



Slab inscribed with cuneiform (wedge-shaped) writing from the palace of Sargon II in Dur-Sharrukin, Khorsabad. Alabaster, 8th century B.C.E. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

for about a century around the end of the third millennium. Thereafter the Sumerians faded from history, but they bequeathed to the ancient Near East a rich legacy of art and literature.

The second millennium saw the rise of Babylon under **Hammurabi** (eighteenth century B.C.E.), a king most famous for the code of laws that bears his name. Thereafter Babylon's power declined, and it only became dominant again a thousand years later, under Nebuchadnezzar, the conqueror of Jerusalem in the early sixth century B.C.E. Assyria, in northern Mesopotamia, first became powerful in the early second millennium. The Assyrians attained their greatest power, however, first in the Middle Assyrian period in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries and then especially in the Neo-Assyrian period in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E.

Egyptian civilization is almost as old as that of Sumer. A form of writing known as hieroglyphics first appeared around the end of the predynastic period (3100 B.C.E.). Stone buildings appeared shortly thereafter. Many of the great pyramids were constructed during the Old Kingdom (2700–2160). The Middle Kingdom extended from 2033 to 1648. For about a century in the middle of the second millennium (1648–1540), Egypt was ruled by foreigners from Asia known as the Hyksos, who were eventually driven out. In the period of the New Kingdom that followed, Egyptian power was extended all the way to the Euphrates. Egypt ruled over Canaan, the region where Israel would emerge, for much of this period. In the mid-fourteenth century, Pharaoh Amenhotep IV abandoned the traditional worship of the god Amun and devoted himself to the worship of the sun and the solar disk (Aten). He changed his name to **Akhenaten** and moved his capital to Amarna. This period is known as the Amarna period. It is important because of the monotheistic character of Akhenaten's devotion, but also because of a hoard of tablets from this period that give information about the state of affairs in Canaan. These are the **Amarna letters**, which were letters sent to the pharaoh by vassals in Canaan. These letters figure prominently in discussions of the origin of Israel. After Akhenaten's death, his successor, Tutankhamun, departed from Amarna and reverted to the cult of Amun.

In this period, the main challenge to Egyptian power in Asia came from the Hittites, a people who lived in Anatolia, or modern Turkey. During the Amarna period, the Hittites

CHRONOLOGY OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN HISTORY

| Period | Mesopotamia | Egypt |
|---|---|---|
| Early Bronze Age (3200–2200 B.C.E.) | 3200 B.C.E. Sumerians develop first known writing system 2300 B.C.E. Sumerian city-states (Uruk, Lagash, Umma) Sargon of Akkad conquers the Sumerians | From 3100 B.C.E. Hieroglyphic writing 2700–2160 B.C.E. Old Kingdom Age of the Pyramids |
| Middle Bronze Age (2200–1550 B.C.E.) | 18th century B.C.E. Rise of Babylon under Hammurabi Assyrian kingdom becomes an established power | 2160–2106 B.C.E. First Intermediate Period 2033–1648 B.C.E. Middle Kingdom 1648–1540 B.C.E. Second Intermediate Period Hyksos rule in Egypt |
| Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.E.) | 14th century B.C.E. (Canaan: Kingdom at Ugarit) 1124 B.C.E. Elevation of Marduk under Nebuchadnezzar | 1540–1069 B.C.E. New Kingdom Ca. 1350 B.C.E. Amarna Period Akhenaten 1279–1213 B.C.E. Reign of Ramesses II |

established a province in Syria. In the thirteenth century, Ramesses II (1279–1213), who is often thought to be the pharaoh of the exodus, fought an indecisive battle against the Hittites at Qadesh on the Orontes in Syria, but Egypt subsequently lost control of most of Syria and Canaan, although Ramesses later regained it in part.

In between Egypt and Mesopotamia lay the land of **Canaan**, where Israel would carve out its territory along the southern half of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Canaan also extended further north, including modern Lebanon and part of Syria. It was not a political unit, except insofar as it was unified as an Egyptian province. Rather, it was a loose configuration of city-states. Later, in the first millennium, the Canaanites in the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos were known as Phoenicians, from the Greek name for the area.

The biblical texts sometimes use the designation “**Amorite**” as an interchangeable variant for “Canaanite.” The name comes from *Amurru*, the Akkadian expression for the land in the west (relative to Mesopotamia). The Amorites appear to have originated in northern Syria. Whether they were nomadic or settled is disputed. They appear in Akkadian texts around the end of the third millennium, when they exerted pressure on the urban centers of Mesopotamia. Before the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the king had built a wall to keep out the Amorites. Amorites were involved in the destruction of Ur at the beginning