Literature and poetry, ancient Near East

BENJAMIN R. FOSTER

Literature has two meanings when applied to the writings known today from the ancient Near East. It can mean any written expression, so can include inscriptions, letters, scholarly treatises, or epics, or, as used here, literature can be restricted to prose and poetry of consciously artful form and content, so only a small percentage of the written traditions of ancient western Asia (Foster 2007: 2–3; Beckman 2009: 225). Sumerian literature includes epics, myths, wisdom compositions, laments, hymns, literary letters, and other genres, originating in the mid-third millennium BCE and still studied as late as the Hellenistic period, long after Sumerian had become a cultural, rather than a living language (anthology in Black et al. 2004; survey in Rubio 2009). The origins and development of this, the world’s oldest literary tradition, remain a mystery. It was written in the CUNEIFORM script on clay tablets. Some of the best-known works of Sumerian literature are epics of ancient kings (Vanstiphout 2003), proverbs and wisdom (Alster 2005), and love poetry (Sefati 1998).

Akkadian literature includes epics, myths, wisdom compositions, hymns, stories, love poetry, magic spells, and other genres, originating in the late third millennium BCE and still understood as late as the Parthian or Roman periods (anthology in Foster 2005; survey in Foster 2009). The best-known work is the Epic of Gilgamesh (George 2003), the story of a king who sought to avoid dying. Other famous works of Akkadian literature include the creation epic Enuma Elish and the Babylonian story of the flood, Atrahasis.

Egyptian literature is attested from the late third millennium BCE through the Hellenistic period in various stages and styles of the long-lived Egyptian language (survey in Hollis 2009; anthologies in Lichtheim 1973–80; Foster 1995; Simpson 2003). Like Sumerian and Akkadian, Egyptian was written with a complex writing system that took longer to master than the alphabetic systems used for Hebrew and Aramaic. Unlike Akkadian, Egyptian was not widely diffused in the Late Bronze Age, and there is no evidence for it being studied outside of Egypt itself. Major works of Egyptian literature included instructions, that is, sayings or teachings of former rulers, viziers, or wise men of the past; dialogues and laments, hymns and prayers, myths, songs, and love songs, as well as numerous magic spells and mortuary books. Egypt had no written epics, but the story was cultivated (Parkinson 1997), of which some of the best known are the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, the Story of Sinuhe, and the Tale of the Doomed Prince. Already in the third millennium BCE the art of obituary writing was cultivated in the form of biographies and autobiographies composed for tombs. Royal inscriptions of all periods could be composed in a literary style.

“Hittite” refers to an Indo-European language or a multilingual written culture of Anatolia of the Middle and Late Bronze Age (survey in Beckman 2009; anthologies in Hallo 1997: 147–235; Hoffner 1998; Singer 2002). Hittite literature had a highly developed tradition of historical narrative, in the form of chronicles, deeds of specific kings, and imaginative accounts of the remote past. Hittite mythological narratives included both Anatolian tradition, such as the Telipinu Myth, and borrowings from Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Hurrians. No native Hittite epic is known, but Akkadian epics were studied and copied. Wisdom and instructions included both Anatolian and Mesopotamian compositions as well. Hittite prayers, composed in the name of reigning kings, could be focused on specific complaints rather than general pleas for divine assistance.

Canaanite or Northwest Semitic is a wider concept than Akkadian or Sumerian, but for the various languages subsumed under this rubric comparatively little in the way of artful writing survives. From the Late Bronze Age
city of UGARIT, on the Syrian coast, myths, epics, prayers, and magic spells written in the local language are known (survey in Pitard 2009; anthology in Hallo 1997: 239–375).

A few spells and literary works discovered at ancient EBLA in Syria, dating to the last third of the third millennium BCE, have sometimes been considered forerunners to Canaanite or North-west Semitic. In fact, some of these compositions originated elsewhere, in northern Mesopotamia or Mari on the mid-Euphrates, so they must be considered foreign imports. The longest of these is a prose narrative evidently intended to demonstrate how a successful ruler must depend on his wits and resourcefulness (Fronzaroli 2003).

Reading the Hebrew Bible as a composite literature rather than as a unified scripture identifies genres such as historical narrative, myth, poetry, wisdom and proverbs, laments, stories, love songs, and prophecy. Each of these, including all or part of the traditional biblical books, has been compared to the same genres in other ancient Near Eastern languages (Hallo 1997); for instance, the creation story of Genesis with other Near Eastern creation stories, the Book of Job with other Near Eastern righteous-sufferer compositions, or the Prophets with prophecy and oracles known in Akkadian. This need not indicate literary dependency, only that Israelite culture developed in a specific historical context and was influenced by the major civilizations of Iron Age western Asia.

Although Aramaic was the most widely understood language in the Near East from the early first millennium BCE to the Muslim conquest, only a few works of literature have survived (survey in Salvesen 1998). These include narratives set in Babylonian or Assyrian royal courts, such as the story and sayings of AHIQAR, an Assyrian sage, the Tale of the Two Brothers, and the Book of Tobit; magic spells; portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls; and, from Late Antiquity, the Babylonian Talmud and Christian Syriac wisdom, hymnography, philosophy, and hagiography.

SEE ALSO: Akkadian language; Atrahasis; Bible, Hebrew; Enuma Elish; Erra; Gilgamesh, Epic of; Hittite, Hittites; Semitic languages; Sumerian language; Tobit, Book of; Wisdom literature, ancient Near East.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


