Introduction

We are about to see a long line of very different women passing before our eyes. One of them is shuffling along, but another is sashaying around across stage. They are all to be found in the pages of this book, from the lowliest slave to the powerful queen. They are linked primarily by their distinctive biology, by what sociologists call their 'sex' rather than their 'gender' which indicates their place in society. So we have chosen 'Women', not 'Woman' of the Ancient Near East as our title, for their roles are far too diverse to use a singular noun. The richest sources of the Ancient Near East are found in Babylonia, Mesopotamia, so we we will concentrate on them.

Babylon was the most important town of what used to be called the land of Mesopotamia. That name is derived from Greek to signify a land 'between two rivers', those being the Tigris and the Euphrates. This area corresponds to present-day Iraq and the eastern part of Syria. It was here that we find the first evidence of cuneiform script, developed first by the Sumerians, and perpetuated from around 3100 BC until far into the Greek period, which began in 330 BC. Scribes normally used a reed to impress cuneiform signs on tablets of soft clay. We also have royal inscriptions, where the achievements of the ancient kings were recorded for posterity by being chiselled out in the same script on stone monuments. The material adduced in this book relies on that vast body of documents from thousands of years ago. They themselves were written over a period of almost three thousand years. Scholars have published hundreds of thousands of them already, and tens of thousands of others are waiting in museum drawers for the attention of today's specialist researchers. And we know that there are countless more still underground waiting to see the light of day. A recent survey, limited to the published archival texts, estimated that at present we have available for study 246,000 texts from Babylon and Assyria containing some 10,000,000 words. This amounts to twice as many known for ancient Egyptian. Only in ancient Greek has more writing survived, most of it coming from thousands of Greek papyri recovered from the sands of Egypt.[1] As for cuneiform, we have still 100,000 more texts from archives, earlier and written in Sumerian, containing up to three million words. That makes the 305,500 words in the Hebrew Bible sound no more than a handful of mustard seeds.

In ancient Mespotamia the cuneiform script was the standard mode for transmitting the culture of the time, a culture which remained relatively stable. In the

1 M. P. Streck, 'Großes Fach Altorientalistik: Der Umfang des keilschriftlichen Textkorpus', Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin 142 (2010) 35–58.

earliest period, from 3100 to 1000 BC, it wielded great influence in neigbouring countries. In this way script and language played a similar role then to that played by English today. One famous example is how the Epic of Gilgamesh became widely known internationally. Scribes, such as those at Meggido in Israel and at Boghazköy, the capital city of the Hittites in central Turkey, copied out the text on clay tablets in distant scribal centres far removed from one another. In this book we shall cite cuneiform sources from the heartland as well as from the peripheries of Mesopotamia, and show how material from the Bible can sometimes complete the picture we draw. From 1000 BC Aramaic became more important as a language of communication. But what we know from Aramaic is relatively little because Aramaic documents were written on wood, parchment or paper. Unlike clay they are all perishable materials and they have vanished into oblivion.

Sumerian was written in cuneiform script until it more or less died out in 2000 BC. It persisted only as a literary language to record Sumerian traditional culture, as Latin did in Europe in the Middle Ages. From 2000 BC onwards Akkadian was used. This is a Semitic language closely related in form but not in time to Classical Hebrew and Classical Arabic, as well as to Aramaic and Phoenician. Akkadian can be divided into two dialects: Babylonian was spoken in the south of the land and Assyrian was spoken in the north. When writing Akkadian the scribes continued to use the Sumerian cuneiform signs, much as Japanese texts today use Chinese characters. Akkadian eventually slowly died out itself under pressure from Aramaic and Greek. The last vestiges of Sumerian and Akkadian and of the cuneiform script are scholarly tablets written by astronomers or priests towards the end of the era. The light was extinguished; darkness and silence prevailed, until 'in our time', from the middle of the nineteenth century, excavations started in Mesopotamia. They gave us the keys to decipher cuneiform and Assyriology assumed a place in the humanities.

In ancient Mesopotamia there was a social separation of the sexes, just as often happens today. Men were considered very differently from women, and women from men. Virtually all the documents that survive were written by men, and many of them concern only men. But in family archives we discover the names of actual women and learn about when they were married, and widowed, and how they fared in everyday family crises. Marriage is an important theme in this book. In archives from the palaces we find references to queens and princesses surrounded by servants, but women of lower status did ordinary work themselves. There were women from just about every rank and position, and nothing could be done about this. A Sumerian proverb goes:

At the time of the harvest, at the most precious time,
Glean like a slave girl, eat like a queen.
My son, 'Glean like a slave girl, but eat like a queen',
That is how it should be indeed![2]

Sometimes women get to speak for themselves. Very occasionally we find a longish text in which a woman talks about her private life. There is an account by the mother of King Nabonidus about her experiences. But this was written after her death, and the words attributed to her are traditional, so that text is described as a 'pious deception'. A few literary-minded women composed poetry about their lives but these examples are rare. Inscriptions naming women who offered gifts to the gods were short and formal in style and were written by men. We come closer to real life when reading statements made by women during proceedings in court cases. There are some wonderfully fluent letters written by women, but here we must take into account the conventions of a professional letter writer who would have written down neatly what the woman told him. We learn also about women and their attributes from art and iconography.

We broach a sensitive subject which has enjoyed different phases of development in modern times[3]. The first feminist phase in writing women's history restricted itself to collecting and presenting material about women. Until that moment that was a forgotten element of history, indeed an element forgotten from half the history of humanity. The second phase was more explicitly critical, focussing attention on the various ways in which patriarchy has become entrenched in human societies past and present and has informed the basic assumptions of those societies. How had a patriarchal society emerged? Had there not been long ago a tradition of matriarchy embodied in the gentle mother goddess? Should not Assyriologists, dealing with the oldest known strata of history, be able to shed light on these questions? The third phase questioned all our ideas, saying at best they were based on reconstructions, so that even an 'objective' observation of 'facts' was to be doubted. That was a wise insight and marked the beginning of what is an ongoing progress.[4]

The reader will soon discover that everything in this book aims to collect facts, which are of basic importance to feminist historical criticism no matter which of these frameworks inform their work. This is not a wrong approach, for

2 B. Alster, *Wisdom of ancient Sumer* (2005) 79, The Instructions of Šuruppak, 131–133.

3 M. van de Mieroop, 'Gender and Mesopotamian history', chapter 5 in his book *Cuneiform texts and the writing of history* (1999) 138–160.

4 More in S. Svärd, *Women and power in Neo-Assyrian palaces* (2015), the introductory chapters 1–2.

when Els Kloek was interviewed about her book, *Vrouw des huizes. Een cultuurgeschiedenis van de Hollandse huisvrouw* (2009), she said

> Some people think that I do not do enough theorizing. Women's historians are always busy doing that. But I am more interested in the stories. What is nice about the history of women is that you are revealing the hidden side of the past.[5]

Theorising should not precede facts. Even so we need to remember that it is hard to find narratives in ancient Mesopotamian documents, and therefore our ideas of the reality of that period are necessarily limited.

I know of no other such comprehensive treatment of women in Ancient Babylonia and further afield in Mesopotamia. I have presented an outline of what material is available and how it has been interpreted by modern scholars. The sources for the quotations I have presented in the text and relevant scholarly literature for these and other remarks are given in footnotes. A selection of important books for further reading, including monographs or research papers from academic authors can be found at the end of the book. The various chapters of the book were prepared during the time that I was working at the Free University in Amsterdam and in the Netherlands Institute for the Near East in Leiden.

I owe much to my wife Roos Stol-van Wijngaarden who transposed the footnotes from the original edition to this book and helped me out in various ways in preparing the manuscript. Professor Martha T. Roth (Chicago) kindly gave me the permission to reproduce her authorative translation of the Middle Assyrian Laws in Chapter 31. Her translations of other law-books were gratefully adopted.

The Dutch version of this book (2012) was translated into English by Helen Richardson-Hewitt and her husband Professor Mervyn Richardson who have been living in the Netherlands since a long time. This has been a considerable task, far exceeding our expectations. Moreover, when they went through the text, they came across opaque passages, inconsistencies, and even errors. They made thoughtful observations and suggestions which led to many revisions. In the edition of the Assyrian laws (Chapter 31) Mervyn took the initiative of introducing every section by a summary. My gratitude to both of them knows no bounds.

Finally, I thank Dr. John Whitley, Project Editor at Walter de Gruyter, for his good advice.

5 *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, February 2010, p. 22.