INTRODUCTION

The symbol of the city of Aleppo, the ancient northern cultural center in Syria, is the Citadel, a medieval fort with a fancy moated entrance. On the top of that entrance the government in the 1980s displayed in neon lights the governing party’s motto—unity, socialism, and freedom.

In Syria the meanings of these terms have evolved somewhat over time, but everyone would agree that in the popular mind the least clearly defined of the three is freedom. Since Syria was in the past a Soviet client, freedom has not always included economic freedom as it is understood in the United States and Western Europe, though recently that has increasingly become an aspect of it. Freedom probably does imply for Syrians freedom from want and freedom from unwarranted official interference—though practice has not always measured up to ideals, in Syria as elsewhere.

The Citadel at night was illuminated, and it was quite a sight with its neon motto. One can imagine a more historically accurate way of highlighting the structure, but the government had its reasons, and freedom had its sway.

For me this sight underlines the problem of freedom in the modern world. The appeal of freedom obviously extends beyond those countries which regard themselves now as part of the West, those countries that have devised their political traditions from a century and more of liberalism, which one might define as the devotion to freedom.

The study of the history of freedom has become identified with a certain political stance in Western politics, one that celebrates Western understandings of freedom and condemns, for example, Communist understandings that might be closer to that of the Syrian government’s. Students of the history of freedom have tended to search for the roots of Western freedom in the ancient history of
Greece and Rome and have argued that Greece gave birth to a unique set of attitudes that led to and, to a great extent, were identical to our own. This pedigree, however, cannot explain the phenomena of 1989, in which not only the Communist East European world fell apart in a devotion to a more recognizably Western-styled freedom, but also China and Burma, cultures more lightly touched by Western values, saw movements arise that affirmed a popular dedication to freedom.¹

Is this phenomenon to be explained by the diffusion of Western values in centuries of contact? Or is it to be understood as the welling up of autochthonous notions about human freedom? Naturally the answers to these questions in the cases of China and Burma must be given by specialists in the modern history of those areas. And those answers may not come for many years, until, as one hopes, eventually archives are opened and scholarship on sensitive questions can be pursued. In the meantime I believe an important parallel question is posed in ancient history, which, luckily, we are quite free to investigate without modern political interference.

If freedom in the Western sense arose only once, in Classical Greece, it would be part of the so-called Greek miracle, which some scholars see as the unprecedented development of art, philosophy, drama, and poetry leading more or less directly to us. Martin Bernal’s work seeking the background to these developments in Egypt and Western Asia does not call into question the existence of the miracle; it merely changes the accepted pedigree, and Classicists seem open to this adjustment, even though they mostly reject the

¹ As an example of Greek-centeredness in such studies, see Susan Ford Wiltshire, *Greece and Rome and the Bill of Rights*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 9, who writes, “The earliest origins of the Bill of Rights lie in Classical Athens, for it was the ancient Greeks who invented the revolutionary idea that human beings are capable of governing themselves through laws of their own making.” She does not examine the Ancient Near East at all.

By focusing on Syria I do not mean to imply that Turkey or Saudi Arabia, or the United States, always manage to adhere to international standards in fostering freedom.
details of Bernal’s claims about the authenticity of the ancient Greek understanding of the cultural borrowings.²

Material from ancient Mesopotamia, ancient southern Iraq, allows one to suggest something more radical, that the Greek understanding of freedom was not a unique and miraculous phenomenon, but one that can be paralleled elsewhere. I am not prepared to survey every known culture and language group, nor do I think that such an effort would be helpful. Rather I wish to pursue a test case in some detail because a great deal is known about Mesopotamia.

The material we have from Mesopotamia that bears on the problem is of two sorts. On the one hand is an abundant record of state-sponsored labor, perhaps usually a tax on labor that we identify with the corvée, the obligation to work several days a month on government-organized projects.³ In that record flight from work is recorded, and this appears to indicate that the state system was not able to retain all the laborers it wanted to control. Inadvertently the governmental scribes recorded their own failure, but they also showed that some illiterate individuals, called upon to participate in the state-labor system, resisted at least by running away.

Modern historians nowadays seek to give voice to the previously voiceless as they try to uncover women’s history and the histories of minority groups in America and elsewhere. The flight of Mesopotamian workers proves to be a fruitful topic of investigation that edges us toward an understanding of a devotion to freedom among the illiterate and oppressed.

The best evidence comes from the Ur III period (2112 to 2004 B.C.E.), but there is important information from other periods too.

---

² Martin Bernal, Black Athena, 1, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), and the symposium in Arethusa 1989. I have benefitted from discussions on Bernal’s attitudes with my colleague Prof. Jamil Ragep. Mario Liverani, “The Bathwater and the Baby,” in Black Athena Revisited, edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy M. Rogers, 421-427, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), points out also that for Bernal the Greek Miracle is not incompatible with Ex Oriente Lux, both of which are Eurocentric.

³ It is of interest that English now uses a French word for this, from Latin corrogère “to requisition”; see Oxford English Dictionary C: 1028.
INTRODUCTION

One aspect of these texts must be stressed at the outset: they were composed by bureaucrats for bureaucrats. They have no propaganda value and are preserved only to make sure that the rations for the absent workers were properly allocated, or not allocated. The goal was inventory control, not condemnation or restoration of escapees, though both of these matters were probably on the minds of the scribes.

The second sort of Mesopotamian material is that deriving from kings' propaganda machines and found usually in the form of royal inscriptions. These obviously were composed with a view to influencing public opinion, though it remains a question how widely they really were diffused, and who would have heard them read, or if anyone did. Perhaps in some periods they constituted merely a touchstone of the party line with which government supporters would be expected to be familiar. And yet as such they are valuable windows onto the intellectual landscape of some of the Mesopotamian elite.

These royal inscriptions speak of freedom as something established by kings for the general benefit of their subjects. As we shall see, what exactly this means is a vexed question that is not easily answered. But at very least we can see that some Mesopotamians were concerned with words that can be translated as freedom.

We have then information from two sorts of texts and not always from the same periods of Mesopotamian cultural life. There was writing in Mesopotamia as early as 3100 B.C.E., and the last datable text comes from 74 of our era. Over this vast time conditions and attitudes changed, and ideas about freedom were probably not everywhere uniform. Such stability is unlikely from what we know of how societies change.

One aspect of Mesopotamian culture that ought to be emphasized at the outset and that will make our task more difficult and the results more ambiguous than we might like is that Mesopotamians disliked generalizing. Why this should be is not known, but the contrast to the Greeks is obvious. The great example of the Mesopotamians' not generalizing is their mastery of the so-called Pythagorean theorem, that the square of the sides of a right triangle is the same as the square
of its hypotenuse. Mesopotamian scribes knew that fact in the Old Babylonian period, a millennium before Pythagoras. But they did not state it as I have just done, as a general rule. Instead they demonstrated through numerous examples of individual instances how it worked. This habit of mind may seem alien, but it leads directly to the science of making lists of phenomena so typical of Mesopotamian thinking and akin to our desire for encyclopedias of each area of endeavor. The lists of omens were probably the most popular among Mesopotamian scribes themselves, but the law "codes" and the lexical texts too must be understood as lists of examples from which the students might draw conclusions. It may be that in the Mesopotamian oral tradition there was a custom of generalization in order to make short-cuts for the students, but it may also be that the lists were thought of as courses in various aspects of knowledge, and the strong students would not expect any handy, and necessarily superficial, generalization.\(^4\)

Like the Greeks, our own tendency is to attempt to verbalize regularities. Bruno Snell in a famous example argued that the power of Greek thought derived to a large extent from their ability to put a definite article in front of anything, and thus to have a noun about which they could generalize, for example το ὄν "the (phenomenon of) being."\(^5\) We may now doubt if grammar alone defines such a cultural style, but we are the heirs of Herodotus, who sought to generalize about everything that he saw. As we attempt to understand Mesopotamian sources, we must also forego the desire for essays


from personal experience such as Herodotus’ fellows sometimes gave us. The problems with such Greek texts are as acute as those with the Mesopotamian texts, but different, since in the Greek mode we have lots of generalizations but no easy way to check their veracity. And in the Mesopotamian we have lots of data but no easy way to see how they may have been interpreted by the culture, or even by its literate members.

Even within the Western tradition, of course, there may be traditions that approach the Mesopotamian more than the contemporary American does in its approach to generalization. I remember being told while studying Russian that one should expect that the mode of argument would be that Soviet thinkers would tend to pile up many relevant examples and only at the end of an essay would they state the conclusion to which they had been arguing all along. To the American that approach seemed like stacking the deck without explaining where one was going. We are frequently too far removed from Mesopotamian issues to see where the argument was going, if it was going in one direction. And yet the Mesopotamians were sometimes lavish with their individual instances, and we generalizers will want to spin a tale from them as we can.

In the course of this study we will also be using the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, and though it is more familiar to us than Mesopotamian texts, we ought to bear in mind one aspect of it that will be especially important for our understanding of escaping laborers and attitudes toward freedom. The Mesopotamian texts come for the most part from royal offices and reflect the ideas of the rulers and the ruling classes. Rarely do we hear of rebellion or disruption that would reflect ill on those classes. The exception is running away since there were economic implications to the absence of workers, and responsibility had to be allotted, not for letting the workers escape but for the food they would have consumed had they been on the job as they should have been. The Bible, in contrast, comes mostly from people who did not work for kings but still had access to literacy. To an extent this difference may derive from the fact that the Bible was written on ephemeral things, mostly parchment, and not on long-lasting clay tablets or other permanent media.
INTRODUCTION

In Mesopotamia too it is possible that there was a literature of dissent that some scribes produced on perishable materials. But in Israel this literature became something treasured in dissident groups, and because of the fall of the Israelite polities, those groups were the only ones who survived antiquity. Their written traditions come down to us because they were copied onto other perishable material when they began to fall apart. This means that the Hebrew Bible approach to problems of runaways is likely to be more sympathetic and nuanced than the Mesopotamian sources.

These differences in approach between the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamian texts ought not to force us to take sides and declare the superiority of the Bible in humaneness or some other aspect that we might admire now. Inevitably we are going to feel more kinship for the Hebrew Bible view just because it has been part of our own culture. But rather we must seek to evaluate evidence from each culture on its own merits, realizing in Israel that there must have been a relatively cogent royal or ruling class view as well as other dissident views that did not make it into the written tradition that has come down to us. We must realize too that Mesopotamia may have known various dissident traditions, most probably usually oral, which would have had a very different take on the matters we will discuss than the royally sponsored texts. Neither culture was monolithic, and taking them together may give us a richness of understanding of the phenomena which otherwise would be unavailable; still, it is important not to assume that we can read in Israel’s record exactly what lower-class Mesopotamians thought or that we can read in Mesopotamia’s the exact ideas of Israel’s rulers.

My epigraph from Burckhardt raises questions that ought to remain open, but Burckhardt, for all his subtlety, assumed a monolithic Oriental despotism we can no longer claim to find in the texts. He assumed that persons more or less like the nineteenth-century individuals he knew were occasionally attempting to assert them-

---

selves against states that resembled those he knew. Now we are
inclined to keep open the definitions of both of these concepts, the
individual and the state. In studying ideas about freedom we may be
directly addressing that relationship between the individual and the
state or community and seeing how the individual did sometimes
assert herself and how the state sometimes asserted itself and made its
representatives act according to policy. We may not succeed at a
redefinition of either individual or state, but perhaps we will alert
others to the problems of definitions in the ancient and the modern
worlds. There is no question but that Greek-centered historians are
still happy to endorse Burckhardt’s idea, that the states arising in the
Ancient Near East sought to suppress the freedom of the individual.
But is this view tenable? We shall see.

Much of what we discuss here is well known to students of the
Ancient Near East, although they have not tried to tease out the
implications of it for the history of freedom. Still, I believe that they
will see avenues for further research opened up by the questions I
pose, and they may see their work in a different light as a result of
this study. I have heard it said that some of us choose these byways
of scholarship because we do not want to confront issues that might
be relevant to current policies, and certainly there is much important
work to be done that has less obvious modern implications. It
appears, for example, that in some periods of Mesopotamian history
only a bit more than 50% of the texts that probably were produced
have been found and studied.7 And there probably are more texts in
the Mesopotamian languages that no one has read since they were
written than for any other literature except Arabic. Much basic work
remains to be done, but we cannot imagine, in a time of contraction
of support for pure scholarship in the Humanities and even in the
Sciences, that an informed public will continue to support our work
unless we step forward from time to time to put it in a broad and
accessible context.

7 See D. Snell, Ledgers and Prices, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 103-
108.
My purpose in ferreting out evidence about attitudes toward freedom is not to write a political history of a key term or to abstract an essence of Mesopotamian or Israelite attitudes. Rather I seek to fulfill three goals:

First, to see exactly how eluding authority worked on the ground, including who was involved and what the bureaucratic response to it was;

Second, to see what the elite understandings of freedom and escape were;

And third, to see how the escapee experience might have affected the elite understanding, especially in the first millennium B.C.E.

In the first chapter we will survey earlier views of the history of freedom and then turn to the vocabulary of freedom in the languages of the Ancient Near East. In the second chapter we will explore flight in Mesopotamia, highlighting suggestive texts. Then in the third chapter we will study the ideology of freedom among elites, and we will try in the fourth chapter to examine flight in literature and narrative. The fifth chapter turns to Israel’s interesting and sometimes abnormal approach to the question of freedom. In the final chapter we shall return to the legacy of freedom in Western culture and the possibility that the kernels of freedom are very widespread.

These goals may be difficult to achieve, and even if we achieve them, some may ask why we bothered. Those comfortable with the story of the Greek miracle would prefer not to know that it may be questioned. And those who doubt it may have easier fields to plough in other disciplines. But I believe the questions we raise here are central to how the West behaves in the modern world and the assumptions we Westerners bring to it. Are we the bearers of a uniquely humane culture that has much to teach the other cultures? Certainly in technology we have much to teach. But other great traditions question our monopoly on virtue, and I want to argue here that they are probably justified in so doing when it comes to the understanding of freedom.