

The Religious Landscape of the Near East at the Turn of the Era

THE MESOPOTAMIA-PALESTINE NEXUS AND THE JEWISH DIASPORA

'Peace be with you, Rabbi Judah b. Bathyra, for you are in Nisibis, and yet your net is spread in Jerusalem!'¹ Judah ben-Bathyra (I) lived in the first century AD in Nisibis, a major centre in the land of Adiabene, which both Classical and Jewish writers identified with Assyria.² He apparently visited Jerusalem several times. Thanks to his work collecting and transferring funds for the Jerusalem temple from the Jewish diaspora in northern Mesopotamia,³ he was well known to the highest level of Jewish society in Palestine.⁴

The vignette from the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) casts light on the lively connections between the Jews of Palestine and their kin in northern Mesopotamia in the period in which the New Testament was being written. Indeed, the Adiabeniens supported the Palestinian Jews in the AD 66–70 war with Rome.⁵ The Jewish communities of Southern Mesopotamia (Babylonia) enjoyed equally intensive contact with Jerusalem.⁶ The account in Acts 2:8–9, 11 of the pilgrims who had arrived there for the Shavuot festival corroborates this: 'How is it that

¹ bPes 3b.

² See, for instance, Pliny, *Natural History*, Book VI chapter 13 (<https://ia800703.us.archive.org/3/items/plinysnaturalhisooplinrich/plinysnaturalhisooplinrich.pdf>; accessed 13/4/19). *Genesis Rabbah* 37:4 identifies Nisibis with Akkad (Gen 10:10).

³ Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 67, 242 n. 29. ⁴ Neusner, *History I*, 48, 50, 62.

⁵ Neusner, 'Conversion', 62–64.

⁶ Mann, 'Studies', 333; Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 59, 62–67, 242.

we hear, each of us in the dialect of our birthplace – Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and those dwelling in Mesopotamia – . . . we hear them relating in our languages the mighty works of God.’ Neusner estimates a Jewish population of between 600,000 and one million in Babylonia in the third century AD.⁷ The number of Jews in Mesopotamia in the first century AD is unknown. Josephus’ estimate of one million seems inflated.⁸ Undoubtedly, the population swelled significantly in the wake of the displacement caused by the Palestinian Jews’ disastrous rebellions against the Romans in AD 66–70 and 132–35, possibly including considerable numbers of Jewish Christians.⁹ Nevertheless, the facts that the royal family of Adiabene converted to Judaism in the first half of the first century AD and that, in the period from AD 20 to 35, a region of Babylonia was under Jewish administration indicate that these communities were populous and held considerable sway even before AD 70.¹⁰ Herod the Great’s appointment of a Babylonian as high priest in Jerusalem highlights the significance of the Babylonian Jewish diaspora in Palestinian affairs.¹¹

Acts 2 states that these first-century Mesopotamian Jews were conversant in the language(s) of the territories in which they lived. What were the languages? One was Aramaic, which was widely spoken in the period throughout Mesopotamia,¹² as it was in Syro-Palestine.¹³ Even in many religious texts, contemporary Jewish scribes followed the compilers of Ezra-Nehemiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, and employed Aramaic as well as Hebrew.¹⁴ While the use of *Koinē* Greek was widespread – particularly in urban areas – in the Fertile Crescent, Aramaic retained its importance.¹⁵ Jesus’ discourse was primarily in Aramaic.¹⁶ There was no insuperable obstacle to communication in writing and, notwithstanding dialect differences,¹⁷ speech between Mesopotamian and Palestinian Jews and,

⁷ ‘Rabbis’, 446. ⁸ Zadok, ‘Judeans’, 118.

⁹ Khan, ‘Languages’, 9; Greenfield, ‘Miscellany’, 85.

¹⁰ Boiy, *Babylon*, 192; Schiffman, *Text*, 82. ¹¹ Neusner, *History I*, 37.

¹² Würthwein, *Text*, 80–81.

¹³ Brooke, ‘Traditions’, 204. A recent monograph that investigates the impact of Hellenism on the first Gospel drastically minimizes the prevalence of Aramaic in first-century AD Palestine (Kinney, *Dimensions*, 125–26). Only selective use of sources can yield such a conclusion. For a balanced examination of the question, see Ong, *Multilingual*, particularly 149, 193.

¹⁴ Macintosh, ‘Languages’, 139–42; Sanders, *Adapa*, 151–52.

¹⁵ Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 32–33; Gesche, *Schulunterricht*, 30. ¹⁶ Jeremias, *Parables*, 25–26.

¹⁷ Gzella, ‘Aramaic’, 122, 126–27.

furthermore, between them and other Aramaic speakers in the contemporary ancient Near East.¹⁸

The shared language facilitated the dissemination of the tenets and accomplishments of Mesopotamian culture to diverse Aramaic-speaking communities from the Iranian highlands to Egypt.¹⁹ Among them was the Jewish community. In fact, from the Neo-Babylonian era onwards the Jews were excellently placed to participate in the transmission since they were prominent in the occupation ‘alphabet scribe’, which was to write in Aramaic.²⁰ Evidence from Qumran indicates that Mesopotamian scholarly compositions reached the sectarians in Aramaic versions.²¹ Aramaic fragments of the Enochic *Book of Giants* contain the names of Gilgameš and Humbaba, as well as more oblique references to the Gilgameš epic.²² Enoch’s visit to the realm of the dead (1 En 17:1–8) may also reflect *Gilgameš*.²³

As late as the third century AD in the city of Assur, situated not far from the Adiabenean capital Arbela, inscriptions in Aramaic attest to the continuation there of the cults of the king of the ancient Assyrian pantheon, Aššur, with his consort Šerua, and other Mesopotamian gods.²⁴ The names of some of their adherents, inscribed in the second and early third centuries AD, have Aššur as a theophoric component.²⁵ The name Aššurbēl is attested in second-century AD Hatra, a neighbouring kingdom.²⁶ According to Stephanie Dalley, in Arbela itself, Egašankalamma, the temple of Ištar, the Mesopotamian goddess of battle, sexual love and, particularly at Arbela, prophecy (‘queen of the divine decrees’),²⁷ functioned into the first centuries of the new

¹⁸ Folmer, ‘Aramaic’, 130; Khan, ‘Languages’, 19–21; Sanders, *Adapa*, 153–96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 185–87; Greenfield and Sokoloff, ‘Astrological’, 202; Folmer, ‘Aramaic’, 129–30.

²⁰ Zadok, ‘Judeans’, 116; Sanders, *Adapa*, 181–83.

²¹ Mladen Popović, ‘Networks of Scholars: The Transmission of Astronomical and Astrological Learning between Babylonians, Greeks and Jews’, in *Ancient Jewish Sciences and the History of Knowledge in Second Temple Literature*, Jonathan Ben-Dov and Seth L. Sanders (eds.) (2014, <http://dlib.nyu.edu/awdl/isaw/ancient-jewish-sciences/>; accessed 7/6/18); Sanders, *Adapa*, 20–21, 158, 188.

²² Milik, *Enoch*, 29–30, 311, 313; Dalley, ‘Variation’, 168–69.

²³ Bauckham, ‘Descent’, 154.

²⁴ Andrae, *Assur*, 251; Dirven, ‘Exaltation’, 100. The temple of Aššur was finally destroyed in approximately AD 240 (Radner, ‘City’, 5). Cult was being paid to Aššur in the southern Babylonian city of Uruk in Seleucid times (*ibid.*, 20).

²⁵ Radner, ‘Period’, 77. On the possible survival of Assyrian archives and customs in Arbela, see Dezső and Vér, ‘Λόγος’, 100.

²⁶ Caquot, ‘Inscriptions (1953)’, 239–40.

²⁷ Cole and Machinist, *Letters*, xvii; Krebernik, ‘Šarrat-Arba’il’.

millennium.²⁸ Indeed, a Syriac tradition relates that a priest of Ištar in the city who converted to Christianity was put to death in AD 355.²⁹ At the same time, the sanctuaries of Bēl (Marduk) in Babylon and of his son Nabû in neighbouring Borsippa aroused rabbinic condemnation.³⁰ The Bavli in a discourse on the Tower of Babel records Rav Joseph's dictum that 'Babylon and Borsippa are evil omens for the Torah' (bSan 109a). The Bavli includes their two great sanctuaries among its five 'established pagan temples' (bAboda Zara 11b). It defines 'established' as 'they are established permanently; regularly all the year round worship is taking place in them'.³¹

Marduk and Nabû, who over time syncretized aspects and symbols of Marduk's identity,³² retained their appeal into the first centuries of the Christian era in Syria as in Babylonia.³³ In Hadrian's reign, a temple to Bēl was built in Syrian Apamea (a Seleucid foundation), while in Palmyra, the Nabû Temple contained a relief sculpted in Late Antiquity portraying three generations of its priests. Palmyra, too, boasted a temple to Bēl.³⁴ An inscription in Greek and Palmyrene Aramaic of AD 24 commemorates a donation to the temple by a Palmyrene resident of Babylon.³⁵ Over 450 years after the birth of Christ, the Syrian Neo-Platonist Damascius was knowledgeably discussing the genealogy of Babylonian gods including Anu, Enlil, Ea as well as Marduk, and demonstrating a familiarity with *Enūma eliš*.³⁶ Around AD 500 a form of *Enūma eliš* was apparently recited in the Syrian city of Edessa on the eighth day of Nisan in the context of worshipping Marduk and Nabû.³⁷ In Assur Nabû was venerated into the third century AD.³⁸

The cults of Ištar/Nanaya and other ancient Babylonian deities such as Šamaš, Nergal and Tammuz also remained features of the religious landscape in Mesopotamia, Syria and beyond well into the first millennium AD.³⁹ Mandaean magical texts recognize Nergal, Ištar and Šamaš, as well as Marduk and Nabû as the spirits operating in the planets. Each retains

²⁸ 'Variation', 171 and *passim*. ²⁹ Dalley, 'Babylon', 31.

³⁰ Oshima, 'Marduk', 351, 356.

³¹ http://halakhah.com/zarah/zarah_11.html#PARTb; (accessed 3/1/20).

³² Pomponio, *Culto*, 220–22.

³³ Dirven, 'Exaltation'; Cureton, *Documents*, 14, 22; Ford, 'Kidinnu', 273 n. 12.

³⁴ Millar, 'Problem', 127–29; Raja, 'Representations', 129.

³⁵ Teixidor, 'Babylonie', 380. ³⁶ Heidel, *Genesis*, 75–76; Komoróczy, 'Berosos', 133.

³⁷ Frahm, 'Counter-Texts', 21. ³⁸ Michel, 'Nabû', 554.

³⁹ Montgomery, *Texts*, 47, 217, 238–41; Drewnowska-Rymarz, *Nanāja*, 158–67; Campion, 'Survival', 84; Kutscher, 'Cult', 42–44. On the identity of Ištar and Nanaya, see Drewnowska-Rymarz, *Nanāja*, 27, 40, 155–57; Reiner, 'Hymn', 233–34; George, *House*, 157:1195.

something of the attributes of their Babylonian precursor. Thus, Nirigh (Nergal, Mars) rules over war, Nbo (Nabû, Mercury) is ruler over knowledge, skill and wisdom.⁴⁰ Ancient Jewish and Mandaean incantations invoke these divinities.⁴¹ As late as the second half of the first millennium AD, the Sabeans in Harran recalled the Tammuz cult in their religious practices.⁴² All these gods had long been venerated over a vast territory stretching from the eastern Persian Gulf deep into Anatolia, Palestine and Egypt.⁴³ The cults of Marduk and Nabû had been adopted into the western Elamite pantheon.⁴⁴ The patron god of Tarsus was associated with Marduk; aspects of his iconography bore unmistakable Assyrian features into the first Christian centuries. The cult of the goddess Išhara, closely identified with Ištar, was prominent in Tarsus in the second and first millennia BC.⁴⁵

When the New Testament was being written, Jewish communities had long lived and worked in this vast territory and their exposure to these cults was intense.⁴⁶ Typically, in Late Antiquity the Jews reimagined these divinities as demons rather than denying their existence altogether.⁴⁷ Thus, Nergal appears in a late-antique Jewish magic text as Nerig in a list of malevolent supernatural forces.⁴⁸

Over millennia, Syria, in particular, was a vector for transmitting ideas and customs, among them Mesopotamian, into Palestine,⁴⁹ paralleling the way Aramaic in the first millennium BC functioned as a vector of

⁴⁰ Aldihisi, 'Story', 48, 61, 493–94; Drower, *Mandaeans*, 240, 252, 318.

⁴¹ Bohak, *Magic*, 253; Müller-Kessler and Kessler, 'Texten'; Greenfield, 'Miscellany', 82.

⁴² MMEW, 162.

⁴³ Taracha, *Religions*, 35, 80–81, 86–89, 106–10, 120–28; Horowitz, Oshima and Sanders, *Cuneiform*, 46–47, 64–66, 97–98, 108–09, 153; Kämmerer, *Induktion*, 75–80; Kiperwasser and Shapira, 'Encounters', 297–98; Caquot, 'Inscriptions (1952)'; Caquot, 'Inscriptions (1953)', 244–46. In the fourteenth century BC, the Mitannian king Tušratta corresponded with Amenhotep III concerning Ištar of Nineveh (Parpola, *Prophecies*, xlviij).

⁴⁴ Gaspa, 'Theology', 133. In 187 BC, Antiochus III died attacking a temple of Bēl in Elam (Collins, 'Apocalyptic', 28).

⁴⁵ Dalley, 'Sennacherib', 74–75. Berossus reports that Sennacherib rebuilt Tarsus on the model of Babylon.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Heritage*, 17–18; Neusner, *History I*, 13–15, 44; Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 33–34; Ford, 'Kidinnu', 273–74.

⁴⁷ Kiperwasser and Shapira, 'Encounters', 293; Montgomery, *Texts*, 70–71.

⁴⁸ Shaked, 'Poetic', 184.

⁴⁹ Winter, 'Art'; Schwartz, *Imperialism*, 211, 247, 253; Soldi, 'Arameans', 113–18. In fact, both biblical and rabbinic sources locate Israel's origins in the nexus of Mesopotamia, Syria (Aram) and Palestine. At the offering of the first fruits the Israelites were enjoined to declare, 'a wandering (or "refugee") Aramaean was my father' (Deut 26:5; Millard, 'Aramean'). In a discourse on the Mishnaic tractate on the first fruits, the Jerusalem

numerous Akkadian words into Hebrew.⁵⁰ These lexical items chiefly reflect the cultural sphere.⁵¹

Even the Greeks, whose culture and language had by the turn of the era acquired some of the prestige formerly attached to Akkadian, were far from impervious to Babylon's lustre.⁵² Indeed, Euhemerus associates Zeus himself with that city,⁵³ and the cult of Serapis, which the Ptolemies vigorously sponsored, was alleged to derive from Babylon.⁵⁴

Mesopotamia's most captivating quality was the eminence of its scholarship, which derived from the perception that it possessed divinely imparted knowledge and practices of timeless importance. This perception reflects the perspective of Berossus, a Babylonian priest of Marduk who penned the three-volume *Babyloniaca* in Greek and may owe something to his works.⁵⁵ To some degree, the status of its scholarship compensated Mesopotamia for its loss of political power. Diodorus waspishly contrasts Babylonian scholars' life-long dedication to study with the Greeks' 'confused wandering'.⁵⁶

The scholarship that he admired was enriched by the abiding legacy of Assyrian erudition.⁵⁷ While the debt Assyria owed Babylonian (and Sumerian) culture was immense,⁵⁸ the transfer was far from one way. Rocío Da Riva observes that: 'intellectual and religious aspects of Assyrian origin survived and were reshaped and adapted to the Babylonian cultural and political context. These elements were later transmitted to Persia, from where they entered the stream of historical tradition with the Macedonians and survived in many elements of the political rationale in the regimes of the Ancient World.'⁵⁹ Omen texts found in a Seleucid-period private library in southern-Babylonian Uruk offer a modest but instructive glimpse of this. They are written in Neo-Assyrian ductus and possess an Assurbanipal colophon.⁶⁰ Salvatore Gaspa is unequivocal concerning Assyria's impact on Achaemenid Persia in shaping 'the organization and administration of the Persian

Talmud (yBikkurim 1.4 [64a]) reinterprets Abraham's original name Ab-ram, 'exalted father', as 'father of Aram'.

⁵⁰ Keel, 'Reflections', 239–40; Mankowski, *Loanwords*, 10–11, 167–70.

⁵¹ Kaufman, *Influences*, 170.

⁵² Even in thirteenth-century AD Byzantium, Babylon's reputation for learning was still remembered (Herrin, *Byzantium*, 277).

⁵³ Ferguson, *Heritage*, 60. ⁵⁴ Lane Fox, *Alexander*, 467; Ferguson, *Heritage*, 134.

⁵⁵ Burstein, *Babyloniaca*, 4–9. ⁵⁶ Diodorus, 449 II:29.6.

⁵⁷ Clancier, *Bibliothèques*, 260–62. ⁵⁸ Mirelman, 'Magic', 357.

⁵⁹ 'Assyrians', 120. ⁶⁰ Beaulieu, 'Afterlife'.

empire, the imperial court life, the forms of visual and written communication'.⁶¹ This influence was particularly felt in conceptions of kingship. Gaspa contends that much of this Assyrian impact on the formation of the Persian empire was directly transmitted, rather than refracted through Babylonian derivations. Nebuchadnezzar settled many of the Judean exiles in the border territory of Babylonia and Assyria,⁶² thus exposing them to both cultures.

Long before the third century, Christianity was well established in Adiabene and Hatra.⁶³ Abercius, who visited the area in the second half of the second century, reports that Christians were present in the 'plain of Syria and Nisibis', and implies that they were ubiquitous.⁶⁴ The meagre evidence may indicate that these Christians were Greek-speakers; the medium used by their co-religionists in Babylonia, however, was Aramaic. Christian communities, principally comprising Jews, were present there by the end of the first century.⁶⁵ An early Syriac text announces, 'Satan fled from the disciples to the land of Babylon: and the story of the crucifixion had gone before him to the Chaldaeans.'⁶⁶ These data support the observation that Rome's eastern frontier was porous with respect to ideas and human traffic.⁶⁷ Merchants, itinerant craftsmen and soldiers in particular disseminated beliefs and tales over long distances.⁶⁸ Among the tales were Babylonian myths, which enjoyed a revival of interest in the Hellenistic period, at least among the literati.⁶⁹ Dalley affirms that, as well as myths, 'almost every other type of text known in Babylonia before the sixth century is now attested also from the Seleucid to the early Parthian period'.⁷⁰ The appearance of fish-*apkallu* motifs in Hellenistic seals that are modelled on late Assyrian types further attests to this revival.⁷¹

In the Seleucid and Roman/Parthian periods, then, not only were many of the ancient traditions of Sumero-Akkadian culture known and studied, but there was no appreciable hindrance, either linguistic or political, to

⁶¹ 'Theology', 125, 132. ⁶² Spolsky, *Languages*, 28–29.

⁶³ Radner, 'City', 20. She surmises that Assur itself may have been home to a Christian community as early as the first century AD.

⁶⁴ Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 276–77. ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 276, 564; Saldarini, *Community*, 24.

⁶⁶ Cureton, *Documents*, 112 VII:11–14.

⁶⁷ Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 277–78; Cureton, *Documents*, 16; Kalmin, *Babylonia*, 4–5.

⁶⁸ Dalley, *Myths*, xviii; Graf, 'Myth', 49–50; Woolf, 'Divinity', 248–49, 255; Carly Silver, 'Dura-Europos: Crossroad of Cultures', in *Archaeology* August, 2010 (https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/dura_europos/; accessed 23/3/2018).

⁶⁹ Komoróczy, 'Berosos', 152; Collins, *Seers*, 66. ⁷⁰ 'Variation', 166.

⁷¹ Wallenfels, 'Apkallu-Sealings', 320; Wallenfels, *Impressions*, figs. 5–11, 41–16.

their circulation between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean.⁷² Given this custom of transmission, it is unremarkable that Babylonia became a hub from which Jewish theological innovations also spread throughout the diaspora, although the number of known Tannaim there was apparently modest.⁷³

Viewed more broadly, the mobility of ideas in the region simply reflected the fact that, from the earliest archaeological records, major trading and migration routes ran through Mesopotamia.⁷⁴ Indeed, Israel's first recorded sin in the Promised Land – Achan's transgression – sprang from lust for a Mesopotamian product found at Jericho, 'one fine mantle from Shinar' (Josh 7:10–26). Mesopotamia was both creator and receiver of fine commodities: products, knowledge and ideas that shaped the ancient world.⁷⁵ It is no wonder that the climactic scene in the Bible concerning Babylon, perhaps amplifying Isaiah 47:15,⁷⁶ describes the merchants and sea-traders of the earth, as well as kings, bitterly mourning her desolation (Rev 18:9–19). Rabbi Judah's net reaching to Jerusalem is simply an expression of Mesopotamia's enduring reach into the Levant and far beyond.

MESOPOTAMIAN LEARNING AND ITS AFTERLIFE

Augmenting the effect of Aramaic as a channel of transmission, some Judeans, exilic and post-exilic, knew Akkadian.⁷⁷ Among scribes this included a facility in cuneiform.⁷⁸ Indeed, evidence from research on the Covenant Code (Exod 21:1–22:16)⁷⁹ and the Book of Judges (see below) indicates that as early as the Neo-Assyrian period some biblical writers possessed a mastery of cuneiform sources. The account of Daniel and his three companions taken to Babylon and compelled to master 'the writing (*sēfer*) and the language of the Chaldeans' (Dan 1:4) may reflect a tradition that some exiled Judean literati in Mesopotamia became expert in cuneiform literature.⁸⁰ Donald Wiseman posits that this story indicates a

⁷² Teixidor, 'Babylonie', 380. ⁷³ Flusser, *Judaism*, 111 n. 128, 133.

⁷⁴ Mellaart, 'Relations'; Horowitz, Oshima and Sanders, *Cuneiform*, 12–13.

⁷⁵ Gurney, *Hittites*, 196; Pongratz-Leisten, 'Agency', 174–75.

⁷⁶ Franke, *Isaiah*, 143–44.

⁷⁷ Ong, *Multilingual*, 142–43; Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 29; Winitzer, 'Assyriology', 187–88, 203–04.

⁷⁸ Astour, 'Prophecy', 579; Stökl, 'Schoolboy'.

⁷⁹ Wright, *Inventing*; Sanders, *Adapa*, 179–81.

⁸⁰ DCH VI:192; BATC, 365; Finkel, 'Remarks', 314–15.

policy of Nebuchadnezzar II's court to train high-ranking hostages from subject nations in Babylonian learning.⁸¹ Nebuchadnezzar was a serial user of Neo-Assyrian administrative structures and processes,⁸² and Neo-Assyrian kings extensively applied this policy. Their goal was to inculcate an appreciation of and loyalty to the hegemonic culture and its ruler.⁸³ Wiseman proposes that Zerubbabel, whom we will consider in detail, was possibly a recipient of such an education.⁸⁴ The proposal has merit: Babylonian and biblical sources agree that Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel's grandfather, received royal attention and support.⁸⁵ Moreover, rationalist data confirm that this provision extended to other noble Judeans.⁸⁶

Competence in cuneiform would have given such individuals access to a fund of Mesopotamian scholarship, concomitantly enhancing their value and, therefore, status in their communities, and perhaps further afield.⁸⁷ Indeed, Daniel 5:11 makes the claim for Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar appointed him his chief astrologer. F. Lelli considers that this text may imply the widespread study of astrology by Jews during and after the exile.⁸⁸

Opportunities to learn Akkadian existed and perhaps beckoned. In the exilic period, Babylonian culture was dominant and made little allowance for other traditions. Paul-Alain Beaulieu asserts that in Babylonia, despite its multi-ethnic character and the ubiquity of Aramaic, 'Babylonian civilization in its traditional form [remained] the ideal and common denominator of society, and above all the only culture that enjoyed official support from the monarchy and the civic institutions that regulated the life of Babylonian cities'.⁸⁹

The Judean community was subject to Babylonian law, which was recorded in cuneiform. An Akkadian marriage contract drafted by a scribe with the West-Semitic name Adad-šamā in the northern Babylonian town of Āl-Yahudu, 'city of Judah', a settlement known from sixth- and fifth-century BC records, is written in cuneiform. It is dated to the early Persian period (Cyrus' reign). The majority of witnesses to the contract possess names with the theophoric element -yah.⁹⁰ The document, like others from Āl-Yahudu, is otherwise indistinguishable from

⁸¹ *Nebuchadnezzar*, 81, 84–86. Note, however, Waerzeggers, 'Contact', 133.

⁸² Da Riva, 'Prism'. ⁸³ Parpola, 'Letter', 33–34. ⁸⁴ *Nebuchadnezzar*, 81.

⁸⁵ Jer 52:31–34; 2 Kgs 25:27–30; Gray, *Kings*, 773–75.

⁸⁶ Stökl, 'Schoolboy', 52; Nissinen, 'Context', 88–89.

⁸⁷ Scurllock and Al-Rawi, 'Weakness', 372–74; Lambert, *Background*, 13–14.

⁸⁸ 'Stars', 813. ⁸⁹ 'Babylon', 6, 10–11. ⁹⁰ Abraham, 'Brides', 212–17.

local Babylonian documents. The Judeans maintained records of their financial, administrative and legal transactions on tablets in Akkadian.⁹¹

Scholars incline to the view that Āl-Yahudu was located near Nippur.⁹² Nippur was a celebrated centre of cuneiform (and astronomical) scholarship into the late first millennium BC.⁹³ Its principal temple, which was dedicated to Enlil, was still functioning in 160 BC.⁹⁴ Evidence suggests that consequent to the Assyrian devastation of Israel and swathes of Judah, Israelite and Judean deportees were settled in the environs of Nippur.⁹⁵ Later, Judeans – Ezekiel among them – taken by the Babylonians may have joined them there.⁹⁶ Others went to Babylon and Borsippa.⁹⁷ Borsippa, the city of Nabû, patron deity of scribes, rivalled Nippur's renown as a seat of learning.⁹⁸

Although information on transmission is patchy, especially in the Parthian era when the area was 'just out of the range of Greek and Roman historians',⁹⁹ I shall consider evidence that Jews living in Mesopotamia absorbed and disseminated knowledge derived directly or indirectly from cuneiform sources. While many Babylonian texts of a theological and '(pre)philosophical' nature carried a prohibition against distribution to the 'uninitiated',¹⁰⁰ the opposite obtained with other major cuneiform compositions, such as *Enūma eliš* and the Erra epic. Readers/hearers were enjoined to propagate their contents.¹⁰¹ The latter composition may have left its mark on 1 Enoch.¹⁰²

Furthermore, Jewish priests seem somehow to have accessed Babylonian sacred knowledge classified as restricted to its scribal community. Expositors present substantial evidence from Ezekiel that indicates its author possessed specialist knowledge of Assyro-Babylonian cult.¹⁰³

⁹¹ Ibid., 206. There were two groups of cuneiform specialists in this period: the élite scribes in Babylonia – those who held positions in royal service and especially the temples – who were generally the scions of distinguished Babylonian families, and the many less privileged people who had facility in cuneiform. Adad-šamā belonged to the second category. If the Daniel tradition has any historical basis, however, there were exceptions to this rigid dichotomy (Frahm, 'Traditionalism', 330).

⁹² Abraham, 'Brides', 198; Beaulieu, 'Babylon', 7.

⁹³ Frahm, 'Traditionalism', 323–24; Cole, *Nippur*, 176; *LAS* II:268.

⁹⁴ van der Spek, 'Hellenistic', 426. ⁹⁵ Oded, 'Kings', 41; Machinist, 'Imperialism', 255.

⁹⁶ Zadok, 'Judeans', 113, 117; Alstola, 'Judeans', 149–52.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 204. Note *Genesis Rabbah* 38:11.

⁹⁸ Frame and George, 'Libraries', 265; Waerzeggers, 'Contact', 139–41.

⁹⁹ Lane Fox, *Pagans*, 278. ¹⁰⁰ Rochberg, *Path*, 219.

¹⁰¹ Michalowski, 'Presence', 394–95. ¹⁰² Bhayro, *Shemihazah*, 244–45.

¹⁰³ Vanderhooft, 'Ezekiel', 103–04, 113–14; Kingsley, 'Ezekiel', 341–44; Hurowitz, 'Materials', 8 n. 17, 12 n. 27; Stökl, 'Schoolboy'.

In the first century AD, texts continued to be composed and copied in cuneiform, although by then Akkadian had joined Sumerian as a language employed solely in specialized religious and scholarly contexts.¹⁰⁴ The latest datable extant cuneiform tablet derives from AD 75. So long as temples existed in Babylonia dedicated to Mesopotamian deities, it is likely that Akkadian and Sumerian continued to be used.¹⁰⁵ Pliny, writing in AD 77, states that ‘to this day [Babylon’s] Temple of Jupiter-Belus [Marduk] continues there entire’, a statement that Babylonian sources confirm.¹⁰⁶ Cuneiform was, therefore, being read and written when the New Testament was being composed.¹⁰⁷

The Syrian Neo-Platonist, Iamblichus, who was active in the early third century AD, appears to have taken lessons in Akkadian from a Babylonian teacher.¹⁰⁸ An interest in Babylonian magic may have prompted his studies.¹⁰⁹ Numerous so-called ‘Graeco-Babyloniaca’ tablets, on whose obverse Akkadian or Sumerian texts are written in cuneiform, while their reverse sides have the texts transliterated into Greek characters, attest to the tenacity of cuneiform learning in Babylonia. They have been provisionally dated to the period 50 BC–50 AD, though they may be considerably later.¹¹⁰ The transliterations are based on the phonology of Neo-Babylonian cuneiform.¹¹¹ Scholars debate whether they are the work of Greeks studying cuneiform or of Babylonians literate in Greek learning cuneiform.¹¹² Among the texts is tablet I of the much-copied second-millennium Babylonian esoteric topographic composition TIN.TIR^{ki}, magic incantations and Akkadian prayers.¹¹³

If Jewish scribes in Babylonia during the Parthian period were, like Iamblichus, drawn to Babylonian erudition, it seems that direct access was possible. After the fall of the Babylonian empire in 539 BC,

¹⁰⁴ Bottéro, *Religion*, 209–10.

¹⁰⁵ Geller, ‘Wedge’, 45–47; Rempel and Yoffee, ‘End’, 385.

¹⁰⁶ *Natural History*, Book VI chapter 26 (<https://ia800703.us.archive.org/3/items/plinysnaturalhisooplinrich/plinysnaturalhisooplinrich.pdf>; accessed 13/4/19); Linssen, *Cults*, 108; George, *House*, 140:967.

¹⁰⁷ Clancier, ‘Guardians’, 758; Lambert, ‘Kingship’, 54.

¹⁰⁸ Scurlock and Al-Rawi, ‘Weakness’, 379.

¹⁰⁹ Geller, ‘Wedge’, 50; Chadwick, *Church*, 296–97.

¹¹⁰ De Breucker, ‘Berossos’, 639; Rempel and Yoffee, ‘End’, 385, 398.

¹¹¹ Beaulieu, ‘Intellectual’, 481.

¹¹² Sollberger, ‘Graeco-Babyloniaca’; Gesche, *Schulunterricht*, 185; Clancier, ‘Guardians’, 767–69; Black and Sherwin-White, ‘Tablet’, 138.

¹¹³ Sollberger, ‘Graeco-Babyloniaca’, 67–68; *BTT*, 30–31, 241; Sanders, *Adapa*, 58.

Babylonian scholarship was predominantly preserved by priestly communities centred on the temples where scribes copied texts, including various omen and medical series, until the end of cuneiform culture.¹¹⁴ If this statement suggests a sterile intellectual environment, it is misleading. Babylonian divines combined profound respect for past learning with the determination to extend their repertoire of knowledge in new ways. This approach is witnessed most clearly in astronomy,¹¹⁵ mathematics and medicine. As Philippe Clancier remarks, they engaged in research.¹¹⁶

The Bavli recounts that even in the third century AD Babylonian lore and learning still attracted eminent rabbis.¹¹⁷ It betrays indications that Babylonian omen series such as *Šumma izbu* and *Šumma ālu* informed its composition.¹¹⁸ According to a Neo-Assyrian text, only with expert guidance could one hope to fathom the meanings in *Šumma izbu*.¹¹⁹ Thus, the rabbis must have consulted Babylonian priests for instruction, whose reference sources were the cuneiform tablets.¹²⁰ The rabbinic borrowings included Akkadian medical, calendrical and, apparently, astronomical terminology.¹²¹

The rabbis' involvement may have affected early Christian epistemology. The system for transliterating Hebrew in Greek that Origen used bears more resemblance to that employed in the Graeco-Babyloniaca tablets than to the system the Septuagint translators adopted,¹²² notwithstanding that Origen shared with them an Egyptian background.

Rabbinic engagement with Babylonian scholarship may provide the most cogent explanation for the transmission of astrological and brontological material from the Mesopotamian source to Jewish compositions at the turn of the era.¹²³ The similarities between them extend beyond the borrowing of observational information to the forms in which information is presented and analysed.¹²⁴ While it appears that astrological/astronomical texts studied by the Qumran sectarians exhibit no awareness of near-contemporary discoveries in Babylonian mathematical astronomy, they are equally silent concerning contemporary Greek advances. This may indicate nothing more than either that the Qumran community lacked the mathematical expertise to exploit the

¹¹⁴ Beaulieu, 'Intellectual', 482; Sallaberger, 'Palace', 274; Popović, *Reading*, 78.

¹¹⁵ ASM, 270. ¹¹⁶ *Bibliothèques*, 280, 294.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 282, 303; Geller, 'Wedge', 56–57. ¹¹⁸ Geller, 'Survival', 3–4.

¹¹⁹ LABS, 44 60.r.:1. ¹²⁰ Geller, 'Survival', 6.

¹²¹ Ben-Dov, 'Terminology', 270; Bohak, *Magic*, 408–09; Livingstone, *Hemerologies*, 266.

¹²² Geller, 'Wedge', 47–48. ¹²³ Stol, *Birth*, 98; Sanders, *Adapa*, 152–54.

¹²⁴ Gabbay, 'Commentaries'.

Mesopotamian (and Greek) findings, or that they did not consider the mathematical advances relevant to their astrological purposes.¹²⁵ Whatever the case, it is indisputable that the sectarians received their astronomical knowledge ultimately from Babylonia.¹²⁶ Their astrology is informed by the seminal texts MUL.APIN and *Enūma Anu Enlil* and is familiar with the zodiac – a Babylonian invention of the fifth century BC – and the Lunar-Three scheme, possibly an even later development.¹²⁷

Gideon Bohak and Mark Geller describe the impact of Babylonian astrology on the ancient Near East in Late Antiquity thus:

Babylonian celestial omens are found among the Dead Sea Scrolls around the first century BCE or CE, in a Demotic Egyptian astrological text copied in the second century CE, in a late-antique Aramaic astrological compendium that probably was composed in the East but is still found in an eleventh-century copy from the Cairo Genizah, in a late-antique Palestinian poetic composition ... and in more recent Syriac and Mandaic manuscripts.¹²⁸

The diverse material that they cite represents accurate quotations of Akkadian material, applied to local contexts. The Aramaic text Papyrus Amherst 63 provides another example of the afterlife of Akkadian material in Egypt. In fact, Egyptian astrologers were still consulting lunar computations of Babylonian origin in the fourth century AD.¹²⁹ Scholars in Byzantium had access to works that originated in ancient Mesopotamia. Byzantine material attests to Babylonian eclipse and lunar omens. Byzantium's debt to Babylonian astrology is still evident in the mid-thirteenth century.¹³⁰ The sixth-century monk Cosmas Indicopleustes was acquainted with Babylonian material including Berossus.¹³¹ As late as the ninth century, Patriarch Photius, whose substantial library earned him the sobriquet *Myriobiblos* ('of countless books'), boasts of reading an immense anthology of material comprising 'testimonies and whole books' originally composed by, among others, 'Babylonian and Chaldaean ... authors highly regarded in each nation'.¹³²

To the present day, Mandaean New Year rituals recall Babylonian practices and beliefs surrounding the *Akītu*, namely the gods' annual

¹²⁵ Ben-Dov, 'Time', 231–32, 245–46. ¹²⁶ Bohak, 'Texts', 464–65.

¹²⁷ ASM, 17; Stevens, 'Secrets', 223. ¹²⁸ 'Astrology', 619–20.

¹²⁹ Ben-Dov, 'Time', 219; Jones, 'Resources', 176; Pingree, 'Astronomy', 619–20.

¹³⁰ Campion, 'Survival', 87–90.

¹³¹ McCrindle, *Cosmas*, 375; Annus, 'Watchers', 279–80.

¹³² Herrin, *Byzantium*, 128–29.

decreeing of destinies for the nation. To facilitate their prognostications, the priests refer to the *Sfar Malwašia* (Book of the Zodiac) whose roots lie in Babylonian omen compendia.¹³³

HELLENISM

It is worth restating at this point that in my judgement Mesopotamian ideas reached the New Testament through three channels. The first was the Hebrew Bible and the early Jewish writing it inspired. The second was Israel's absorption of Mesopotamian epistemology. Over time, this mode of interrogating and comprehending the world determined the nature of intellectual inquiry in the Judean community, irrespective of abrupt differences in theology between the two civilizations. The process was accelerated during the exilic period.¹³⁴ The third channel was New Testament writers' direct apprehension of Mesopotamian sources.

I present here two propositions. The first is that the New Testament's conceptual landscape is essentially indebted both to the Hebrew Bible and to the scholarship of earlier and contemporary Jewish scribes active in Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine.¹³⁵ This is unexceptionable. Chadwick notes that the theology of the earliest Christians was purely 'exegesis of the Old Testament'.¹³⁶ Chilton and Neusner 'understand the New Testament's religious system (indifferent to whether we call it Judaism or Christianity) as Judaisms among Judaisms'.¹³⁷ Aspects of Essene theology were influential in early Christian circles,¹³⁸ and, in some respects, strict demarcation between Judaism and Christianity did not occur for centuries.¹³⁹ This is not to deny that frequently Greek translations mediated the New Testament's reception of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴⁰ New Testament books vary considerably in this respect as a comparison of the first Gospel with Revelation demonstrates.

We have seen that one need look no further than the first seventeen verses of the New Testament to detect the influence of the Hebrew

¹³³ Drower, *Zodiac*, 1–3; Scurlock, 'Sorcery', 127, 144–46. Manuscripts of the *Sfar Malwašia* date from the thirteenth century AD though the work was composed in the Sassanid period.

¹³⁴ Selz, 'Ur', 71. ¹³⁵ Mellor, 'Old Testament', 179–81; Müller, 'Reception', 315.

¹³⁶ *Church*, 9, 20, 23. ¹³⁷ *Judaism*, 10; Snyder, 'Christianity', 178–79.

¹³⁸ Flusser, *Judaism*, 25–31, 33–37.

¹³⁹ Satlow, 'Influence', 45. In fourth-century AD Mesopotamia, Aphraates' church was in close contact with Jewish communities (Broadhead, *Matthew*, 257–58).

¹⁴⁰ Betz, 'Hellenism', 128.

Bible. Earlier and contemporaneous Jewish scholarship also left its mark there.¹⁴¹

My second proposition is that both influences, the biblical and the post-biblical, had been substantially affected by Mesopotamian literature and theology.¹⁴² There is consensus that the Priestly author of the Enoch account in Genesis 5:18–24 and the writers of certain Enochic texts and the Book of Jubilees were familiar with and exploited Mesopotamian material, including *Atra-ḥasīs*, and the legends of Adapa as well as *Erra* and *Gilgameš*. The influence of Mesopotamia on their writing extended much further than the borrowing of motifs; their compositions are grounded in Mesopotamian literature.¹⁴³

The present book breaks new ground in positing that New Testament writers were receptive to Mesopotamian sources. The receptivity was based in part on the contemporaneous conception that the roots of Jewish identity were to be found in Babylonia. Just as Mesopotamia is strongly present in the Matthean genealogy, so Mesopotamia enjoys a prominent place in the New Testament's conceptual 'genealogy'. Mesopotamian theology is, by this analysis, a direct 'ancestor' of the New Testament.

Hellenism had an effect on the New Testament writers' appreciation of the world around them, and provided the language they used to describe it. Hellenism's imprint is clearly evident in certain early Jewish works, particularly the Wisdom of Solomon and 4 Maccabees.¹⁴⁴ As a rule, sapiential material proved to be more portable to different linguistic and religious environments than other forms of religious dogma, as Jesus' reference to the Queen of Sheba's journey to hear Solomon's wisdom reminds us (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31).¹⁴⁵ Although Hellenism's impact on the New Testament lies outside the scope of this book and therefore will not be treated in detail, it will enter the discussion when I consider the origin of a given aspect of kingship or hermeneutical procedure evinced in the New Testament. Many commentators lament the tendency to overstate the effect of Hellenism on the first Jewish Christian writers.¹⁴⁶ Even a

¹⁴¹ Johnson, *Purpose*, 189, 209, 217.

¹⁴² Collins, *Seers*, 44–46; Borger, 'Beschwörungsserie'; Bhayro, *Shemihazah*, 41, 244–45, 258 n. 95.

¹⁴³ Annus, 'Watchers', 278, 290–91 and *passim*; Kvanvig, *Roots*, 319–42, 231–42.

¹⁴⁴ Schiffman, *Text*, 124–30; Witherington, *Jesus*, 105, 112, 142.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14–16, 344.

¹⁴⁶ Feuillet, 'Jesus', 163, 188–90, 195; Guthrie, *Theology*, 303; Witherington, *Jesus*, 118–19; Flusser, *Judaism*, 283–92.

feature so apparently reliant on Greek thought as Paul's appeal to 'allegory' in Galatians 4:21–31 is less clear-cut than one anticipates. This is evident when one compares his application with Philo's more Platonist treatment of the same Genesis episode.¹⁴⁷

In an influential article, Rudolf Bultmann discerned two sources at work on the Evangelists: that deriving from 'Palestinian soil', that is, the rabbinical, and that deriving from 'Hellenistic soil'.¹⁴⁸ He ascribed the miracle episodes to the latter.¹⁴⁹ This perspective gained a foothold in New Testament studies,¹⁵⁰ despite subsequent exposure of its weakness.¹⁵¹ In his exegesis of Col 1:15–20, John Barclay conceives of only two sources of influence, namely, 'Hellenistic theological and philosophical notions' and 'Jewish texts'.¹⁵² Occasionally, this dyadic perspective is expanded by a third source: Roman customs and ideology.¹⁵³ It exists within a broader hermeneutic framework that is essentially Euro-centric and consequently exaggerates the legacy of Hellenism in the ancient Near East relative to other sources.¹⁵⁴ Some scholars claim that in Babylonia's ancient cities Hellenization was superficial; the impact of Greek culture on Babylonian religion and scholarship as well as on daily life in Babylonian cities was insignificant. New temples were constructed but they were dedicated to Babylonian gods.¹⁵⁵ In Babylon, the editors of the Bavli appear to have had limited, if any, familiarity with Greek.¹⁵⁶ Many aspects of Babylonia's material culture remained unchanged.¹⁵⁷ Indigenous institutions and religious and literary traditions showed great resilience throughout the Seleucid and into the Parthian period.¹⁵⁸ It appears that in the Parthian domains the Arsacids privileged Aramaic over Greek. On the whole they resisted Hellenization, albeit with some

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 251.

¹⁴⁸ 'Approach'. That said, he conjectured that the rabbinic source contained 'oriental-syncretistic' elements from Babylon. He did not entertain this possibility, however, for the Hellenistic source (ibid., 361–62).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 348–49.

¹⁵⁰ Davies, *Invitation*, 116–17, 515–17; Guthrie, *Theology*, 59–60; Moses, *Transfiguration*, 32.

¹⁵¹ Hurtado, *Lord*, 23; Throup, 'Jesus', 52–53. ¹⁵² *Colossians*, 66–67.

¹⁵³ Wallace and Williams, *Worlds*; Jipp, *Christ*, 7–10.

¹⁵⁴ Lieberman, 'Background', 219; Bhayro, *Shemihazah*, 14–16; van der Spek, 'Cyrus', 234–35.

¹⁵⁵ van der Spek, 'City', 72–74; Boiy, *Babylon*, 92, 288–89, 293. De Breucker, 'Berossos', 640, and Joannès, 'Hellénistiques (rois)', 379, are more equivocal.

¹⁵⁶ Geller, 'Survival', 2; Schiffman, *Text*, 96–97; Clancier, *Bibliothèques*, 282.

¹⁵⁷ Kuhrt, 'Babyloniaka', 50.

¹⁵⁸ Beaulieu, 'Berossus', 116; Clancier, 'Guardians', 758, 764.

exceptions.¹⁵⁹ The practice of Babylonians in Uruk using Greek names died out within ten years of the Parthian conquest.¹⁶⁰ A similar picture emerges in eastern Syria from the first century BC.¹⁶¹

In an essay on the second-century AD composition *De Dea Syria*, Lucinda Dirven highlights the consequences of exaggerating Hellenism's impact: 'the attention to the Hellenistic traits in the work has led to a neglect of the equally or more important "native" elements.'¹⁶² Fergus Millar also urges a rebalancing of the argument, observing that even in those Syrian urban environments especially susceptible to Greek influence, local traditions coexisted with receptivity to Greek ideas and practices.¹⁶³ In his study of first-to-third-century AD inscriptions in Hatra, André Caquot concludes that the city resisted cultic innovation from the West.¹⁶⁴

The distortion that over-emphasis of Hellenization creates is aggravated by a frequent lack of recognition of how much Hellenism itself owes to Near Eastern cultures, including Sumero-Babylonian and Assyrian.¹⁶⁵ J.G. Droysen had already acknowledged this debt during the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁶ 'All the evidence,' asserts Nicolas Wyatt, 'suggests that before the time of Alexander contact between the Semitic and Greek worlds was very largely in a westward direction';¹⁶⁷ and Alexander did not entirely reverse the process. Plutarch's description of the Macedonian's court in Babylon strikingly resembles accounts of Esarhaddon's court in Nineveh: 'if the least unusual or extraordinary thing happened, [Alexander] thought it a prodigy or a presage, and his court was thronged with diviners and priests whose business was to sacrifice and purify and foretell the future.'¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁹ van Kooten, 'Matthew', 526–27, 581, 596; McEwan, 'Arsacid', 131.

¹⁶⁰ Gzella, 'Aramaic', 111–12; Clancier, 'Guardians', 758. ¹⁶¹ Millar, 'Problem', 126.

¹⁶² 'Author', 165. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 13, on the overemphasis of Greek influence on Jewish mysticism, and Gzella, 'Palmyrener', on the resilience of Aramaic in Palmyra to Greek influence in the period 44 BC–280 AD. More eastern Aramaic dialects exhibit even less Greek influence (Geller, 'Survival').

¹⁶³ 'Problem', 132. ¹⁶⁴ 'Inscriptions (1952)', 118; 'Inscriptions (1953)', 239.

¹⁶⁵ Parpola, 'Soul'; West, 'Material'; Böck, 'Esoteric', 620; Faraone et al., 'Mother', 180–81; Fears, *Princesps*, 68–70, 280–81, 317–24; Kramer, 'Studies', 487–88; Black and Sherwin-White, 'Tablet', 138–39; Dezsó and Vér, 'Λόγος'; Schiffman, *Text*, 60; Mikalson, 'Greece'.

¹⁶⁶ Betz, 'Hellenism', 127.

¹⁶⁷ *Texts*, 22; see also Braun-Holzinger and Rehm, *Import*, 163–83; Larson, 'Greece', 138–39.

¹⁶⁸ *Plutarch's Lives: The Translation Called Dryden's*, rev. A.H. Clough (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1895), IV:252; *RINAP* 4:2; Radner, 'King', 221–22.

Scholars ascribe qualities to ‘Greco-Roman Wisdom’ that had long been stock features of Assyro-Babylonian theology. Ben Witherington enumerates five: ‘(1) a concern for maintenance of cosmic order; (2) human beings held accountable for their actions; (3) oracles making clear the purpose of the universe; (4) a belief in divine choice of human agents to fulfil God’s purposes; and (5) imagery used to express these expectations drawing on traditional mythical language.’¹⁶⁹

Systematic empirical studies are first recorded in Mesopotamia.¹⁷⁰ Astrology was initially ‘*ungriechisch*’, with little evidence of it even in the early Hellenistic period.¹⁷¹ Ben-Dov asserts, ‘Hellenism is no more than the sum of its constituents, and in the . . . case [of Jewish texts in the Graeco-Roman period] the constituents, or at least some of them, come from the East.’¹⁷² Beaulieu has demonstrated that Babylonian practice informed even such a prominent and essential product of Hellenism as the establishment of the *Mouseion* and Library of Alexandria.¹⁷³

A recent monograph on the first Gospel provides an example of what I mean. In treating Matthew’s account of the magi, Matthias Konradt remarks that ‘The star was a common symbol of authority in the Graeco-Roman world since the time of Alexander the Great. Against this background, the mention of “his star” reads as an indication of the universal dimension of the reign of the “newborn king”.’¹⁷⁴ The Matthean passage in question seems to invite us to consider the broader context of its referents, ‘magi from the east’, rather than restricting enquiry solely to the Graeco-Roman sphere. Babylonian astrologers, from as early as the second millennium BC, identified a specific star – Regulus (α Leonis), known as ^{mul}LUGAL ‘the King’ – precisely as a ‘symbol of (royal) authority’.¹⁷⁵ It emblemized the king of Akkad (Babylonia), as seventh-century BC astral omen reports attest.¹⁷⁶ In fact, the Greeks borrowed the association of α Leonis with the figure of the king.¹⁷⁷

Matthew’s report of the magi conferring with King Herod recalls a trope of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian court life – the king and his

¹⁶⁹ *Jesus*, 297. ¹⁷⁰ Delnero, ‘Divination’, 147–50; Robson, ‘Scholarship’, 625–26.

¹⁷¹ Peterich, *Theologie*, 202–03; Jones, ‘Resources’, 180–81, 192–93; Steele, ‘Fragments’, 109.

¹⁷² ‘Time’, 218–19; Sanders, *Adapa*, 133–38. ¹⁷³ ‘De l’Esagil’. ¹⁷⁴ *Israel*, 272.

¹⁷⁵ Kurtik, *Zvezdnoye*, 283–84.

¹⁷⁶ Hunger, *Reports*. For instance, ‘If Regulus is dark: the king will become furious’ (25 4or.:3); ‘If Regulus carries radiance: the king of Akkad will exercise complete dominion’ (100–01 17or.:3–4).

¹⁷⁷ Condos, *Myths*, 127.

astrologers earnestly consulting one another on celestial omens. Until recently, scholars assumed that the Achaemenid era saw the existence of court astrologers cease, not least because the rise of mathematical astronomy transformed the role of such experts away from speculative divination.¹⁷⁸ We now know, however, of at least one case of a Seleucid ruler employing a Babylonian astrologer.¹⁷⁹

Deidre Good's book on kingship in Matthew illustrates the constraints a perspective that ignores the Mesopotamian dimension can impose on biblical exegesis. It, too, seems to presuppose that serious intellectual endeavour in the Near East began only with the Macedonian conquest. Early in the book, we are alerted to its limited grasp of the broader cultural landscape when it credits Hellenism with the following innovations: grammar, lexicography and theology.¹⁸⁰ They are attested in Sumer some two millennia before Homer.¹⁸¹ To compound the problem, she tends to conflate 'Hellenistic' with 'Greek'.¹⁸² This misapprehension occurs frequently in the scholarly literature,¹⁸³ in part because there is no generally accepted definition of 'Hellenism',¹⁸⁴ further obscuring the contribution Near Eastern cultures made to Hellenism.

Given Good's starting point, she naturally perceives Matthew's presentation of kingship as reflecting a Hellenistic model; she does not envisage any influence unmediated by Hellenism. She argues that the use of *praos/praotēs* in Matthew's Gospel betrays an implicit claim by Jesus to being a good king judged according to Hellenistic values. Her contention that *praos* in Matthew's diction is, above all, a signifier of kingship is controversial in itself, not least because *praus* is an archetypal descriptor of Moses (LXX Num 12:3; Sir 45:4) and Matthew frequently intimates Mosaic parallels in his portrayal of Christ.¹⁸⁵ Her cardinal proof-text to support her thesis is Matthew 21:5, a quotation of Zechariah 9:9,¹⁸⁶ whose Hebrew text reads 'Behold your king comes to you . . . , humble (*ānî*) and riding on a donkey'. The LXX renders *ānî* here with *praus*. From this, Good extrapolates that Jesus' self-description in Matthew 11:29 – 'I am *praos* and lowly in heart' – is 'that of a Hellenistic ruler',¹⁸⁷ notwithstanding some scholars' insistence that a rabbinic hermeneutic informs Matthew's presentation of Zechariah 9:9.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁸ Rochberg, 'Scribes', 359, 367–68. ¹⁷⁹ Clancier, 'Guardians', 761. ¹⁸⁰ *Jesus*, 39.

¹⁸¹ Jacobsen, *Harps*, xiv; Langdon, 'Hymn', 27–32. ¹⁸² *Jesus*, 62.

¹⁸³ For example, van Tilborg, *Leaders*, 169; Kinney, *Dimensions*, 26–27; Jipp, *Christ*, 6–7; Betz, 'Hellenism'.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 127. ¹⁸⁵ Riches, *Mythologies*, 272, 317. ¹⁸⁶ *Jesus*, 62. ¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸⁸ Stendahl, *School*, 119; Riesenfeld, *Jésus*, 96.

Praos is a difficult lexeme to translate. Nevertheless, by analysing its semantic field and the context that Matthew 11:29 supplies, we can at least adumbrate its meaning. In the verse, it stands in synonymous parallel to the adjectival phrase ταπεινός τῆ καρδία, ‘humble/lowly of heart’. We may deduce that the lexeme’s semantic field includes ‘humble’, ‘gentle’, and ‘meek’, as the English translations of the verse reflect. Barclay defines *praos* as human strength under divine control.¹⁸⁹ Good marshals much evidence to corroborate her assertion that the qualities of humility, gentleness and meekness, together with their corollaries servanthood and non-retaliation, were traits of exemplary kingship in the Hellenistic period,¹⁹⁰ without asking the question whence came these traits to Hellenism. However shaky the inference is that, in describing himself as *praos*, Jesus identifies himself with the paradigmatic Hellenistic king, the attendant contention that royal humility, gentleness, piety and submissiveness/servitude to the divine will were values that stemmed originally from Hellenism is plainly wrong. They were owned by rulers in much earlier periods. Consider, for instance, the mighty Esarhaddon’s self-description: ‘pious slave, humble, submissive, the one who reveres [the gods] great divinity’.¹⁹¹ It accords perfectly with Barclay’s definition of *praos*. Mesopotamian monarchs from Hammurabi (eighteenth century BC) to the last indigenous king of Babylon, Nabonidus, avowed their humility.¹⁹²

I am not proposing that the writer of Zechariah 9:9 or of Matthew 21:5, for that matter, drew consciously on a Mesopotamian archetype to describe the character of the king in the passages cited above. This would be unprovable. No more provable, though, is the assertion that Matthew in his application of *praos* had a Hellenistic kingly model in mind. More generally, I submit that disregard of plausible sources apart from Hellenism skews and impoverishes New Testament exegesis. This disregard is as untenable as an argument that, since much Hebrew biblical textuality was composed during the Assyro-Babylonian domination of the Hebrew-speaking area, Mesopotamia was *ipso facto* the sole external contributor to the texts concerned, thus ignoring Canaanite and Egyptian contributions.¹⁹³ All these religions, in Klaus Koch’s memorable simile, ‘stood like godfathers at the cradle of Israelite religion’.¹⁹⁴

In fact, Hellenism’s impact on the New Testament pales against the much older, more solid and vigorously maintained cultural apprehension

¹⁸⁹ *Words*, 240–42. ¹⁹⁰ *Jesus*, 61–93. ¹⁹¹ *RINAP* 4:222 109:i 10’–11’.

¹⁹² *CAD* A/2, 455–56. ¹⁹³ Collins, ‘Apocalyptic’, 31. ¹⁹⁴ ‘Wort’, 252, 278.

founded on Jewish traditions, beliefs and modes of thinking that one encounters on its pages,¹⁹⁵ and that I have begun to probe. Dominant contemporaneous attitudes in Judaism sought to protect its spiritual heritage from the impact of Greek ideas,¹⁹⁶ though as I discussed, the reality was a complex intermeshing of resistance and adaptation.¹⁹⁷ Even the Qumran sectarians were not immune.¹⁹⁸ That said, these attitudes perforce affected Jewish Christian writing.¹⁹⁹ One notes, in this connection, the credentials that Paul cites as a God-fearing Jew (Phil 3:4–6). They are alien to Hellenism,²⁰⁰ despite his use of Greek to enumerate them and the fact that some scholars consider him a ‘Hellenist’.²⁰¹

In Christianity’s first century, Mesopotamian ideas encountered much less resistance in both faith communities. For one thing, those ideas were not identified with a current or recent political oppressor. Josephus remarks that while the Egyptians and Tyrians are ‘our bitterest enemies [,] of the Chaldaeans I could not say the same’.²⁰² Babylon, Assyria and Judea had all been deprived of genuine political independence centuries earlier (the Hasmonean interlude in Palestine had been short-lived). For another thing, the ideas bore the patina of ancientness. Over time, though, as the balance shifted between Jewish and Gentile Christians, Hellenistic influence grew deeper and more extensive in Christianity.²⁰³ This development is evident in influential patristic writings, such as those of Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.²⁰⁴

In light of these remarks, I seek to redress over-emphasis on Greek and Hellenistic influence on the New Testament where this impinges on the discussion. More essentially, I attempt to present the two propositions I outlined above in a logical chain of causation and to apply them to the topic of kingship. Thus, Mesopotamian conceptions and modes of expression strongly influenced the writers and editors of the Hebrew Bible; the Hebrew Bible was a major determinant of the world view of the writers and editors of the New Testament; consequently, the imprint of

¹⁹⁵ Saldarini, *Community*, 8, 11, 26; Charlesworth, ‘Evangelist’, 162–63; Broadhead, *Matthew*, 248–49.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 250; Witherington, *Jesus*, 82, 111–12, 119; Williamson, *Israel*, 83; Davies, ‘Apocalyptic’, 268.

¹⁹⁷ Carr, *Writing*, 258–59; Sandmel, ‘Parallelomania’, 6.

¹⁹⁸ Flusser, *Judaism*, 120–27; Schiffman, *Reclaiming*, 32–33.

¹⁹⁹ Barker, ‘Writings’, 96–97; Chadwick, *Church*, 4, 10, 15, 22.

²⁰⁰ Betz, ‘Hellenism’, 132. ²⁰¹ For example, Sim, *Gospel*, 63; Satlow, ‘Influence’, 48.

²⁰² *Josephus I* 190–91 I:70–71.

²⁰³ Smith, ‘Message’, 233 n. 4; Hurtado, *Lord*, 24–25; Cross, *Library*, 83–84.

²⁰⁴ Chadwick, *Church*, 93, 105, 124.

Mesopotamia is felt in the New Testament. This imprint was consolidated by the impact of Mesopotamian traditions on the broader intellectual environment of the Near East and specifically on Jewish modes of conceptualization and exegesis. This includes those that New Testament authors espoused. This statement holds despite the differing exegetical approaches maintained in first-century AD Judaism.

We see the imprint in biblical texts that New Testament writers drew upon, such as Isaiah,²⁰⁵ Jeremiah,²⁰⁶ Zechariah²⁰⁷ and Daniel.²⁰⁸ It is also evinced in texts that inform the New Testament presentation of Jesus, but are not explicitly quoted there. A case in point is the account of Gideon and his son Abimelech (Judg 6–9), which I analyse in Chapter 5. Since Judges is not a book generally held to contain messianic material beyond loose typological parallels largely centred on Samson,²⁰⁹ this finding supports the claim in the New Testament, most explicitly by Luke, that not only the Law but the Prophets predicted and spoke of the coming Messiah, anticipating Jesus.²¹⁰ Notwithstanding Luke's tendency to use 'all' hyperbolically,²¹¹ the New Testament is concerned to demonstrate that Jesus constitutes the fulfilment of the Prophets as well as of the Law of Moses.²¹² Examples are: 'Beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he explained to them in all the Scriptures²¹³ the things concerning himself' (Lk 24:27; likewise Acts 3:18, 20–22a; 10:42–43a); 'All this happened in order that the Scriptures of the prophets be fulfilled' (Mt 26:56; also 5:17); 'the Gospel of God, which was promised in advance through his prophets in sacred writings, concerning his son' (Rom 1:1–4). Evidently, the form of the prophets' predictions was 'multifarious', and they were delivered in 'many ways' (Heb 1:1).

These verses substantiate the conclusion that the prophets were pre-eminent for the early Christians and that they interpreted the legal provisions of the Torah as prophecy.²¹⁴ Jack Kingsbury argues that Matthew's presentation of the *Heilsgeschichte* is bipartite: 'The "time of Israel (OT)"

²⁰⁵ Beaton, *Christ*, 88.

²⁰⁶ Note Matthew's addition (16:14) of Jeremiah to Mark's list (Mk 8:28).

²⁰⁷ Coggins, *Haggai*, 69.

²⁰⁸ Aster, *Light*, 221–27. On the impact of Daniel on the New Testament and early Christianity, see Hull, *Magic*, 92; Wright, *How*, 130, 193.

²⁰⁹ Metzger, *Introduction*, 171; Gunn, *Judges*, 94, 96, 138–39, 166, 171, 175–82, 200–01, 210.

²¹⁰ Müller, 'Reception', 322. ²¹¹ Bates, 'Codes', 84–85.

²¹² Broadhead, *Matthew*, 125–26.

²¹³ Müller, 'Reception', 323 translates this phrase 'in every part of the Scriptures'.

²¹⁴ Charles, 'Garnishing', 6.

(= the time of prophecy) and the "time of Jesus" (= the time of fulfilment).²¹⁵ A corollary, then, of our exploration of the Mesopotamian legacy will be the analysis of some passages in the Hebrew Bible germane to our subject that influenced the New Testament presentation of the Messiah but which commentators have generally not recognized as such.

'SENTIMENTS OF AFFINITY': BABYLON AND ISRAEL

The immense debt New Testament writers owe to the Hebrew Bible is explicitly asserted and implicitly evident throughout. The Evangelists present Jesus appealing to its authority in a way that is mutually validating. The Law, the Prophets and the Writings confirm that he satisfies the model of the promised Messiah; in turn, as the Son of God, he confirms their veracity.²¹⁶ This dialectic receives graphic expression in the transfiguration. Moses and Elijah, representing respectively the Law and the Prophets, appear with the effulgent Jesus, manifested as God's Son, in the presence of the three apostles (cf. Mal 3:22–23 [E. 4:4–5]). This moment sees the baton passed from the heroes of the old covenant to those destined to be heroes of the new, each, according to Ephrem the Syrian, recognizing the other: 'they looked to one another: the Prophets to the Apostles and the Apostles to the Prophets. There the authors of the old covenant saw the authors of the new.'²¹⁷ Even early Gentile followers of Jesus, who had not been acculturated to Judaism and whose interest in it *per se* was probably limited, appreciated the badge of venerable antiquity that the Jewish Scriptures bestowed on their nascent faith in an age when antiquity lent authenticity.²¹⁸

In *Contra Apionem*, Josephus contends that the Jewish religion is superior to its Greek counterpart on account of its greater age. On this reasoning, Babylonian religion, the custodian of the most ancient theological traditions ever recorded, could claim pre-eminence. Actually, Josephus acknowledges the superiority of the traditions of the Chaldeans and Egyptians over those of the Greek arrivistes and the Jews,²¹⁹ noting that 'our first leaders and ancestors were derived from

²¹⁵ *Structure*, 123; cf. Mt 11:2–5.

²¹⁶ Bauer, 'Characters', 358; Anderson, 'Gradations', 181.

²¹⁷ *Sermon on the Transfiguration* (www.dormitioninconcord.com/articles/SermonTransfiguration.pdf; accessed 12/4/19).

²¹⁸ Ehrman, *Christianities*, 144–45.

²¹⁹ Herodotus provided a conspicuous model for such views, observing that the Tyrian Heracles possesses greater antiquity (and divinity) than his Greek namesake (*The*

[the Chaldaeans]' (1.13).²²⁰ This seems a remarkable admission for a Jewish intellectual of priestly descent to make.²²¹ It reflects, however, a conviction widely held by contemporary Jewish scholars that is echoed in later rabbinic texts.²²² We meet it, too, in Acts 7. Stephen starts his address to the high priest and the assembled crowd of enraged Jews by referring to Abraham's origins in Chaldea Ur. From his audience's silence we may infer this to be one of his less controversial pronouncements (vv. 2–4). The notion obtained even earlier. In late-third-century BC Greek text fragments attributed to Pseudo-Eupolemus, God commissions Abraham to instruct Egypt and Phoenicia in astrology and 'Chaldea learning'.²²³ Abraham's teaching astrology to the Egyptians is a trope found in later works – Philo and Jubilees (Jub 12:16–20).²²⁴ Moreover, Jubilees (11:7) implies that Ur was a centre of Chaldea astrological knowledge and states that Abraham's great grandfather and grandfather were expert in it.

The conviction that Josephus expresses proceeds from the Genesis account of Abraham's origins (Gen 11:28–31; 15:7), repeated in the post-exilic Book of Nehemiah (9:7) as well as in Chronicles.²²⁵ In the biblical cosmogonic tradition, the only decipherable fixed points for the *Urheimat* of the first human beings are the Tigris and Euphrates, not Palestine (Gen 2:8–14).²²⁶ Other ancient peoples – Sumerians, Egyptians, Canaanites (insofar as Ugaritic material reveals their cosmogonic beliefs) and Akkadians – locate the origins of humankind in their ancestral homelands.²²⁷ The Babylonians' cosmogony represented in *Enūma eliš* takes the Tigris, Euphrates and Babylon as its cradle.²²⁸ The rivers flowed from the right and left eyes respectively of the dismembered Tiamat.²²⁹

History of Herodotus, trans. G.C. Macaulay, 2 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1890) 1:11:44). The ancientness and therefore superiority of Near Eastern religions over Greek beliefs became a common refrain in the first centuries of the new millennium (Dirven, 'Author', 167). The Babylonians themselves had long esteemed antiquity as conferring authority (Hallo, 'Antiquity', 175).

²²⁰ *Against Apion*, trans. William Whiston (www.gutenberg.org/files/2849/2849-h/2849-h.htm; accessed 27/8/18).

²²¹ *Josephus I*, 2–3 1:1. ²²² van Kooten, 'Matthew', 619.

²²³ Kvanvig, *Roots*, 113–15. ²²⁴ Riches, *Mythologies*, 43.

²²⁵ Hendel, 'Genesis', 34; Levine, 'View', 559.

²²⁶ Anderson, 'Eden'. In *Genesis Rabbah* 16:4, Pishon, the first of the prelapsarian rivers (Gen 2:11), is construed as Babylon.

²²⁷ Wilkinson, *Rise*, 27–30; Cross, *Myth*, 36–38; Pongratz-Leisten, 'Ishtar', 136; Lion, 'Cosmogonie'.

²²⁸ Michalowski, 'Presence', 389. ²²⁹ *Enūma eliš* V:55 (*BCM*, 100–01, 192–93).

The Hebrew writers situate it wholly²³⁰ or partly in the Mesopotamian region, notwithstanding the fact that later writings make the temple mount in Jerusalem the site of Adam's altar, renewed by Noah after the Flood.²³¹ Jubilees (8:19), composed in the second century BC, makes Mount Zion the centre of the earth. Notwithstanding it envisages the Garden of Eden as the 'holy of holies'.²³² Furthermore, consonant with Babylonian tradition as reflected by Berossus, Genesis also places the cradle of postdiluvian humanity in Babylonia (Gen 11:2; note also Jub 10:19), with it, together with Assur, becoming part of Shem's patrimony in the Table of the Nations (Gen 10:21–25).²³³

The Bible, then, links both antediluvian and postdiluvian humanity with Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian setting of humanity's *Urheimat* serves, in fact, to introduce Abraham, the central figure in Genesis. Abraham's family, declares Joshua (24:2), dwelt in Mesopotamia *mē'ôlām*, 'from forever'. Using the same phrase, Jeremiah describes Babylon as *gôy mē'ôlām*, 'a people from forever' (Jer 5:15).²³⁴ This conception of Babylon accords with Berossus', itself a reflection of the city's status in *Enûma eliš*.²³⁵ In Jeremiah and Isaiah, the locution 'land of the Chaldeans' *'eres kasdîm* frequently functions as the synonymous parallel of 'Babylon' (for instance, in Jer 50:1; Isa 47:1).²³⁶

John Hill demonstrates that Jeremiah supplies some of the clearest expressions of the notion that metaphysically Israel *qua* Yahweh's people and Babylon are indissolubly bound, that their relationship is one of 'metaphorical identification'.²³⁷ In the oracle against the nations conveyed in Jeremiah 25, Judah and Babylon serve as the beginning and end points of Yahweh's judgment. The use of the *atbash* form of Babylon, *šēšak*, in v. 26 reinforces the sense that in the theological construct

²³⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*, 63–64.

²³¹ Court, *Dictionary*, 82–83; Smith, *Place*, 84–85. One rabbinic tradition elegantly reconciles the Israel–Babylon tension by hybridization: 'R. Oshaiah said in Rab's name: "Adam's trunk came from Babylon, his head from Eretz Israel, his limbs from other lands"' (bSan 38a-b). Jon Levenson (*Resurrection*, 87–88) contends that the Genesis account of the four rivers identifies the second of them, the Gihon, with the eponymous stream in Jerusalem. This identification is not known, or perhaps accepted, by the writer(s) of *Genesis Rabbah* (16:3–4).

²³² Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 51–52.

²³³ De Breucker, 'Berossos', 644; Riches, *Mythologies*, 29.

²³⁴ Stratton, 'Identity', 222–23. On 'ôlām, see Gaster, 'Cosmogony', 702.

²³⁵ *BCM*, 199–201. For Babylon as 'eternal city', see Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar*, 44; for Babylon as the 'ancient city', see *BTT*, 245–46.

²³⁶ Vanderhooft, 'Depictions', 175–77. ²³⁷ *Friend*, 82, 103, 127, 143, 215–16.

presented by this narrative Babylon possesses symbolic and mystical properties.²³⁸ Like Jerusalem/Zion, Babylon stands for more than merely a capital city. She encapsulates an idea that becomes clear only in her juxtaposition with Jerusalem. Together, in Louis Dumont's felicitous phrase, they 'exhaust the universe of discourse'.²³⁹ They are opposites and yet the same. As we shall see, this relationship reveals a dialectic that is axiomatic in the Mesopotamian world view. Deutero-Isaiah in one of his oracles concerned with Babylon juxtaposes her and Yahweh's people, and Marduk and Yahweh in a series of chiasms.²⁴⁰ The Judeans and the Babylonians represent poles that, paradoxically, are indistinguishable: they both practise idolatry;²⁴¹ weariness, defeat and exile affect them equally.

At first blush, Jeremiah provides some of the earliest indicators of the existential bond between Babylon and Israel. The situation is, however, more complex. Several of the passages that support the metaphorical and metaphysical identification (25:1–14; 27:5, 6, 20) are largely absent from the LXX or treated differently there. While the redaction history of Jeremiah is not our concern, it would seem rash to disregard the consensus that the tradition evinced in the LXX (and Qumran manuscripts) concerning this matter antedates the Masoretic text. Thus, the data in Jeremiah are probably post-exilic and, so, contemporary with the composition of Nehemiah or even Daniel.²⁴² Certainly, in Daniel 1–6, Babylonian hegemony is not repudiated; rather it is presented as a facet of Yahweh's divine economy.²⁴³ Noble kings such as Nebuchadnezzar come to acknowledge the supremacy of the God of the Jews; vexatious kings such as Belshazzar are punished.²⁴⁴ Similarly, the Book of Daniel does not denigrate Babylonian learning but, rather, recognizes Yahweh as its ultimate source.²⁴⁵ In their apprehension of divination, Ezekiel and Matthew subscribe to a comparable view, as does Josephus.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117–21. ²³⁹ *Homo* (1980), 241. ²⁴⁰ Franke, *Isaiah*, 72, 97.

²⁴¹ Hill, *Friend*, 112.

²⁴² Tov, 'History', 213–14, 223; Hill, *Friend*, 112–16, 162; Sanders, *Adapa*, 112–13.

²⁴³ Deuteronomy presents non-Israelites' worship of indigenous gods as similarly part of Yahweh's management of the oecumene. Adducing Deut 4:19; 29:25–26; 32:8–9 (cf. Rom 1:20), Michael Floyd ('Evil', 63) observes that 'Yahweh, as creator of the world, has allotted to the nations their various forms of worship'. See also Cooley, 'Religion', 283–84.

²⁴⁴ Humphreys, 'Life-Style', 221.

²⁴⁵ Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar*, 97; Bhayro, *Shemihazah*, 26–27.

What we are beginning to see in these late canonical texts is the emergence of a strand of Jewish theology that contained 'sentiments of affinity' towards Babylon. It seems to have gained considerable currency by the turn of the era.²⁴⁶ In the spectrum of diverse and competing beliefs jostling in contemporaneous Judaism,²⁴⁷ Josephus and the writer of Acts, among others, viewed Babylon not as Judah's nemesis, but as her kindred. In Josephus' conception Babylon's traditions, albeit differently formulated, were traditions that 'Moses' enshrined. Josephus may even imply in *c. Apion* 1.19 that the origins of the Flood episode in the Torah derived from Abraham himself who would have grown up with the story in Ur. From this viewpoint, Babylon is both the progenitor of Israel/Judah and, mystically, her mirror image. In Jeremiah, both lands are condemned to destruction because of their idolatry,²⁴⁸ and, like Israel, Babylon was expected to turn to Israel's God precisely as Daniel 4:25–37 portrays her most famous king doing (cf. Zech 2:15 [E. 2:11]).²⁴⁹

This brings us to another aspect of the relationship between Judah and Babylon: the messianic hopes placed in the descendant of Abraham and David, Zerubbabel, in the early post-exilic period.²⁵⁰ The significance of this figure in the books of Haggai and Zechariah is immense.²⁵¹ He remained a critical element in the messianic narrative, despite fulfilling few if any of the expectations that those prophets placed on him.²⁵² The genealogies of Jesus prepared by Matthew and Luke attest to his continuing significance. Although they diverge in the generation after David, with Matthew claiming Solomon as Christ's forebear while Luke locates his line in Nathan, the lines merge a second time in Zerubbabel's father Salathiel/Shealtiel²⁵³ and Zerubbabel, before bifurcating once more.²⁵⁴ The Gospel genealogies converge again only in Joseph, Mary's husband.²⁵⁵

²⁴⁶ von Rad, *Theology* 2:288; Stratton, 'Identity', 224.

²⁴⁷ Chilton and Neusner, *Judaism*, 10–18; Saldarini, *Community*, 12–13.

²⁴⁸ Hill, *Friend*, 112, 197.

²⁴⁹ Ezekiel (3:5–7) seems to imply that, had he been sent with a prophetic message to the Babylonians rather than to the Jews, his mission would have succeeded (Vanderhooff, 'Ezekiel', 104).

²⁵⁰ Blenkinsopp, *History*, 154–55, 202–3.

²⁵¹ von Rad, *Theology* 2:283–88; Laato, 'Zachariah', 67–68.

²⁵² Driver, *Prophets*, 159. ²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁵⁴ Drimbe, 'Isus', 17. The names of Zerubbabel's sons given in the Davidic genealogy that 1 Chr 3 supplies do not include the Abiud that Matthew lists (Mt 1:13a). That said, in 1 Chr 3:16–21, Shealtiel was not Zerubbabel's father.

²⁵⁵ See the table in Drimbe, 'Isus', 15–16.

The Matthean and Lukan genealogies were both skilfully compiled to prosecute the theological agendas of their authors.²⁵⁶ One may reasonably ask why, for both agendas, Shealtiel and Zerubbabel were considered such essential elements in Christ's lineage that the genealogies were flexed to accommodate them despite the lists' general incompatibility after David. Given that a Hebrew appellation is complete only with its patronymic, the appearance of Shealtiel serves to complete Zerubbabel's name.²⁵⁷ This explains the former's participation in both genealogies but not the latter's.²⁵⁸ Zerubbabel represented for Zechariah and Haggai the promise of the messianic king. In fact, Haggai, who brackets his book with mentions of 'Zerubbabel ben-Shealtiel' (1:1; 2:23),²⁵⁹ prophesies that, in the day that he overthrows kingdoms, Yahweh will make him 'as a seal, for I have chosen you' (2:23). As Yahweh's seal, Zerubbabel assumed the divine identity and authority.²⁶⁰

Seals that were believed to be owned and used personally by the deity to invest their authority in the contents of a document are a feature of Mesopotamian cult that can be found already in the Old Assyrian period.²⁶¹ In *Enūma eliš* IV:121–22, Marduk regains the tablet of destinies and seals it with his seal. Divine seals are a prominent feature of the expression of divine authority exercised through the king in first-millennium BC Babylonia and Assyria.²⁶² Some not only depict the god but also the king revering the god. Such seals are connected with the tablet of destinies. They serve to validate and activate the destinies decreed on the tablet for the divine and human realms.²⁶³

The Mesopotamian material elucidates Hag 2:23. Its imagery suggests that Yahweh will use Zerubbabel to shape destiny;²⁶⁴ Zerubbabel will metaphorically impress the clay of the new dispensation and thereby realize it. He is chosen to be its determinant, with the seal bearing, metaphorically, his royal image together with Yahweh's divine image.

The Mesopotamian data provide a broader context in which to set Driver's exposition of Hag 2:23: 'the Messianic aspirations that attached formerly to the Davidic king are transferred by Haggai to Zerubbabel, who becomes . . . a type of Christ.'²⁶⁵ For the Evangelists, it was obvious that Jesus as the realization of the messianic king would be linked through

²⁵⁶ Merz, 'Star', 489. ²⁵⁷ For example, the citation of Zerubbabel's name in Ezr 3:2, 8.

²⁵⁸ Rose, *Zemah*, 33. ²⁵⁹ Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai*, 67. ²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶¹ Wiseman, 'Treaties', 17–19; Parker, 'Seals', 26.

²⁶² Collon, *Impressions*, 5, 131; Parpola and Watanabe, *Treaties*, 45 6 §§35, 37.

²⁶³ Oates and Oates, *Nimrud*, 203–06; George, 'Sennacherib', 133–34, 138–42.

²⁶⁴ Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai*, 68. ²⁶⁵ *Prophets*, 168–69.

descent to Zerubbabel and fulfil the prophecies attached to him.²⁶⁶ The prophecies are steeped in Babylonian allusions, as the oracle of the seal suggests, and are therefore germane to our enquiry. I explore them below.

A further aspect of Zerubbabel warrants our attention: his name. Haggai underscores its significance by citing it seven times.²⁶⁷ One does not really expect a deliverer figure of impeccable Davidic pedigree to bear the name 'Seed of Babylon'. In Hebrew culture, as in Babylonian and Egyptian (and Greek and Roman), name-giving was a predictive cum performative act: *nomen est omen*.²⁶⁸ Names were believed to encapsulate the nature and determine the destiny of their bearers.²⁶⁹ 'The name is the person, and to give a name to another is to grant him the attributes of which the name speaks.'²⁷⁰ Zerubbabel's grandfather's appellation, Jehoiachin/Jeconiah, is freighted with meaning.²⁷¹ Given this, the significance of Zerubbabel's name merits more attention than it receives in commentaries. Its distinction is underscored by the fact that personal names with the *zaru*-prefix are unattested elsewhere in the Bible. Its affixation to the name of an alien city compounds this distinction.²⁷² In fact, Zerubbabel is a calque on the Akkadian *Zēr-Bābili*,²⁷³ which, by contrast, was a relatively common Babylonian name in the first millennium BC.²⁷⁴

Like Babylonian rulers, authentic 'seeds of Babylon', Zerubbabel is associated with building/restoring a temple:²⁷⁵

This is Yahweh's word to Zerubbabel, declaring, 'Not by might, nor by power, but my spirit/wind', says Yahweh. Who are you, Great Mountain, before Zerubbabel? You will be reduced to a plain. And he shall bring out the capstone with cries of 'Grace, grace be upon it!' . . . Zerubbabel's hands have founded this house, and his hands shall bring it to completion. (Zech 4:6–7, 9a)

The king portrayed as divinely inspired temple-builder is a staple of Mesopotamian royal imagery from the Early Dynastic period. The late third-millennium ruler of Lagaš Gudea builds the temple of his divine patron Ningirsu: '[Gudea] placed on his head the carrying-basket for the house, as if it were a holy crown. He laid the foundation, set the walls on

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 181. ²⁶⁷ Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai*, 67–68.

²⁶⁸ Paschke, 'Nomen', 313–14, 321; Ferda, 'Inscription', 226–27, with references. Tucker Ferda (ibid.) notes that Matthew was particularly interested in the symbolism of names. His interest in the name 'Jesus' is demonstrated by the number of times he cites it: 152.

²⁶⁹ Bottéro, 'Noms', 15, 26; Arnold, 'Daniel', 243–45. ²⁷⁰ BCM, 456.

²⁷¹ Johnstone, *Guilt*, 267–69. ²⁷² See BDB, 279, 281–83. ²⁷³ Brettler, *God*, 47.

²⁷⁴ PNA 3/II, s.v. ²⁷⁵ Laato, 'Zachariah', 57; Winter, 'Touched', 82.

the ground. He marked out a square, aligned the bricks with a string. . . . He built his master's house exactly as he had been told to.²⁷⁶

This general allusion to Mesopotamian imagery is concretized in the locution 'Great Mountain' in the passage, since 'Great Mountain' (Sumerian KUR.GAL) was the stock epithet of the king of Sumer's pantheon, Enlil.²⁷⁷ The climax of *Enūma eliš* (VII:135–49) has Enlil apparently bestowing his name – a name that conveyed divine hegemony – on Marduk, rendering him king of the pantheon. While this is implicit in the epic, a Babylonian commentary on tablet VII states it explicitly.²⁷⁸ Thus the two deities were identified, with Marduk becoming the 'Enlil of the gods'.²⁷⁹

The significance of *Enūma eliš* for Mesopotamian religion and political thought can hardly be overstated.²⁸⁰ The earliest cuneiform copies of the epic date from the early ninth century and the latest possibly from the Parthian period.²⁸¹ Moreover, it was an extraordinarily influential work throughout the ancient Near East. Its influence derived from three factors: first, the political and cultural dominance of Mesopotamia in a formative period for the cultures of the region; second, the performance aspects of the work in the context of the apogee of the Babylonian and Sargonid calendars, the *Akitu* in Nisan; finally, the injunction to disseminate it. These factors combined to ensure that Hebrew writers were familiar with its contents.

The displacement of 'Great Mountain'/Enlil-Marduk by Yahweh and the nexus of building from the plain of Shinar, that is, Babylonia (cf. Gen 10:10; 11:2–9; 14; Dan 1:2),²⁸² to Jerusalem's Temple Mount, mediated through a Jewish ruler whose Babylonian roots are explicit, emphasize Babylon both as antecedent and as mystical mirror image of the revitalized Judah. To highlight the interchangeability further, the next chapter of Zechariah recounts the prophet's seventh night vision: the flying ephah containing the woman designated 'Wickedness'. Traversing the interval between heaven and earth, two women with the wings of storks convey her in the opposite direction, namely, from Jerusalem to the Shinar plain (5:5–11).²⁸³ Their act releases Jerusalem from sin and imposes it on

²⁷⁶ Gudea, Cylinders A and B (ETCSL t.2.1.7:472–833, accessed 4/4/19).

²⁷⁷ Levine, 'Lexicography', 116. ²⁷⁸ *BATC*, 116.

²⁷⁹ *BCM*, 130–33, 456, 458. In the Neo-Assyrian adaptation of Babylonian theology, Aššur, who acquired Marduk's roles, epithets and attributes, is styled KUR.GAL (*RINAP* 3/1:188 23:9b).

²⁸⁰ Frahm, 'Counter-Texts'; by the fourth century BC, some Greeks were familiar with the epic (Brown, *Israel*, 189).

²⁸¹ *BCM*, 3–4, 464. ²⁸² *Genesis Rabbah* 37:4; Day, 'Tower', 143.

²⁸³ Körting, 'Sach', 485.

Babylon.²⁸⁴ In Mesopotamian theology, the space between earth and heaven, that is, the air, is the domain of Enlil.²⁸⁵ Zechariah makes clear that it is Yahweh who is sovereign of this cosmic zone. No less revealing of the God of Israel's displacement of the chief divinity of Mesopotamia, Marduk-Enlil/Great Mountain, is the affirmation that the prophecy concerning Zerubbabel and the temple will be fulfilled by Yahweh's spirit/wind. Many authorities interpret EN.LÍL as 'Lord Wind',²⁸⁶ since LÍL signifies 'wind, air, breath, spirit'.²⁸⁷ Zechariah contends that Yahweh is the true 'Lord Wind': the 'four winds (*rûḥôt*) of heaven'²⁸⁸ that go back and forth' are under the command of 'the Lord of all the earth' (Zech 6:5).²⁸⁹ His wind (*rûah*) propels the women's flight (5:9). Zechariah 4:6–10 portrays Yahweh's *rûah* as the agent of cosmic transformation, energizing Zerubbabel's hands (instrument) to build the house (object). In Neo-Babylonian, a single cuneiform sign could render the values for LÍL 'spirit, wind' and É 'house, temple'.²⁹⁰ If this informed the juxtaposition of the two nouns in the passage, it demonstrates a sophisticated knowledge of contemporary cuneiform on its author's part. Regardless, Yahweh's wind/spirit as the vehicle and expression of his performative word transforms the chaos of devastation into ordered existence. This motif, too, occurs in *Enūma eliš*.²⁹¹

Antti Laato detects other Mesopotamian referents in this pericope.²⁹² Even if some of the parallels that he, other scholars and I adduce prove invalid, Zechariah 4–6 unarguably contains a range of motifs drawn from detailed acquaintance with Babylonian culture. These motifs are then reworked by the writer to realize his theological aims.²⁹³ The focus the book gives to a royal builder, who bears a name calqued on Akkadian, underscores its Mesopotamian heritage. 'Made in Babylon' is Zerubbabel's name and the section's context; 'transformed by Yahweh' is its message. If Wiseman's conjecture be entertained, Zerubbabel was a

²⁸⁴ Redditt, 'Zerubbabel', 254. Following Mathias Delcor ('Vision', 144–45), Marvin Sweeney identifies the 'woman' as Ištar. He avers that the vision represents the removal of her cult from the Jerusalem temple to Babylon (*Prophets*, 620–21).

²⁸⁵ van Binsbergen and Wiggermann, 'Magic', 21.

²⁸⁶ D'yakonov, *Istoriya*, 146; Fincke, 'Treatise', 120; Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 98–99; Arnaud, *Nabuchodonosor*, 130. This interpretation is not universally accepted, however (Leick, *Mesopotamia*, 151–52; Wang, *Metamorphosis*, 6–22);

²⁸⁷ *EDSL*, 225; Katz, 'Wind', 427.

²⁸⁸ S.R. Driver (*Prophets*, 210) translates the phrase thus: 'These are the four winds (or spirits) of heaven.'

²⁸⁹ Brettler, *God*, 40. ²⁹⁰ *MZL*, 658–59:484, 495; Beaulieu, 'Speculations', 207.

²⁹¹ Cassin, *Splendeur*, 36. ²⁹² 'Zachariah', 59–60, 63–68.

²⁹³ Note Redditt, *Haggai*, 75; Petersen, *Haggai*, 267–68.

royal hostage trained in Babylonian learning and lore, yet, like Daniel remaining faithful to Yahwism.²⁹⁴ Indeed, in 1 Esdras (3:1–5:5), Darius rewards Zerubbabel for his peerless wisdom, thus recalling Nebuchadnezzar's treatment of Daniel (Dan 2:47–49). Abraham, who marks the beginning of Yahweh's *Heilsgeschichte* and consequently stands at the head of the Matthean genealogy, is susceptible of precisely this formula, 'made in Babylon, transformed by Yahweh'.²⁹⁵ Abraham was raised in a family who worshipped Mesopotamian gods (Josh 24:2). He abandoned them in favour of Yahweh.

If the 'classical hypothesis' is correct that Zechariah 6:9–15 concerns the coronation of Zerubbabel and not Joshua,²⁹⁶ the Babylon-Judah mirror-image relationship is rendered even more evident by the chiasm of Zerubbabel's establishment as ruler in Jerusalem and his building of Yahweh's house with the woman's establishment in Shinar and her building a house there. The prominence that Zerubbabel enjoys in the New Testament genealogies, further underlined by the Matthean list's emphasis on the exile, indicates that Matthew and Luke employ 'Seed of Babylon' as a heuristic for interpreting Christ, the fulfilment of Yahweh's soteriological design.²⁹⁷

Thanks to their engagement with and perspectives on Mesopotamia, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Daniel are the prophetic books on which we have chiefly focused. In fact, Michael Goulder dubs Jeremiah 'the prophet of the Fall of Babylon', Daniel 'the prophet in Babylon', and Zechariah 'the prophet of the return'.²⁹⁸ Equally concerned with the exile is Deutero-Isaiah. It is striking that all these writers are key to the Synoptists' presentation of Jesus, especially Matthew's.²⁹⁹ While it would be imprudent to rush to conclusions concerning these correspondences, it is evident that some New Testament writers liberally exploited books with an explicit Mesopotamian background to illuminate Jesus' status and role, and that this background was significant for them.

²⁹⁴ In this case, Zerubbabel's preparation to be a sanctuary-building leader called to transform Yahweh's people recalls that of an illustrious predecessor. In the words of Acts 7:22, 'Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians', having been raised in the royal court of the then pre-eminent culture. Like Zerubbabel, he bore a name indicative of his alien birthplace (BDB, s.v.).

²⁹⁵ Oded, 'Father', 392.

²⁹⁶ For example, Redditt, 'Zerubbabel', 256–57; Blenkinsopp, *History*, 207–08. For a balanced discussion of this point, see Coggins, *Haggai*, 14, 47–48.

²⁹⁷ Bauer, *Structure*, 50. ²⁹⁸ *Midrash*, 233.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 445–46, 459; Williamson, 'Concept', 145.