

Preface

This book takes a different approach to writing about the ancient Near East than is usually found in works intended for general readers or students. It does not concentrate on a single culture and does not limit its chronological scope. Instead it uses sources from the archives of most of the peoples who inhabited the area for millennia before the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century. It aims to offer an anthology of human activities, concerns, and thoughts as reflected both in official political and religious documents and in the records of everyday life. In doing so, it seeks to establish a link between ourselves and our ancestors of five thousand years ago, who lived in Egypt, the Palestinian corridor, central Anatolia (in present-day Turkey), and Mesopotamia (today the region of Iraq).

Western religious heritage is the living reminder of our connection to the ancient Near East. Biblical texts bring us intimately into the world of our religious origins. But no living tradition links us to the rest of the peoples who inhabited the territories of the Near East. Although we have collectively hundreds of thousands of records from numbers of ancient Near Eastern civilizations, the too usual academic view is that since these civilizations are “dead”—and therefore off the main paths of human development—the people who daily struggled with their lives in antiquity have little in common with us. But where there are records there *is* life. And it is selected samples of this life that I present here as short essays, scenes, and sketches.

Readers may be confused that the terms *Near East* and *Middle East* refer to the same general area. *Near East* is preferred by historians and other scholars of antiquity in that it alludes to civilizations that occupied

the Arabian Peninsula and its immediately bordering areas—Egypt, Anatolia, and western Iran. *Middle East* today includes North African states and areas as far east as central Asia. It is a term normally used by contemporary political and social analysts and media representatives. The archaeologist tends to work in the Near East. The news commentator reports from the Middle East. They may both, however, meet for lunch in the same restaurant in Cairo or Beirut.