Reconnecting with the Ancient World

Ancient Near Eastern inscriptions, monu-
ments, 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 As-
syria, a cavalcade of rulers mentioned in the
Bible—among them Sargon II, Sennacherib,
and Ashurbanipal—took flesh to validate ele-
ments 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 rear-
ranged 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
ancestors 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 journal-
ism) 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 produc-
tion, 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 special-
ized 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 An-
cient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old
Testament (3rd ed., 1969) and W. W. Hallo
Aswan) with contracts for marriage (earliest the Passover.

Aramaic archives affirming a 5th c. Jewish by YHVH and other gods), and references to in attestation), syncretistic worship (blessings and not always fully compatible. Not surpris­ in Egypt.

Given its accessible monumental remains (pyramids, temples, tombs, and mummies), Egypt has enticed the wider public with­ out 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; 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 hittil ("Hittites") of Scripture proved tenacious despite evidence of vast differences. In fact, the Hittites of the Hebrew Bible were more similar to Semitic populations in Anatolia, 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 putatively 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 bibil­ 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 absorption; 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 prac­ purposes came to an end just after the Second World War. In the interval, a number of sites began to discharge 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 Yorghan 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 Spiezer; Cyrus Gordon). Some Nuzi parallel biblical models that clarified the wife-sister connection between Abraham and Sarah (Gen. chs 12; 20; cf. ch 26) proved
and Yam, some grammatical constructions, and its poetry was comparable to bibli- 
cal 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 Harrir, on the right bank of the Euphrates, 50 km 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 diplo- 
matic relations with Mediterranean cities such as Ugarit, Byblos, and Hazor, and docu- 
mentation 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 Yamin” and “Benjamin” are identical in meaning.) An 18th c. cuneiform fragment of territory near Jericho. (The names “DUMU Mari may have eventually settled Benjamin and his suggestion resurfaces periodically in the literature.

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 picaraque (auto) biography of King Idrimi. A refugee from Aleppo, Idrimi grasped fate by the horns and I handed you the weapons with which I battled against Sea [Jërmun = 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.

Biblicizing

More recent are the discoveries at Emar (Tel Meskene-Balis, by the Upper Euphrates; rescue operation 1972-1976; resumed since 1996) and at Elba (Tel Mardikh, not far from Aleppo; excavated since 1964, but with stunning results after 1975). These two discoveries exemplify an older phenomenon that has spikid in our days, as information is deliv- 
ered 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 per­ 
manence 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. 11:1) became the name of the site. Woolley had actually found a bejeweled goat that was likely paired and balanced to hold a bow. 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 Mar­ 
duk’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 zukru-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 proces­ 
sions 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 back­ 
ground 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 ex­ tensive Elba archives with anything bibli­
cal, for most of them date from the 25th c. on, when Israel was yet to be conceived. Indeed, Elba depicts a society where the elite owned huge herds of sheep, with scant evidence of the pastoral lifestyle that Creationenberged to the Israelite’s ancestry. Elba was a wealthy city in a region teeming with urban settle­ 
ments 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 E. 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 analogy to them, among them ‘Abraham, ‘Esaq, ‘Isaac, ‘David, and ‘Israel. Because some names ended in -ya, plausibly a shortened form of Yahweh, 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 representation 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 ‘Beidar 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 the illusion 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. We have never been bereft 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 and the Abrahamic covenant”, 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 and judicial 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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