

# On the Bible and the Ancient Near East

## Reconnecting with the Ancient World

Ancient Near Eastern inscriptions, monuments, and artifacts (with the exception of the Egyptian pyramids), and the knowledge of the ancient cultures that they revealed, were largely unknown to Western culture throughout the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. At the close of the 19th c. as the Ottoman empire was breathing its last, European powers posted many missions to the Middle East that included archeologists. At first, essentially they were looters who took back monuments, many with hieroglyphics and cuneiform writings. When these scripts were deciphered in the mid-19th c., the inscriptions told an eager public about the world in which Israel was formed.

## Mesopotamia

From Nineveh (present day Mosul) in Assyria, a cavalcade of rulers mentioned in the Bible—among them Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Ashurbanipal—took flesh to validate elements of the biblical accounts of the Assyrian devastation of Israel and Judah. Yet nothing was as sensational as the presentation George Smith made to the British Society of Biblical Archaeology on December 3, 1872. Reading from a Nineveh tablet, Smith revealed how a Mesopotamian hero (Utnapishtim, then read as Hasisadra for Atrahasis) survived a flood the gods had sent to destroy humanity. The news stunned: Could the account of God's command to Noah have been cribbed from Babylonian antecedents?

There were other jolts: abandoned as a baby, Sargon of Agade was shown (in 1870) to have survived in a reed basket, eventually to earn divine favor. The god Marduk (in some versions Assur) conquered Tiamat (possibly cognate to Gen. *tehom*, “the deep”) and rearranged its corpse in terms reminiscent of the

creation in Gen. ch 1 (1876). From Susa (1905) came Hammurabi of Babylon's imposing law code stela that questioned the distinctiveness of biblical divine legislation. With all these antecedents to biblical lore, the hot topic around the First World War was which to credit, the Bible or Babylon, for stimulating our culture? Some of the debate (pressed by the German Friedrich Delitzsch, and labeled *Babel und Bibel* in contemporaneous journalism) degenerated into anti-Semitic diatribes; but it did stimulate scholarship (e.g., Form Criticism, best associated with Hermann Gunkel) that interpreted biblical traditions, though comparison with Near Eastern, especially Mesopotamian, lore. The aim was to illuminate the contexts for the production, application, adaptation, and diffusion of themes and motifs that excited the mind in antiquity. In this enterprise, the focus came to be less on when, where and by whom Hebraic traditions were created (the focus of the earlier Documentary Hypothesis), but on how, why, and under which circumstances ideas commonly shared in antiquity came to have their particular inflection among the Hebrews. In effect, the Bible had come to be one more source from the ancient Near East, and a latecomer at that.

An industry soon came to the fore in the late 19th and early 20th c. in which specialized compilations “paralleled” the Bible, book by book, through excerpts from mostly cuneiform documents. In this way, a treasure trove of ancient material came to the attention of a wider public, with mythological (*Enuma Elish*, *Atrahasis*), epic (*Gilgamesh*), cultic (hymns and rituals), wisdom, juridical, annalistic, and divinatory contents. These publications are precursors to more recent reference sets such as J. B. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed., 1969) and W. W. Hallo

and K. L. Younger, *The Context of Scriptures* (3 vols., 1997–2003). Here, however, translated texts tend to be complete rather than extracts and are arranged by genre rather than following the sequence of biblical books. In these reference works, too, selections come from a broad horizon, including lands and subjects only remotely associated with the Bible. Among the translated sources are those from ancient Egypt, which outside of Mesopotamia was the other locus of scholarly attention.

**Egypt**

Given its accessible monumental remains (pyramids, temples, tombs, and mummies), Egypt has enticed the wider public without being linked to the Bible. Still, at least since Josephus (1st c. CE), there has always been interest in finding Egyptian sources to confirm biblical episodes: Had Joseph not governed Egypt, second only to Pharaoh? Did Israel not live in bondage there for centuries? Had God not deployed “signs and wonders” when confounding Pharaoh? Did Solomon not marry an Egyptian princess? Since the decipherment of hieroglyphics in the early 19th c., the brunt of biblical focus on Egypt has been on the Late Bronze Age, specifically from the Hyksos through the 21st Dynasty (ca. 1630 to 1100). Israel is thought to enter (exodus) and leave (exodus) Egypt during that interval. In the absence of credible Egyptian testimony, establishing a date and condition for the exodus (however conceived) has required the juggling of a broad array of circumstantial evidence, from many sources, and not always fully compatible. Not surprisingly, proposals have a limited shelf-life or they appeal to narrow circles. Totally unexpected was the recovery (since the 1890s) of Aramaic archives affirming a 5th c. Jewish (mercenary) presence in Elephantine (near Aswan), with contracts for marriage (earliest in attestation), syncretistic worship (blessings by YHVH and other gods), and references to the Passover.

By contrast to evasive historical confirmations, Egypt’s literature has contributed notable conjunctions with biblical equivalents. Its sun-splashed hymn to the god Aten (Amarna period, 14th c.) has reminded many of the great Ps. 104 (see Ps. 104 n.); but with this linkage came much speculation on an Amarna period birthplace for monotheism as well as sensationalizing rewrites of the early years of Moses. Egypt’s courtly love lyrics (13th c.) have illumined the study of the Song of Songs, in particular accenting courtly setting and erotic desire. Egypt’s rich display of wisdom treatises (esp. that of Amenemope) has nicely enhanced understanding of Prov. and the *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) urgings of the Harper’s Songs that are often cited along those of Eccl. Many episodes in Egypt’s arsenal of delightful tales are brought into comparison with those in the Bible, none as frequently as the attempted seduction of an innocent youth by a married woman (“The Two Brothers”), the life that Sinuhe created for himself in Middle Bronze Canaan, or the neat magician’s trick of dividing waters to reveal dry land (see the “Westcar Papyrus”). In addition, the 14th c. Amarna Letters have offered helpful background for understanding the early history of Israel, including the origin of the name “Hebrew,” connected by many to the Hapirus/Habirus that were frequently mentioned in those documents.

**Anatolia**

The recovery of cuneiform tablets from *Boğazköy* in the heartland of Anatolia (Turkey) had occurred early in the 20th c. Because many were in Akkadian and could be read, they confirmed the site to be Hattushash, the capital of the Hittites. The Hittites turned out to be Indo-Europeans; but a disposition to connect them with the *hitti* (“Hittites”) of Scripture proved tenacious despite evidence of vast differences. In fact, the Hittites of the Hebrew Bible were mostly northern Syrians with populations that included Indo-European Luwians, who also wielded a just recently

deciphered hieroglyphic script. The Hebrew writers got to know them best after Arameans dominated the region; that is why practically all Hittites in the Bible have patently Semitic names and are not related to the much earlier Hittites of Hattushash.

The bulk of recovered Hittite documents came from elite circles, and although they contained ritual, legal, as well as literary texts, the material that has delivered the most satisfying correspondence with biblical thought is historiographic. Embedded in Hittite annals and in penitential prayers are a powerful sense of obligation (covenants and oaths), a visceral urge for expiation, and an obsessive need for absolution; these themes are exploited extensively by many biblicalists despite the significant chronological gap present between the Hittite and biblical texts.

**Northern Mesopotamia and Syria**

After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, western Asia was administered by the French and British, an arrangement that for all practical purposes came to an end just after the Second World War. In the interval, a number of sites began to disgorge tablets. Through such outlets as the *Illustrated London News* (before it petered out in the 1970s), an eager public learned of major finds as they were being made and in the process supported investment in more expeditions. These are noted below by the sequence of their first discovery:

**Nuzi**

Nuzi is located at Yorghana Tepe, east of the Tigris River; excavated from 1925 to 1931. Its family archives were from the 14th c. and they gave detailed information on the social lives of a Hurrian community. They were widely exploited, at first to give a late Bronze Age setting for the patriarchal narratives (see works of Ephraim Speiser; Cyrus Gordon). Some spectacular Nuzi parallels that clarified the wife-sister connection between Abraham and Sarah (Gen. chs 12; 20; cf. ch 26) proved

to have false foundations. Comparisons that explained the Laban-Jacob marriage arrangements and their sheep-herding provisions have fared better; but they cannot be used to date episodes in Gen. because such practices had long duration in the ancient Near East.

**Ugarit**

This is Ras Shamra, on the Syrian coast; excavated since 1929. Its Late Bronze Age archives came from the palaces of merchant-princes and the houses of learned priests. Although they include documents in many languages, those preserved in alphabetic cuneiform quickly captured the imagination of biblicalists. Until their discovery, knowledge of Canaanite (and Phoenician) culture had been drawn largely from the Bible, where it had been caricatured as fickle (many gods), seductive (cheap thrills), brutal (human sacrifice), and depraved (orgies). The first charge is arguably true; the others hardly likely.

The Ugaritic literature proved to be especially fresh and stimulating. Among the texts were the saga of a king, Keret or Kirta, who risked losing it all by making an unnecessary vow; the tale of Danel, who begged for a son only to see him killed by a petulant goddess; and a grand myth, featuring a dysfunctional pantheon, about Baal’s struggles to deserve leadership of the gods. Characters from these texts continue to inspire scholarship; none more so than Asherah, wife of El, and Anat, consort of Baal. Especially since the discovery of inscribed jars in Kuntilet el-Ajrud (Sinai Peninsula, since the mid-1970s), Asherah is commonly discussed as an erstwhile partner of the Hebrew God. Yet, it is not often kept in mind that Ugarit was much more cosmopolitan than Israel or Judah ever were. As such, its pantheon was by no means limited to those evoked in the Bible and its mythmaking had broader applications than that shaped in Israel.

The language of the alphabetic texts proved especially useful. It shared with Hebrew a vocabulary (esp. as it concerned the cult, including the names of deities like El, Baal,

and Yam), some grammatical constructions, and its poetry was comparable to biblical psalms. After a period of undisciplined exegesis based on Ugaritic, a modest number of biblical passages have indeed found clarity through application of Ugaritic principles. Still under debate is the value of dating the production of biblical verse on the basis of Ugaritic poetics.

**Mari**

This site is Tel Ḥariri, on the right bank of the Euphrates, 50 kms north of the Iraqi frontier; excavated since 1933. Its palace archives were largely from the 18th c. and they gave insight into the lives of Amorite rulers in the age of Hammurabi of Babylon, with Aleppo and Qatna proving to be major Middle Bronze powers. The site preserved records of diplomatic relations with Mediterranean cities such as Ugarit, Byblos, and Hazor, and documentation of trade with Cyprus and Crete (but not yet with Egypt). No direct links can be made as yet between Mari's Amorites and the ancestors of Israel, although a Yaminite tribal branch that roamed the environs of Mari may have eventually settled Benjamin territory near Jericho. (The names "DUMU Yamina" and "Benjamin" are identical in meaning.) An 18th c. cuneiform fragment of local origin from the coastal region (Siyanu, near Latakia) shows scribal procedures that are similar to Mari's. Startling and most unlikely is a suggestion that Amutpiel of Qatna is Amraphel of Gen. ch 14.

Many practices and institutions recovered from the Mari tablets show remarkable affinity to those in the Bible, albeit without direct influence. In particular, the biblical gift for storytelling, with its lively phrasing, vivid pacing, fine structure, and wordplays, is nicely matched in Amorite letter writing. Details on tribal configuration, covenant ceremonials, battle strategies, third-party marriage arrangements (as was Isaac's), and *matzebot* (stone monuments) installations, have all shed light on biblical passages. In the Mari age, treaty obligations were limited

to the lifetimes of the signatories—unlike what would later develop in the Amarna period, when covenants were deemed to be eternal and permanent. This perception too has had application in studying Hebrew historiography.

More widely discussed are the origins and development of prophecy. During the reign of King Zimri-Lim, a concerted effort to consult the gods left us a rich dossier of visions, dreams, and prophecies. None is more biblically evocative among the latter than an admonition attributed to the god Addu (Hadad) of Aleppo in which a just rule is the price for divine support:

I had given all the land to (your father) Yaḥdun-Lim and by means of my weapons he had no opponent. But when he abandoned me, I gave (his enemy) Samsi-Addu the land I had handed to him.... I brought you back to your father's throne and I handed you the weapons with which I battled against Sea [*tēmtum* = Yam]. I rubbed you with oil from my numinous glow so that no one could stand up to you. Now listen to my only wish: Whenever anyone appeals to you for judgment, saying, "I am aggrieved," be there to decide his case and to give him satisfaction. This is what I desire of you.

**Alalah**

Known as Tel Achana, in the Turkish Amuq Valley; excavated intermittently since 1937, its royal archives—some from the 17th c. and others from the 14th c.—include a picturesque (auto) biography of King Idrimi. A refugee from Aleppo, Idrimi grasped fate by the horns and shaped for himself a throne in Alalah. The story, inscribed on a homely likeness, is full of folkloristic touches, inviting comparisons with the rise to power of such figures as Abimelech (son of Gideon), Jephthah, and especially David. While many individual texts—dealing with marriage, loans, wills, and treaties—are readily presented in the reference collections mentioned above, their

contribution to elucidating biblical passages is decidedly uneven.

**Biblicizing**

More recent are the discoveries at Emar (Tel Meskene-Balis, by the Upper Euphrates; rescue operation 1972–1976; resumed since 1996) and at Ebla (Tel Mardikh, not far from Aleppo; excavated since 1964, but with stunning results after 1975). These two discoveries exemplify an older phenomenon that has spiked in our days, as information is delivered online with little lead-time for proper scholarly evaluation, namely a tendency to *biblicize* Near Eastern records.

To *biblicize* is to attach Bible-derived explanations to details in Near Eastern documents and artifacts on first exposure to them. The result then becomes evidence by which to clarify biblical contexts and passages. The logic is circular; the goal is to draw reciprocal benefits for biblical and Near Eastern lore by highlighting proximal parallels—and over time such commissions correct themselves. Occasionally, however, the process gives permanence to misconceptions. For example, just after the First World War, Leonard Woolley excavated Tel el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq, a site that covered Sumerian Ur. There he found evidence of a flood so major that he imagined it impacting biblical historiography and his suggestion resurfaces periodically in the literature.

Of more consequence was his recovery of an early dynastic tomb (27th c.) with the remains of a beautiful statue of a "ram in the thicket." For Woolley, the pose evoked a detail in the aftermath of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.13); thenceforth, "Ur of the Chaldees" (Gen. ch 11) became the name of the site. Woolley had actually found a bejeweled goat that was likely paired and balanced to hold a bowl. But the explanation took hold and it is practically impossible today to locate a biblical map of the patriarchal period without finding in it Abraham trekking from Southern Mesopotamia, a region that has

hardly any mention in Hebrew recall of its origins. Similarly, when *Enuma Elish* (often termed "the Babylonian Creation Epic") was being deciphered, how Marduk shaped the cosmos was first read with Gen. ch 1 as a guide. The pattern and sequence of Marduk's creative effort are often used to secure a Mesopotamian background to Gen. ch 1, even if no individual act in the accounts matches securely and no step in the transmission charts reasonably.

The evaluation of Emar's records is still ongoing. The site has delivered a large variety of texts from a building of an official titled "diviner of the gods of Emar." Along with some literary documents several elaborate rituals were recovered, among them a libretto for the installation of the High Priestess of Baal. Gathering the attention of biblical scholars is the unique sequence of activities for the *zukurru*-festival. Apparently recurring every seven years, the ritual involved the citizens of Emar on the first full moon of the year, and extended over a full week. There were processions beyond the city gate, with stops at blocks of standing stones, apparently in a renewal of pledge to the god Dagan. For some scholars, this type of ritual comes from beyond Canaan and so might remind of renewal ceremonies among the Hebrews who likewise moved from inland Syria into Canaan. Yet, as achieved, the balance between the two institutions relies on outlines crafted much too accommodatingly. More significant for understanding the background of the Bible are juridical documents, with women playing major roles in guiding family life, even with male kin around.

Logic might have discouraged linking the extensive Ebla archives with anything biblical, for most of them date from the 25th c. on, when Israel was yet to be conceived. Indeed, Ebla depicts a society where the elite owned huge herds of sheep, with scant evidence of the nomadic life that was the remembered trait of Israel's ancestry. Ebla was a wealthy city in a region teeming with urban settlements and with influence far and wide. While the scribes relied on Sumerian formulae to

maintain their records, we now know that the written language of the archives is reminiscent of Akkadian (so East Semitic), but with many West Semitic words.

William F. Albright, the architect of a major American school of biblical scholarship, had relied on Near Eastern archives to buttress Israel's version of its patriarchal history; but after his death in 1971, studies challenged his approach and conclusions. His supporters, therefore, turned to the Ebla archives to reaffirm his vision. Read with the then imperfectly understood Ebla syllabary, documents were thought to reveal the names of cities that played a role in Hebrew historiography, among them Sodom, Gomorrah, Jerusalem, Hazor, Lachish, and Gaza. Ebla personal names also seemed to have a biblical calque to them, among them Eber, Abram, Esau, Saul, David, and Israel. Because some names ended in *-ya*, plausibly a shortened form of Yahveh, some argued that the Hebrew god was already worshipped in Canaan. Even family tombs, of the type known at Machpelah, were shown to be typical of Eblaite culture, hence proto-Hebraic. There could be little reason, these scholars claimed, to doubt the Bible's accurate memory of Israel's earliest past.

The debate about Ebla's role in sustaining biblical historiography was conducted by eminent scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. It stretched into the mid-1980s before sharper understanding of Ebla's records took out much of its steam. Better knowledge of the script soon taught that there was no equivalence to any personal name found in the Bible and no uncontested mention of any place familiar to us from the land of Israel. Ebla was abruptly dropped from several tours of the Holy Land, alas for the wrong reasons. When in the early 1990s similar archives were recovered from Tel Beydar in northeast Syria, hardly any biblical scholar paid them mind.

The "and" of the Matter

Yet the risk of *biblicizing* must not be overstated. Despite the occasional endurance

of skewed or hyped evidence, the process nonetheless brings many discoveries to the attention of a public that focuses best with the Bible as lens. The better message here is how to think of the conjunction "and" in "The Bible *and* the Ancient Near East." The two entities are frequently linked in this way, yet there is only coarse equivalence or match to the components. The "ancient Near East" is a geographical area, generally stretching from Egypt through Iran, with records long before the invention of writing. The label has meaning only in reference to an aggregate of societies unequal in power, intellectual worth, and lasting contribution. Some of these powers achieved regional control or intellectual primacy that lasted over centuries and occasionally influenced ancient Israel. In the process, they have bequeathed humanity a treasury of enriching concepts and ideas as well as models for evaluating the social experiment that became Israel. These achievements and models are for us to reconstruct by evaluating thousands of records that the modern spade recovers. However, none of the component cultures has left us anything remotely comparable to the "Bible," that is a shared scripture that has codified a people's religious, social or religious mores and has sustained a vision of a narrated past covering many centuries.

In contrast, for many the "Bible" is a distinct entity, with iconic status and special sanctity. But the Bible also emerges as a highly processed compendium of distinct efforts, each of disputed origins. When we search it to learn how Israel conducted its life—how people married, raised children, worked, and died—we develop insights by capturing tidbits from across diverse types of literatures (narratives, love songs, prayers, and the like), not all of them as attached to actual ancient practice as we would wish. So, we welcome what the ancient Near East, with its accumulation of more precisely targeted testimony, has to tell us about the lives of Israel's neighbors, and try to reach applicable conclusions through judicious

comparison—after all, Israel partook of that world. After a century of such proximation, the inventory of biblical practices that remain as yet exclusively Israel's is now slim but significant: beyond the adoption of monotheism by a substantial segment of the population, they include circumcising males a week after birth, observing a seventh-day Sabbath, excluding women from the priesthood and from juridical transactions, legalizing cultic instruction, codifying purity and diet taboos, and regulating aspects of intimacy, dressing, and grooming.

So far, Israel's soil has been uncommonly stingy in yielding independent and datable records that might confirm the Bible's march of events. It is really jolting for us to acknowledge that so far no record from Israel or its neighbors has had direct or specific recall of any of Israel's storied ancestors and leaders, the first such validation surfacing when Ahab ruled Israel (9th c.). We should reason, of course, that the dearth of evidence is never a cogent argument against historicity; still, we might also keep in mind that what Israel wanted most to communicate through its literature is embedded in momentous exchanges between God and Hebrew ancestors, dialogues that are largely impervious to historical appraisal. One day we might recover from some tel a document that mentions "Abram son of Terah"; but what possible source could there be to substantiate the divine revelations that sent him off to the promised land or had him ready to sacrifice his beloved son?

Finally, the arguments detailed in Israel's accounting of its past aim less to chart an exact accounting of events than to promote a set of principles articulated in some biblical texts, including the ideas that there can only be one God; with no heavenly lineage or a recognizable form; that this God displays

divine will through interaction with a chosen people; that this people must meet an elevated code of behavior worthy of that God; and that history progresses by commitment to a divine covenant rather than by adherence to international treaties. For this reason, short of uncovering a nice cache of extrabiblical records from Judah or Israel that might give living testimony of their social culture and historical experience, matching ancient Near Eastern records with biblical accounts will continue to be a challenge. Nonetheless, as students of Israel and of the ancient Near East, we cannot deny the accuracy of two momentous contentions advanced in our Bible: That ancient Israel has been exceptional in its capacity to discover the logic of monotheism and that it remained stubborn in its resolve to broadcast it as a historical truth.

Beyond this Essay

A handy and (almost) painless guide into the world of Israel's neighbors is through Jack M. Sasson (et al., eds) *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (2 volumes; Hendrickson Publishers, 2001). Kenton L. Sparks's *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2005) is a truly remarkable synthesis, for it surveys literary treasures from the Levant in an elegant and judicious way. Many of the works mentioned in it can be found in Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* and in Hallo's and Younger's *The Context of Scriptures*, cited above. Those interested in how ancient documents have affected our knowledge of Israelite history can now turn to a masterly, if generally conservative, overview: *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Carta, 2005) by Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley.

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