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EDUCATION IN ANCIENT BABYLONIA

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TO the commercial spirit the civilization of the world owes a very great deal. Common honesty in truth telling, and the growth of the democratic idea are ascribed to it, and for the latter one may compare the growth of socialism in commercial Germany with the doctrines held by the military emperor. Certainly the equality and freedom of woman, and enthusiasm for popular education are both the offspring of thorough-going commercialism.

In a land where there is no spirit of commerce, or where it is but feebly developed, if the nation be not altogether given over to militarism, there may be from time to time schools, which make a study of great themes, and evolve important doctrines. These, however, while they immeasurably enrich the intellectual life of the world, do little or nothing for the cause of popular education or help to bring its blessings within the reach of the multitude, and thus give them an opportunity for betterment. In fact such schools have generally looked down upon the vulgar herd, frequently even regarding the lower classes as belonging to a distinct and inferior order. Amongst a people thoroughly commercial, the good things of life become more widely disseminated, or at least come within the compass of a greater number. Still, I must not be understood as holding up the commercial life as the ideal one for a people. It has its limitations, and its own inherent evils, neither minor nor few, which must always be held in check by other powers. These checks the very education which commerce sought to make her handmaid, in large measure supplies. It must also always be remembered that the greatest thoughts of man have not come to the birth in the midst of the hustle and bustle of commerce, but rather as far removed from it as possible.

But if popular education be a result of commercialism the latter is itself the product of certain conditions. If the causes be from within, one of them may be a national attitude, but the most important certainly is a country not too lavish to her children. This condition Babylonia supplied. Naturally unproductive, being given up to marsh and desert, it was only by strenuous and persistent labor in digging canals and building dykes that the land was made fertile. To keep it so was a severe struggle. Private letters of the 22nd century B.C. show how hard the lot of the farmer was. Because of this struggle for existence the "man with the hoe" very early began to try to add to his income by the easier method of trade. With this began the career of Babylonia as a commercial nation, and therewith began our civilization.

But in commerce training is of paramount importance, and this training is in a large measure supplied by the ability to read and write, and the mental training involved. A man with an education can "make his way in the world" is almost an axiom among money making people, so in Babylonia learning was held in very high esteem, and in time a system was developed by which all the children of the higher and middle classes received at least a "good common school education." Among the upper classes illiteracy seems to have been rare, and it is most probable that the lower classes and slaves shared very largely in the blessings of the schools.

The beginnings of education in the Euphrates Valley are lost in antiquity. Already in the time of Sargon (3800 B.C.) there are traces of a postal system between certain of the cities; at Tello, De Sarzec found a library of about 32,000 tablets, all in order as they had been catalogued and shelved probably somewhere about 2700 B.C.; in the time of Hammurabi (2250 B.C.) there is a postal system in full operation and by means of it great numbers of letters, public and private, on matters of business or friendship, are continually passing up and down the land; in the fourteenth century B.C., the time of the Tel-el-Amarna letters, we see the system extended to Western Asia, and letters in the Babylonian style and generally in the Babylonian language, passing freely and in considerable numbers between Babylonia, Syria and Egypt. All these evidences, not only that there were people able to read and to write, but that this privilege was enjoyed by great numbers in the community.

The children were sent young to school. The day began early, as we learn from a copy-book headline which says "He who would excel in the school of the scribes must rise like the dawn." The process of education was doubtless much assisted by the frequent application of corporal punishment. The Egyptians had a proverb, "The ears of a boy are on his back," and we may be certain that Babylonians held the same doctrine, or should we rather say, heresy. Women being in business the equals of men, they required education as well as the boys. The signatures of women occur frequently on business tablets, showing that the fact of being a woman did not necessitate illiteracy. There are also many letters from women and to women. One of the Tel-el-Amarna letters is from a woman, presumably written by herself, to King Akhenaten of Egypt. Whether there was co-education we cannot say. Assurbanipal tells that in school he was taught marksmanship and other athletic exercises besides the ordinary subjects. But