reedy marshes near the Persian Gulf

Read more about natural conditions and daily life in each of these land areas. Based on what you learn, write paragraphs to accompany the photos of each setting. Arrange the paragraphs and photos around the map. Finally, use this map in a brief group talk to the class in which you discuss the importance of each of these five settings to the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations.

Lesson 1—Land Between the Rivers

Illustrations 3A & 3B

3A



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Discussing the Illustrations

1. With levees and canals, the Sumerians grew wheat, barley, and vegetables. They also herded goats, sheep, and other animals. But they lacked wood, stone, and minerals such as copper and tin. Some historians say Sumerian civilization could not have arisen without these things. Do you agree?
2. The Sumerians had to trade with others to get these other resources. Illustration 3A is one artist's idea of a market in an ancient Mesopotamian city. What does it suggest about such cities? What does it suggest about labor and social organization in those cities? How reliable do you think this illustration is?
3. Merchants like these often gathered near the temples built for the Sumerian gods. Illustration 3B is a statue of Innana (or Ishtar) seated on a throne. She was a Sumerian goddess of love and war. Why might Sumerians have seen these two aspects of life as parts of the same deity? What else does this statue suggest about the way Sumerians viewed their gods and goddesses?

3B



The Granger Collection, New York

Follow-up Activities

1. Heat, sudden floods, and drought made life uncertain in Sumer. Some historians say this affected the way Sumerians viewed their gods. What effect do you think this might have had on Sumerian attitudes toward their gods? Find books or other sources of information on the gods of ancient Mesopotamia. Write an essay on one of these deities and what you think Sumerians believed and felt about it.
2. **Small-group activity:** Wood, copper, tin, stone, and precious metals were among the most important goods traded in ancient Mesopotamia. Find out how the people of Sumer got these goods. Your librarian should be able to help you find books with maps and information on this. Use what you learn to create a trade map for the entire region of Mesopotamia, including Egypt, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Persian Gulf region. Draw the main trade routes merchants followed and the locations of the key goods they traded. Discuss your map with the class.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will understand what the key cultural and intellectual achievements of Mesopotamian civilization were.
2. Students will better understand the core ideas and values of the various ancient Mesopotamian societies.

Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

In a way, Mesopotamia is where history began. That's because it is where written language began. Without writing, societies leave behind only their physical artifacts, such as tools, bits of pottery, or parts of buildings. These tell us some things about a society. But only a written record can tell us much about specific events and people. In Sumer, writing began for very practical reasons. It was a way to keep economic records—sales of land, deliveries of goods to the temple, debts between merchants, etc. Sumer's written script is called "cuneiform." It is made up of marks scratched with a wedged tip into soft clay that then hardens. The tablet shown here is a record of business accounts from around 2350 BCE.

Illustration 2

Cuneiform began as a way to make lists of debts or goods, but its purposes soon grew. It was soon used to record the deeds of cities and kings. And it gave birth to the world's first great literature. All societies have myths or stories that sum up their beliefs and their outlook on life. For Sumer, the most important story was one about a king named Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh was part-god and part-human. In his story, he learns to face his own humanity and accept death. He goes on a quest for everlasting life. At the end of the epic, he is given a plant that will make him young again. But a snake eats it, and he must return home and accept that he is mortal. The tale ends on a gloomy note. And yet Gilgamesh is left with something of value: his city—or civilization itself. The story's message seems to be that humans must accept limits, and death, and find life's value in their own civilized accomplishments.

Illustration 3

The Sumerians used writing to record something else of great value, codes of laws. The most famous is the code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi was not a Sumerian. He was a Semitic king who created a vast empire including Sumer and much of the rest of Mesopotamia. His law code was recorded on an upright stone slab called a "stele." The top of it, seen here, shows a seated god giving the laws to Hammurabi. These laws tell much about daily life in ancient Mesopotamia. Some of them may seem harsh. Others may seem strange. But the code itself was a great achievement. It gave citizens dependable guidelines for all aspects of their common life.

Lesson 2—Mesopotamia’s Cultural Triumphs

Illustration 1



The Granger Collection, New York

Discussing the Illustration

1. The word “cuneiform” refers to one of the Sumerians greatest triumphs. This tablet should help you explain what cuneiform was? Why do you think it was recorded on clay tablets such as this? What else can you infer about Sumerian writing from this image?
2. Cuneiform writing began mainly as a way to keep economic records—such as sales of land, deliveries of goods to the temple, taxes paid, etc. Why do you think writing began in Mesopotamia as a practical tool of this sort? For what other purposes have people used writing throughout history? Why do you think it began for purposes of record keeping?
3. The word “civilization” is used for societies such as the one that arose in Sumer beginning more than 5000 years ago. A system of writing is often seen as one of the first and most important signs of the appearance of an ancient civilization. Why do you suppose this is so? What other features do you think make a society into a great civilization? Why?

Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** Cuneiform script was actually used to write in several different Mesopotamian languages, just as French, English, and German all use the same alphabetical script. But cuneiform was only one of several written scripts that developed in the Middle East four or five thousand years ago. Another was Egyptian hieroglyphics. And a third group of scripts were the alphabetical ones used by the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, and the Hebrews. As a group, learn more about these various types of scripts. Create a chart showing when these scripts developed and where, and include your own drawings of examples of each script. Also as a group, talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each kind of script. Use your chart in a brief talk to the class in which you report on what you have learned and on your group’s ideas about the value of each kind of written script.

Lesson 2—Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Illustration 2



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Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept.

His tears flowed down his cheeks.

He took the hand of Urshanabi, the Boatman:

"For whom have my hands laboured, Urshanabi?

For whom has my heart's blood been spent?

I have not obtained any advantage for myself.

*I have only obtained an advantage for the earth-lion."**

* The "earth-lion" is a snake that eats a magic plant given to Gilgamesh to make him young again.

Discussing the Illustrations

1. Writing began as a way to keep practical records. But in time, Sumerians began to use it in other ways. They created what may have been the world's first written epic. What is an epic? Can you name the hero of this most famous Sumerian epic?
2. Gilgamesh tells us much about how Sumerians thought and felt about life. Gilgamesh is a king who is part god and part man. In the epic, he has many adventures in a long search for eternal life. What else do you know about this epic tale? What impression of Gilgamesh do you get from this illustration?
3. Some of the final words of the epic are shown here. Urshanabi is a boatman who takes Gilgamesh back across the waters of death after he has met with the immortal Utnapishtam. Utnapishtam tells him of a plant that can make him young again. Gilgamesh finds the plant. But as he sleeps, a snake (called an "earth-lion" here) eats it. What do you think of this ending to the epic? What, if anything, do you think it helps us to know about the Sumerians?

Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** Many stories about Gilgamesh existed in ancient Mesopotamia. At one point, the epic was written on 12 stone tablets, which were found in the ruins of a library in Assyria, a kingdom that arose long after Sumer was gone. As a group, read and discuss a version of the Gilgamesh epic. One version is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Danny P. Jackson, editor (Bolchazy Carducci, 1997).
2. Find a complete version of the epic or a summary of it that at least contains many actual passages from the story itself. Choose five to ten of these passages. Then create your own complete narrative telling the entire story and connecting the passages you have chosen. Have one person read the narrative portion of your version and other group members read the various passages you have chosen. Read your own version of the Gilgamesh epic aloud to the class and discuss it with them.

Lesson 2—Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Illustration 3

If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.

If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

If anyone is committing a robbery and is caught, then he shall be put to death.

If any one steal a water wheel from the field, he shall pay five shekels in money to its owner.

If anyone open his ditches to water his crop, but is careless, and the water flood the field of his neighbor, then he shall pay his neighbor corn for his loss.

If a man marry a woman and she bear sons to him; if this woman then dies, then her father shall have no claim on her dowry; it belongs to her sons.



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Discussing the Illustrations

1. Writing in Mesopotamia was also used to record laws. The most famous law code was set down by a Babylonian king who died in 1750 BCE. He is shown here on a stele (a long stone slab) as a seated god gives him the laws. Can you name this king? Why do you think he posted his laws on stelae like this one all over his empire? Why do you think he included the relief sculpture you see?
2. Hammurabi's laws are written on the rest of the stele. Some of them are listed here. Which seem most fair or wise to you? Which seem least fair or wise? Why?
3. Hammurabi's Code is made up of 282 laws. Many take the following form: "If someone does a certain act, then a particular punishment will follow." Some historians say that no matter what you think of the particular laws, this code was a great step forward for civilization. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. What kinds of things can you learn about daily life in Mesopotamia from the laws listed here?

Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** As a group, read more about Hammurabi. In particular, read and discuss his law code. This code is really a list of 282 laws like those shown here. It won't take long to read through, since it is only about 15 pages of text. Group the 282 laws in the following ways:

- A. Laws you admire
- B. Laws you do not admire
- C. Laws that show similarities between ancient Mesopotamia and our own society
- D. Laws that show differences between ancient Mesopotamia and our own society
- E. Laws you find confusing and will need help to understand

As a group, present your findings to the class in a discussion about Hammurabi's law code and what it can teach us about ancient Mesopotamian society.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will relate what they know about Mesopotamia to the various views of it in the Old Testament of the Bible.
2. Students will better appreciate the deep impact of Mesopotamia on Western civilization.

The Bible's Mesopotamia

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

For centuries, European civilization knew of Mesopotamia mainly through stories in the Old Testament of the Bible. These stories are not always accurate, yet they do contain truths and insights. In any case, they show how important Mesopotamia was in shaping our own civilization and culture. The illustrations in this lesson focus on this biblical view of Mesopotamia.

Illustration 1

In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the people of Sumer build a huge tower in an effort to reach heaven. The Hebrew God sees this as arrogant. He causes the people to speak many languages instead of one, and the confusion this creates forces them to give up their tower and scatter into many groups. The biblical story's tower could be a ziggurat, which is what this artist's view of Babylon suggests. As for the confusion of languages, it is the case that over the centuries, many cultures, with many languages, often invaded and settled throughout Mesopotamia.

Illustration 2

In the Bible, Abraham was the founding patriarch of the Hebrew people, to whom God promised a home in Canaan (modern-day Israel). Later the Hebrew people supposedly became enslaved in Egypt. Moses led them out of slavery and into the desert in order to return to Canaan. According to the Bible, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. This photo is of the Monastery of St. Catherine, with Mount Sinai in the background. The monastery's courtyard is the traditional site of the burning bush mentioned in the Bible.

Illustration 3

A good deal of the Old Testament is actually a history of the Hebrew people in Canaan. In the Bible, that land is often troubled and at war with dangerous foreign enemies. In 722 BCE, one of the two Hebrew states, Israel, was destroyed by Assyria, a great Mesopotamian empire. In 587 BCE, the other Hebrew state, Judah, was also destroyed by another empire, Babylon. Here is an artist's idea of the scene as King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon conquers Jerusalem. Thousands from among the Jewish leadership were taken to Babylon at that time. This "Babylonian Captivity" was a key turning point in the history of the Jewish people.

Lesson 3—The Bible's Mesopotamia

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. Some Bible stories are fairly accurate; others are not. But even the inaccurate ones can often teach us things about Mesopotamia. One story in the Book of Genesis is about the Tower of Babel. Here is one artist's idea of that tower. Some say it was actually a common temple structure in ancient Mesopotamia. Can you guess what structure? How does this illustration hint at the connection between the Tower of Babel and ancient ziggurats? How accurate do you think this view of an ancient Mesopotamian city is?
2. The story in Genesis seems to make use of several similar words: the Hebrew words *babhel*, meaning "Babylon," and *balal*, meaning "confuse," and the Babylonian word *bab-ili*, meaning "gate of god." How much of this biblical story can you summarize? In what way does the story seem to use the words *babhel*, *balal* and *bab-ili* together to teach its lesson?
3. Some would say the story of the Tower of Babel is actually a warning against human pride or arrogance. Do you agree this is its lesson?

Follow-up Activities

1. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel follows its account of Noah and the Flood. That story is also an example of the links between the Bible, the Hebrew people, and the history of ancient Mesopotamia. That's because a similar story occurs in several Mesopotamian records, including the epic of Gilgamesh. Ask your teacher or librarian to help you find a copy of the Gilgamesh epic. Read its account of the flood and the one in the Old Testament. Prepare a list of the similarities and differences in the two accounts. Discuss the list in a report to the class.
2. In the story of the Tower of Babel, the Mesopotamian people unite in an effort to build a huge tower. The Bible portrays this as an act of pride and arrogance. By causing these people to speak many different languages, God confuses them and keeps them from being able to complete the tower. Does this story fit in any way with the history of ancient Mesopotamia? As a class, discuss this question.

Illustration 2



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Discussing the Illustration

1. One of the most important stories in the Bible is about Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew people. He is said to have traveled from the Sumerian city of Ur up the Euphrates River and down into Canaan. This journey took him from one end of the so-called “Fertile Crescent” to the other. What was the Fertile Crescent, and why was it given that name?
2. Later, the Hebrews found themselves in Egypt, where supposedly they were enslaved. According to the Bible, a great leader helped them escape into the desert and seek Canaan again. On the mountain shown here, God gave this leader what the Hebrews considered their greatest gift. Can you name the leader, the mountain, and the gift he was given?
3. In the foreground is a Christian monastery. Why do you think this location was chosen for a monastery? What, if anything, about this setting can help you better understand the significance of this site to Jews and Christians today?

Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** In the Bible, Abraham is the father of the Hebrew people. He may well have been a caravan trader who followed well established trade routes linking Sumer to other parts of Mesopotamia. The Hebrew people were just one of many groups of Semitic nomads that played an important role in the history of ancient Mesopotamia. Your group’s task is to learn more about these Semitic peoples and their impact on ancient Mesopotamia from 3000 BCE on. Create a timeline indicating when each major Semitic group entered the region. Use the timeline in a brief talk in class in which you describe the nature of these Semitic peoples and the impact each of them had on the history of ancient Mesopotamia.
2. The Book of Genesis contains the Bible’s account of the creation of the world. The Sumerians and other Mesopotamians also had creation myths. Learn more about these myths. Write a brief essay comparing one or more of these myths with the one found in the Bible.

Lesson 3—The Bible's Mesopotamia

Illustration 3



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Discussing the Illustration

1. Historians say that, over time, many of the stories about Mesopotamia in the Bible have been verified in other ways. What does this mean?
2. The story about the so-called “Babylonian Captivity” is one of these. The Babylonian Captivity took place in 587 BCE, and it was carried out by a Babylonian King named Nebuchadnezzar II. Why are these events called the Babylonian Captivity?
3. This painting shows Nebuchadnezzar II killing the sons of Judah’s King Zedekiah. Judah was actually the second of two Hebrew kingdoms to be destroyed in this period. Can you name the first and identify the Mesopotamian power that destroyed it in 722 BCE?
4. What details make the painting vivid and dramatic? This painting is only an artist's idea of what happened to Judah in 587 BCE. What point of view about this event does the painting express? How does it get its point of view across? How does it help reinforce the story as told in the Bible?

Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** Read more about one of these moments in the biblical story of the Hebrew people:

1030 BCE	Saul becomes king of Hebrews
931 BCE	Northern Kingdom (Israel) separates from the Southern Kingdom (Judah)
869 BCE	Ahab becomes King of Israel
722 BCE	Northern Kingdom (Israel) destroyed
600 BCE	Warnings of prophet Jeremiah

Each group member will pretend to be an adviser to the Hebrew rulers during one of the above dates. He or she will learn more about the situation in all of Mesopotamia during the time of that ruler or rulers. Learn about the main kingdoms near Israel and Judah and about the biggest empires in the region. Include Egypt if it is relevant. Now write a long report to your ruler explaining the situation and giving advice on how to deal with it. Post these reports, along with a map, in a bulletin-board display called: “Ancient Israel: The Mesopotamian Setting.”

OBJECTIVE

1. Students will better understand some of the geographic and cultural forces that resulted in a continual rise and fall of empires in ancient Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia's Later Empires

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

Ancient Sumer was mainly a collection of separate city-states. At times, a powerful ruler would unite these states into a larger empire. Later on, empires also arose to the north of Sumer—for example, the Babylonian empire of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE) and the Assyrian empire along the upper Tigris River. But unlike ancient Egypt, these Fertile Crescent empires rarely lasted long. Geography may explain why: Egypt's Nile valley was well protected by sea and desert. The fertile “land between the rivers,” however, was always open to Semitic nomads moving up from Arabia or powerful societies in the hills to the north and east. Jealous of the wealth and civilization along the rivers, these groups rarely stayed away in peace for long. This kept ancient Mesopotamia in turmoil. It also made it a land of restless ethnic and cultural interaction.

Illustrations 2A & 2B

Assyria was one of the most powerful and warlike of the ancient Mesopotamian empires. These two Assyrian works of art help convey a sense of its fierce spirit. It went through several stages, growing in power in the 14th century BCE, fading, reviving, and fading again. From 745 BCE, Assyria's leaders built an empire that would dominate the entire region for more than 100 years. Under Ashurbanipal (669–627 BCE), it even conquered much of Egypt. But after 627 BCE, it fell apart rapidly. It was conquered in 612 BCE by a newly revived Babylon in alliance with the Medes, a people beyond the Zagros Mountains (in present-day Iran).

Illustration 3

Like Assyria, Babylon also went through many stages. At times it was no more than a single city-state. Under Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE), it came to control most of Mesopotamia. But the Hittites sacked Babylon in 1595 BCE. After the destruction of Assyria in 612 BCE, a neo-Babylonian empire arose, with Nebuchadnezzar II as its greatest ruler. This painting is one artist's notion of what his Babylon looked like, including its fabled Hanging Gardens. But in 539 BCE, a new empire from outside Mesopotamia swept in to conquer Babylon and all of Mesopotamia. That power, Persia, opened a whole new chapter in the history of this region.

Lesson 4—Mesopotamia's Later Empires

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. This map shows all of ancient Mesopotamia and more. The city-states of Sumer were in the south-eastern part of the region shaded green and labeled “Fertile Crescent.” In addition to Sumer, can you name some major empires that arose in this green-shaded area from about 2000 BCE on?
2. The great civilizations of the Fertile Crescent were constantly beset by invaders in the three or four millennia before the birth of Christ. This was much less true of ancient Egypt. Using this map and what you know of these ancient civilizations, can you explain this difference?
3. In Mesopotamia, people from the mountains in the north and east and Semitic nomads from Arabia were constantly invading the river-valley civilizations. However, when they did this, they almost always settled down and copied the literature, cuneiform script, religious ideas, and other achievements of those they had conquered. Why do you suppose they did this so often?

Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** The map shown here gives you a general idea of the political and cultural patterns of the Middle East over a period of 3000 years. To get a better idea of the rise and fall of various societies, your group’s task is to use this map as a starting point for creating six more maps. Each of these maps will be a sort of “snapshot” in time. You will have to do some research in the library, looking through books on ancient Mesopotamia. Based on what you learn, create maps for the following six dates (hints about each era are provided with the dates):

1. 2350 BCE (Empire of Sumer and Akkad)
2. 2100 BCE (Third Dynasty of Ur)
3. 1750 BCE (Old Babylonian era)
4. 1000 BCE (time between empires)
5. 650 BCE (Ashurbanipal’s Assyria)
6. 587 BCE (Neo-Babylonian era)

Use these six maps in a brief presentation in class explaining the overall course of history in ancient Mesopotamia.

Lesson 4—Mesopotamia's Later Empires

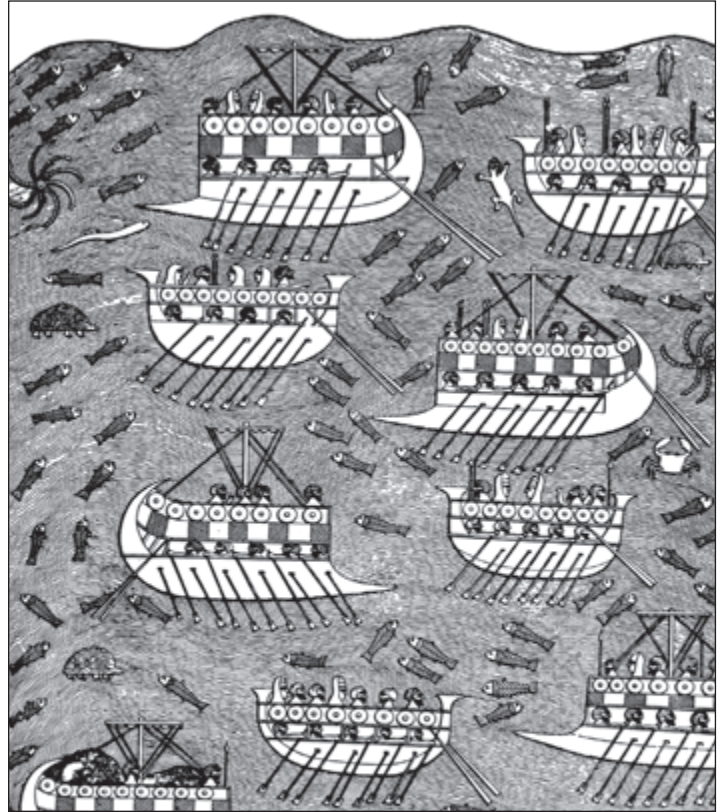
Illustrations 2A & 2B

2A



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2B



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Discussing the Illustrations

1. In the first millennium BCE, one very powerful empire arose just north of Sumer and Babylon, along the upper reaches of the Tigris River. Illustrations 2A and 2B are artworks from that empire. Can you name it?
2. By the eighth century BCE, Assyria was already conquering much of Mesopotamia. What key reason for this success do these two artworks suggest? What details in the images provide this evidence?
3. The Assyrians used infantry with pikes and swords, cavalry, horse-drawn chariots, and siege towers. What else do you know about the cause of Assyria's power?
4. Assyria fell apart rapidly, starting with a palace revolt in 627 BCE. It was finally destroyed in 612 BCE by a revived Babylon and its allies. Some historians say two factors leading to its downfall were expansion beyond Mesopotamia and a lack of clear rules for selecting a successor. Why would these have been especially serious for a society like Assyria?

Follow-up Activities

1. In 854 BCE, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser II described one battle in a long campaign this way:

I desolated and destroyed, I burnt it: 1200 chariots, 1200 horsemen, 20,000 men of Biridri of Damascus; 700 chariots, 700 horsemen, 10,000 men of Irhulini of Hamath; 2000 chariots, 10,000 men of Ahab of Israel... these 12 kings [Irhulini] took to his assistance. To offer battle they marched against me. With the noble might which Asshur, the Lord, granted, with the powerful weapons which Nergal, who walks before me, gave, I fought with them, from Karkar into Gilzan I smote them. Of their soldiers I slew 14,000.

As a class, discuss this quote. What does it show about the nature of Assyria and its rulers?

2. In 745 BCE, Tiglath-Pileser III took power in Assyria. His political and military skill helped finally make Assyria a true world empire. Learn more about him. Write a brief essay explaining how his policies helped put Assyria on the road to world empire.

Illustration 3



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Discussing the Illustration

1. This is one artist's idea of the capital city of the great empire that ruled Mesopotamia after Assyria, in the sixth century BCE. What city is it?
2. Nebuchadnezzar II was the most famous ruler of this new Babylonian empire. This painting shows part of a feature of Babylon Nebuchadnezzar II supposedly built for his wife—the Hanging Gardens. No one is really sure if the Hanging Gardens even existed. Do you think these gardens existed? If so, do you think they might have looked like this artist's version of them? What details seem most believable? Why?
3. Babylon, with help, destroyed Assyria's powerful empire in 612 BCE. But Babylon was itself destroyed less than a century later by a powerful new nation from outside of Mesopotamia. What nation was that, and in what part of the Middle East did it arise?
4. What do you think is the most important lesson to be learned from studying the rise and fall of the various societies of ancient Mesopotamia?

Follow-up Activities

1. Go to the library and look for all the books you can find on Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II, or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Read more about the fabled Hanging Gardens. Also, find as many artists' illustrations as you can showing the Hanging Gardens. Make photocopies of these illustrations and bring them to class. Choose the one you think likely to be the most accurate. Share these illustrations with the class and explain your choice.
2. **Small-group activity:** How have experts gone about looking for the Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Do some library research on this problem. Based on your group's research, prepare a brief presentation answering these three questions: How did the story of the Hanging Gardens first get started? What have archaeologists been able to learn about the Hanging Gardens? Why have stories about the Hanging Gardens fascinated so many people throughout the ages?

Image Close-ups

Land Between the Rivers

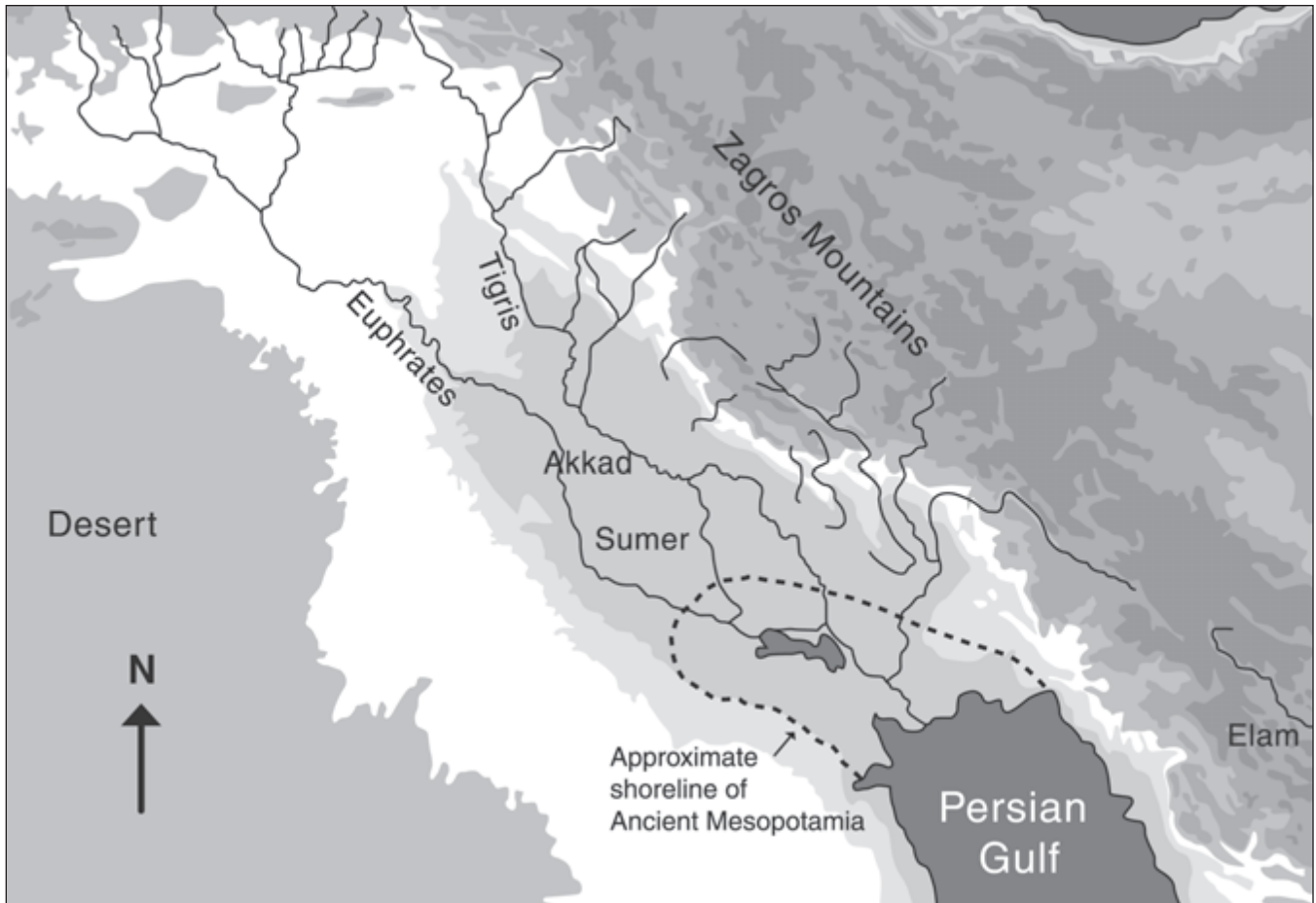
Illustration 1



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Land Between the Rivers

Illustration 2



© MindSparks

Land Between the Rivers

Illustrations 3A & 3B

3A



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3B



The Granger Collection, New York

Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Illustration 1



The Granger Collection, New York

Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Illustration 2



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Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept.

His tears flowed down his cheeks.

*He took the hand of Urshanabi,
the Boatman:*

*“For whom have my hands laboured,
Urshanabi?*

*For whom has my heart’s blood
been spent?*

*I have not obtained any advantage
for myself.*

*I have only obtained an advantage
for the earth-lion.”**

* The “earth-lion” is a snake that eats a magic plant
given to Gilgamesh to make him young again.

Mesopotamia's Cultural Triumphs

Illustration 3

If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.

If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

If anyone is committing a robbery and is caught, then he shall be put to death.

If any one steal a water wheel from the field, he shall pay five shekels in money to its owner.

If anyone open his ditches to water his crop, but is careless, and the water flood the field of his neighbor, then he shall pay his neighbor corn for his loss.

If a man marry a woman and she bear sons to him; if this woman then dies, then her father shall have no claim on her dowry; it belongs to her sons.



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The Bible's Mesopotamia

Illustration 1



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The Bible's Mesopotamia

Illustration 2



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The Bible's Mesopotamia

Illustration 3



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Mesopotamia's Later Empires

Illustration 1



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Mesopotamia's Later Empires

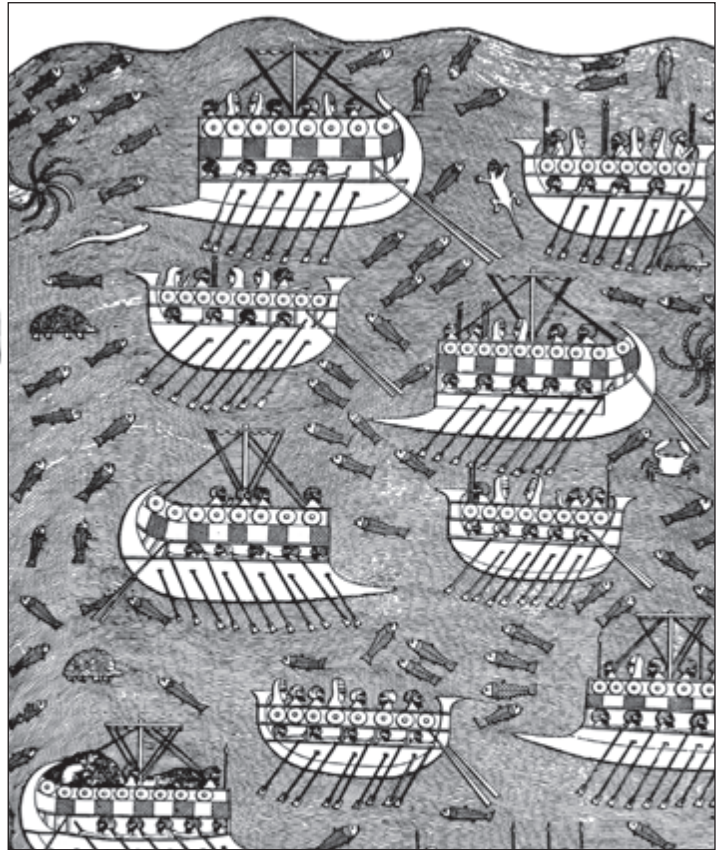
Illustrations 2A & 2B

2A



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2B



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Mesopotamia's Later Empires

Illustration 3



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