In Mesopotamia, as in Egypt, our knowledge of ancient history has come through two distinct, though related, lines of research. One has been excavation of the great mounds which covered ancient cities. This includes study of their architecture, statuary, pottery, implements, etc. The other has been the decipherment of the language and the study of the writing on the excavated tablets and monuments.[3]

In Egypt the great mass of writing was done on papyrus, a material about as durable as our best modern paper. Except for a comparatively small number of papyri buried mainly in tombs, the unimportant, day-to-day writings of ancient Egypt have perished. In Mesopotamia no such convenient writing material was available. A substitute was found in clay tablets, marked with wedge-shaped characters which we call "cuneiform."[4] Although much less convenient than papyrus, these tablets have the merit of great durability.

The overwhelming mass of the writing of ancient Mesopotamia has been preserved in the ruins of its cities. It includes contracts and ephemeral writings of individuals, as well as important state documents. Several hundred thousand of these tablets have been excavated and brought to museums. From them it is possible to secure a far more precise knowledge of the culture and life of ancient Mesopotamia than can be gained from Egyptian writing for many aspects of the life of ancient Egypt. The only gap in this knowledge is the fact that in every age many of the most common features of daily life are so well known that no one takes the trouble to write about them. For the filling of this lack ancient pictures, bas-reliefs, and statues often prove very helpful.

[3]A fascinating account of the early steps of both phases of Mesopotamian discovery is contained in R. W. Rogers, *A History of Babylonia and Assyria*, (New York: 1900), Vol. I.

[4]For sample of a clay tablet with cuneiform writing see Fig. 21.



The cuneiform writing is a very complicated system. It was used to write many different languages. Its inventors were the Sumerians, a people speaking a language neither Semitic nor Indo-European. They controlled Mesopotamia during the major part of the third millennium B. C. Their language was taken over and adapted by the speakers of a Semitic language now generally called Akkadian,** which was spoken by the later Assyrians and Babylonians. This language became the *lingua franca* of ancient diplomacy, and clay tablets inscribed with letters in Akkadian were used for correspondence even between Pharaohs of Egypt and kings of cities in Palestine, although neither party actually spoke it. Several hundred such letters were found at El-Amarna in Egypt, and provide a source of information regarding early Palestine which is still far from exhausted. As in the case of all letters, much is taken for granted in them, and consequently any new information relating to the period from which they come may clear up difficult points in their interpretation, and may, in its turn, be explained by statements contained in them.

Thus not only is the material found in Mesopotamia itself often of great value in connection with Bible study, but much material found elsewhere is intelligible because of the knowledge of cuneiform gained from Mesopotamia. In the study of the contacts of Mesopotamia with the Bible there is much that is obvious, but still more that involves a great deal of careful study before it can be fully understood. For the Bible student there is no field of archaeological study which is more fruitful than that derived from Mesopotamia.

### *Palestine and Syria*

The third region is Palestine and Syria. It is in Palestine that the majority of the events recorded in the Bible actually

**Sometimes spelled "Accadian."