

Imperialism From the Cradle to the Grave

In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid.

Mesopotamia was the cradle of empires, but it was also their grave, as the Persians were to discover. The Persians were a great people, whose simple code of honor—ride a horse, shoot straight, and tell the truth—was admired by their Greek enemies. The conquest of Babylon in 537 B.C. (the occasion of Cyrus's edict), although it sealed Persia's fate as an imperial nation doomed to degenerate and fail, shows the Persians flushed with success but determined to deal justly with their subjects. Although it has been conjectured that the Persians were rewarding the Babylonian Jews for covert assistance in the defeat of Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king, there is no need to posit any special relationship between a tiny and helpless people and the greatest ruler of the day. It was Cyrus's general policy to reverse the oppression inflicted by Babylonian and Assyrian rulers, who had driven defeated enemies into exile and resettled foreigners in the vacated lands. This *divide et impera* strategy would be emulated by later tyrants.

The Assyrians permanently destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Babylonians, after conquering the people of Judah, although they did allow many Jews to remain in their own country, drove skilled workers and much of the elite class into exile and destroyed and looted Solomon's Temple, whose ruins were a potent symbol of cultural genocide. The Assyrians and their Babylonian successors wrote the book on tyranny and empire, setting an example to be imitated by future conquerors, no matter how noble their motives. The Persian Cyrus the Great, for example, understood that leaving people alone to enjoy their own customs and worship their own gods is a better means of securing the loyalty of subjects than the orgy of destruction and bloodshed over which the Assyrian documents so lovingly gloat. But the comparative

decency and humanity of the Persians, glorified not only by Ezra but in Daniel and in Isaiah (who calls Cyrus *messiah*), must have come as relief, a gentle morning after the long nightmare of Assyrian and Babylonian misrule.

The Babylonian Nabonidus was not so much a tyrant as an eccentric. His mother was from Haran (one of Abraham's cities), where she was priestess of the moon-god Sin, and, as king, Nabonidus devoted much of his time to elevating his mother's deity over the gods of the Babylonian pantheon. Many Babylonians thought the old man (already in his 60's when he came to power in 355 B.C.) was insane—claiming victory in battles that had never taken place (as if a general should wear a combat ribbon without ever serving in combat). The powerful priests of Marduk had even stronger opinions. And yet this "archeologist king" not only rebuilt the temple of Sin but restored ancient temples and revived religious and cultural traditions of the Sumerian and Akkadian peoples.

Those traditions can be traced, in written documents, back to the early third millennium B.C., when the peoples of Sumerian city-states—Lagash, Uruk, Larsa, Eridu, Kish, and Ur—were laying the groundwork for the civilization that was later enriched and reinvented by Greeks and Romans, before being passed down to us. Outside of Mesopotamia (and Egypt), other early peoples are only so much bones and rubbish, and their "histories" are told as catalogues of pottery styles and methods of interment. But the Sumerians and Akkadians, and the peoples of Mari and Nineveh who followed them, we know as distinct men, who lived and died, killed and loved, and worshiped their gods, whose deeds are the central subject of their literatures. And if the Sumerians created civilization, their Akkadian successors gave birth to the first empire. In legend, Sargon had a miraculous birth (entrusted, like Moses, to a basket that was put into a river), and he grew up to be the lover of Ishtar. The reality, however, is almost as remarkable. Sargon conquered much of the Middle East, proclaiming himself "king of the four corners of the world," and, after his death,

his name became (like Caesar's) synonymous with empire.

To visualize Sargon's "empire" and the lands ruled by his successors, it is helpful to imagine a map. Babylon was on the Euphrates River, southwest of modern Baghdad (on the Tigris). Upstream from Babylon lay Mari, whose records give us so lively a picture of early Semitic life, as well as Assur and Nineveh, the Assyrian capitals. Downstream on the Euphrates lay Ur, the imperial city of the Sumerians. Ancient Babylon was not far from Agade, the city that commemorates the name of the Akkadians, the Semitic people that intermingled with the Sumerians and eventually, without ever forgetting their debt, took the reins of political and cultural hegemony. In terms of modern cities, this land between the rivers, or Mesopotamia, stretches from Mosul in the north (near ancient Nineveh, the city that Jonah called, so reluctantly, to repentance) and southeastward down the Euphrates to Basra, which lies east of Ur and Eridu.

In other words, *Iraq*, a name Arabs and Persians applied to the southern coast of the region, is what we learned in the fifth grade to call the Fertile Crescent, the Cradle of Civilization. An antiquarian king such as Nabonidus might well exult in the heritage of his land, and both he and his priestess mother appear to have made a collection of antiquities. By Herodotus' time, many of these cities already lay in ruins underneath the blowing sands, and, although there were haphazard excavations and looting expeditions in the 19th century, the land of the black-headed people did not receive systematic investigation until the 20th century, at the hands of such archeologists as Sir Leonard Wooley, who revealed the glories of Ur.

"Ur of the Chaldees," where Abraham was living before he set out for Canaan, is one of the richest archeological sites on the planet, and the artifacts recovered testify to the brilliance of Sumerian civilization. Later rulers, such as the Bible's Nebuchadnezzar (Nebuchadrezzar II of Babylon), left their mark on the city—and their names on inscriptions and bricks. Even the current successor to Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, Saddam Hussein,

has had his name inscribed on bricks at Ur and other ancient sites and said, during the Iran-Iraq War, that he was carrying on the Babylonians' age-old struggle against the Persians. During the Gulf War, according to U.S. sources, Saddam parked two MIGs near the temple of Ur, but, out of respect for antiquity, the U.S. Air Force did not attack them. Locals—and archeologists—tell a different story: Bomb craters pockmark the earth, and the temple itself bears evidence of strafing.

Although much was made of the “smart” bombs used in the Gulf War, most (more than 80 percent) of the bombs dropped on Iraq were stupid bombs deployed in nondiscriminatory clusters of 40 to 60 at a time. According to an article in the *Nation*,

This blind bombing most likely damaged a large percentage of Iraq's 10,000 known archaeological sites. Unfortunately, the UN Security Council will not allow foreign archaeologists into Iraq to fully [*sic*] assess the damage.

Nineveh, the Assyrian capital that remains a symbol of empire and its futility, has also suffered, not from bombing but from looting and vandalism. John Malcolm Russell was one of the archeologists on the Berkeley team that excavated the palace of Sennacherib (who, in the Byron poem, “Came down like a wolf on the fold” to attack Jerusalem). Russell has repeatedly warned collectors and scholars of the recent appearance of looted and vandalized art treasures from Nineveh. The worst part is not the theft itself but the scattering of artifacts and the break-up of cuneiform inscriptions that are now reduced to nonsense.

Russell points out that, since 1847, when Henry Layard discovered the palace, Western governments and art collectors have been looting the treasures of Mesopotamia. Since the creation of the state of Iraq, however, the government has tried to stop the looting, but the Gulf War and U.S.-imposed sanctions have changed all that:

[R]esources have been diverted from nonessential areas such as the preservation of antiquities and heritage at the same time that newly impoverished Iraqis, squeezed between ruinous inflation and critical shortages of basic necessities, have

been forced to seek new sources of subsistence income.

Russell does not implicate Iraqi officials in these thefts. (The fact that the site is within the northern “no-fly” zone makes government surveillance still more difficult.) “Like the wolf on the fold,” he concludes, “the United Nations sanctions against Iraq have finally destroyed Sennacherib's palace, finishing the work begun by the ancient Medes and Babylonians who sacked Nineveh in 612 B.C.”

Good riddance, one might be tempted to say, since the Assyrians were a nasty lot who excelled in the refinements of mayhem and torture—skinning alive was a favorite technique. It is sometimes supposed that the Assyrian chroniclers exaggerate the violence, but the ruins of Ashdod, a Philistine city that tried to reassert its independence from Sargon II, reveal a grisly story. Israeli archeologists (Moshe and Trude Dothan) found dozens of dismembered bodies thrown into a pit, a stack of ten skulls (eight of them with two or three vertebrae attached), as well as the remains of hundreds of children, adolescents, and adults—all in one small area. Egypt, which might once have come to the rescue of her Philistine satellite, had been reduced to a cipher, and the rulers of Ashdod had made the mistake of thinking they could stand up to their world's only remaining superpower.

The Persians came into Assyria as high-minded liberators, but, within a generation or two, they had gone native, imitating the quaint customs of the locals. By the time the Persians attempted the conquest of Greece in the early fifth century, Herodotus, who appreciated the Persians' good qualities, was able to see the Persian Wars as part of the ongoing struggle between Hellenic Europe and barbaric Asia. The Macedonians and Greeks who overthrew the Persians and took over Mesopotamia also began on a high note, but they, too, fell in with local traditions, and the record of the later Seleucid rulers is stained with the blood of tyrants. It was Antiochus Epiphanes' attempt to hellenize the Jews by force that brought on the revolt of the Maccabees.

The Romans, who were invited by the Jews to intervene on their behalf, succeeded the Macedonians, but, although Rome's eastern provinces brought great wealth, the project was a costly adventure that entailed generations of warfare against the Parthians and, later, the revived kingdom of the Persians. Some of the greatest

defeats suffered by the Roman army were in these wars: At Carrhae (Abraham's Haran, where the Babylonians had defeated the Assyrians seven centuries earlier) in 53 B.C., for instance, when Crassus the triumvir was trapped, captured, and executed. (His severed head, sent to the Parthian court, was used as an impromptu stage prop.) The struggle for control of Mesopotamia dragged on for centuries. Marching against the Persians, Emperor Julian met defeat and death in A.D. 363. The Eastern (or Byzantine) emperor Heraclius finally conquered the Persians, but the victory proved very costly. Not only had the empire exhausted its resources in the struggle, but, with Persia out of the way, it had to face the gathering storm of Islamic terrorism—alone.

The Romans and Byzantines were not the last Western peoples to attempt to dominate Mesopotamia. They were followed, 400 years later, by the Crusaders, who came to rescue the Holy Land and remained to become as degenerate as “their paynim foe.” Britain arrived in force after World War I, to ensure a stable and pro-British government and, as time went on, to control the oil fields. Their mischievous creativity in making states by drawing lines on maps has only contributed to the instability of the Middle East. If any of these well-intentioned Western powers thought they could rid the Middle East of violence and tyranny, they should have been quickly disabused.

Enter the not-so-quiet Americans. There is no doubt about our capacity to conquer the current tyranny in charge of the Cradle of Civilization, but at what cost and to what purpose? There are less violent ways to secure the oil that fuels the U.S. economy, and no one should have any illusions—after 5,000 years—about bringing peace and democracy to Babylonia and Assyria. Our grandchildren will not live to see that day, but, should they wish to prowl among the ruins of a civilization that died in their grandparents' time, will they still be able to visit Ur and Nineveh?

Empire—or, rather, the concept of benevolent global hegemony—is one of the gifts of Mesopotamia, but it is a poisoned chalice. The story of the Tower of Babel is the Bible's commentary on the Babylonians' attempt to build a multiethnic state, and the ruins of Nineveh and Babylon and Persepolis should warn the ruggedest imperialist against the danger of walking in the footsteps of Sargon and Sennacherib.

Overman

by Richard Moore

Mankind's intelligence is the earth's curse.
How did he get that out-sized, whopper brain,
who'd swung breezing through trees? Walking upright
did it, and running after animals.
Wearing them out, his brain got overheated,

synapses blew. He needed extra brain
to supply spare parts, keep from going gaga;
and now the damn things won't stop operating.
Look! They've dreamt up civilizations, arts
and sciences, gone blasting to the moon,

made mushroom clouds, generate greenhouse gasses,
and worst of all, write stupid poems about it.
Hateful big brains create a taste for grandeur.
The victim uses *words*, loosens from *things*,
cogitates, dreams up horrors for himself

and everyone. God, is there no escape?
Listen: in Africa, the home of all the
biodiversity that produced *him*,
there's been a new species developing,
men so intelligent, they give up thinking,

tuned to the lost harmonies of the world,
the things they touch, the dishes they are washing,
the feelings in their bones, tastes in their mouths,
the casual engagements of their fingers.
That way, *things* master *them*, discover them.

So more and more they'll thrive, dominate even.
Then what? Campaigns to weed them out? No doubt.
How can such weeding ever be complete?
What if the new men move among us now,
dying for life that blooms for us unnoticed?