

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ARCHIVES¹

Much of what we know about the ancient Near East before and during biblical times comes from collections of administrative, diplomatic, legal oracular, and literary tablets found in or near temples and palaces excavated in what is now modern Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt. Some of these collections, most often literary or religious texts, were gathered on purpose, as was the major library of Ashurbanipal at Assyrian Nineveh, and smaller Assyrian libraries at Calah, Asshur and Sultantepe.² Other collections appear to be the stored records of palace transactions, covering provisioning, personnel, administrative and diplomatic correspondence.

Ashurbanipal's library is our major resource in reconstructing the Akkadian cultures of Babylon and Assyria. Ashurbanipal, who ruled Assyria from 668-612 b.c.e, prided himself on his literacy and on his commitment to cultural pursuits. He collected large numbers of cuneiform texts--more than 1,500 at a minimum--from his many conquests, and kept them in his palace at Nineveh, the chief royal residence of Assyria, where they were excavated in modern times. The Assyrians were passionate collectors, importing the idea of libraries from the Babylonians, probably beginning during the Assyrian sack of Babylon in the second half of the thirteenth century b.c.e. Dedicated to Nabu, the god of scribes, libraries consisted of rows of cuneiform tablets inscribed on clay. Indexes of these tablets were compiled to make access easier. Literary, scholarly, and religious texts made up the bulk of these collections. Some of these texts, which were copied and recopied from much earlier tablets, dated as far back as the culture of Sumer.

An extensive private archive of cuneiform texts relating to family law in Akkadian was found at the Hurrian capitol of NUZI,³ centered in the middle Euphrates valley near Harran, located in the foothills of South Kurdistan in northeastern Iraq, dating from ~Nuzi's peak, about 1500 b.c.e. The Hurrians, biblical Horites, Hivites, Jebusites, were widely scattered across the ancient Near East, and were the dominant ethnic element in the kingdom of Mitanni which extended from Anatolia to Egypt, or at least to central Palestine. Nuzi flourished from about 2500 to 1000 bce, and was a province of the kingdom of Mitanni during the century from about 1400 to about 1300 b.c.e., when it was conquered by the Assyrians.

The Hurrian Language is unrelated to Semitic, Sumerian or Indo-European, although it does show affinities with ancient Armenian (Urartu). Yet the extensive archives found in the

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1. NOTE TO EDITORS: I understand your sound concern about spotlighting Mari in light of scholarly controversy regarding patriarchal chronology, anachronism, etc. I took the liberty of broadening the focus to ANE archives in general, since ALL of them are controversial as they supposedly bear upon biblical practices, yet they are each in different ways a rich source of background; NUZI is at least as (I would say more) important in this way as is Mari, and I am presuming you are discussing Ashurbanipal's library elsewhere, so I only mention it here. You have enough to cut this down to the 40 lines you wanted on Mari alone, but I do not believe you will be doing justice to the topic if you do so.
 2. For Ashurbanipal and his library, see entry in ABD on Mesopotamia, History of (Assyria) esp. pp.746-747, and 749; see also History of (Babylonia), pp.771-3.
 3. Nuzi information from International Dictionary of the Bible, Harper's, and the Patriarchs volume (Vol. 2) of The World History of the Jewish People, ed. Mazar, Rutgers, 1970.

Hurrian capitol were all written in Akkadian, the diplomatic lingua-franca of the fertile crescent for two thousand years.

Hurrian practices that may have some indirect relationship to practices described in the Bible's patriarchal stories include the practice of taking a wife's handmaid as concubine, and the possible significance of the household teraphim as symbolic of inheritance rights for their possessor. The Nuzi documents also refer to the HABIRU as a group of mixed ethnic backgrounds, under-privileged foreigners, and people of displaced social status, references that contribute to the scholarly discussion of the relationship of the social status group Habiru to the ethnic group referred to in the Bible as Ibri, Hebrew.

Another Akkadian collection are the 20,000-tablet Royal Archives excavated before and after World War II by French archaeologists⁴ in ancient MARI, located in modern Syria about 15 miles north of today's Syrian-Iraqi border.⁵ The impact of these finds on biblical scholarship resides more in the illumination of the environment alluded to in biblical stories than in the direct relationship of any archival document to any particular incident or person described in the Bible.

Mari was located on major trade routes between the cultures of Mesopotamian Sumer and Ebla in North Syria, making it a commercial crossroads starting in the third millennium b.c.e.⁶ Originally Sumerian in culture, Mari was taken over by the West Semitic Amorites sometime around the beginning of the second millennium b.c.e. With the advent of the Amorites, the foundation for the great palace at Mari, site of the Royal Archives, was established. The archives concern the dynasty of the Lim rulers, dating from 1825 to 1765 b.c.e.⁷

Finds at Mari reveal especially extensive documentation of the final twenty-years of its last kings, Yasmah-Addu and Zimri-Lim, whose political history and daily life can be reconstructed from records of palace provisions, harem records, and other correspondence.⁸ Normal meals, two each day, and special meals in honor of the dead, were prepared using grains, fruits, legumes, sweets, and oil.⁹ Meat and sweetened wine were served as well. Ice, stored in underground facilities, was also available.¹⁰ The king was entertained by dancers and singers, and honored by exotic gifts from far-flung allies or subject princes: choice cuts of meat, desert truffles, even ostrich eggs, as well as a veritable menagerie of unusual animals.¹¹ Zimri-Lim of the west ultimately fell afoul of an East Semitic Amorite ruler, the renowned King Hammurapi, who finally captured Mari, destroying its magnificent palace (and incidentally preserving the archives under its rubble for 20th-century excavators!)¹²

Most interesting in terms of the Bible is the background provided by the Mari archives on the West Semitic Amorites, who infiltrated Mesopotamia at about 2000 b.c.e. Practices depicted in Mari archival materials resembles some biblical practices, but with significant differences. Examples: the covenant-making practice of splitting a young animal as part of the treaty process, a young ass at Mari rather than the heifer, goat, ram, or birds of Genesis 15 ; census-taking for military and tax purposes, royal in Mari rather than cultic as in Leviticus 1-8, and 26; and the first references to ecstatic or intuitive divination, distantly akin to the biblical prophetic

4. Harper's, ABD, etc.

5. EJ

6. Harper's

7. Harper's

8. Harper's, ABD

9. ABD, Harper's.

10. ABD

11. ABD

12. EJ,

pronouncements, but lacking the elaboration or literary sophistication of the biblical prophets. In addition, documented tribal names, personal names, vocabulary, terminology for political organization, and some social practices may shed light on biblical personal and place names, terminology, and tribal organization. This perspective is literary and circumstantial, however, and cannot be applied to proving or disproving the dating of the patriarchal stories.¹³

A major source for the diplomatic history of the Levant and Egypt in the fourteenth century b.c.e. is the Amarna archives,¹⁴ a collection of cuneiform tablets consisting of the correspondence between the Egyptian Pharaoh and his vassals that illuminates the relationships among the petty city-states of Egypt-dominated Canaan. This trove was found by the Amarna bedouin in 1887, and proved to be the royal archives housed in the “office house of the letters of Pharaoh,” in the ancient Egyptian capital of Akhetaten founded by the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, later known as Akhenaten. The site was abandoned after his death. A major contribution of these letters to biblical scholarship is that although they are written in the diplomatic language of Akkadian, the scribes are natives of Canaan, Phoenicia, or other North West regions. The letters are replete with variations from standard Akkadian in grammar, syntax and vocabulary attributed to the influence of their native tongues. These “North West Semiticisms,” along with place names, personal names, and other details, help scholars understand aspects of North West Semitic dialects as they must have been used at that time.

One of the most important cuneiform finds of modern times is the excavation, beginning with its discovery in 1929, of the archives at Ras Shamra near the Mediterranean coast of Syria¹⁵ at ancient Ugarit, a late Bronze Age city of Canaanite culture that was destroyed about 1200 b.c.e. Cuneiform texts were found in many of the languages of the ancient Near East, including Hurrian and Hittite, and hundreds of Akkadian texts were uncovered, primarily legal and diplomatic in content. But the main attraction for Bible scholarship is the trove of texts in Ugaritic, a dialect of the West Semitic Canaanite language, written in an alphabetical cuneiform script. These texts, many of them mythic, ritual and cultic, reveal a West Semitic sensibility quite distinct from that of the East Semitic Akkadian cultures of Mesopotamia.¹⁶

Contributions from Ugaritic studies illuminate the Bible by allowing a deeper understanding of Hebrew grammar, philology and syntax based upon new knowledge of the North West Semitic family of languages. Polytheistic Ugaritic religion is quite different in essence from that of the Bible, but stylistically and expressively there are many parallels. Poetic imagery for Ugaritic deities named Baal and El echo descriptions of God in the Psalms, including such epithets as “Rider in the Clouds” (compare the Baal epic and Psalm 104, for example).¹⁷ Language such as biblical poetic word pairs like “heaven/ earth” or “gold/ fine gold” occur in Ugaritic poetry in identical or reversed order, and the Ugaritic context often illuminates obscure words in the Hebrew text.¹⁸

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13. EJ; Oxford; Harper's.

14. Amarna information is from ABD AMarna Letters, pp.174ff.

15. ABD, Ugarit, p.695

16. ADB, Ugarit, 706-10.

17. Pritchard, ANET, pp.130, 132, 134, (large hardcover third edition with supplement, Princeton, 1969)

18. For deeper discussion, see S.E. Loewenstamm's chapter “Ugaritic Writings” in the Patriarchs volume (vol 2) of *The World History of the Jewish People*, Rutgers, 1970.