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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

Ebla and Biblical Historical Inerrancy

Eugene H. Merrill

With the rise of modern post-Renaissance studies in the past 200 years has come the almost universal consensus among liberal Bible scholars and theologians that the Old Testament, while remaining in some sense the Word of God, is almost totally worthless as a source of reliable ancient scientific and historical information. This is particularly true of biblical references to pre-Mosaic times, commonly known as the patriarchal period. Such scholars usually allege that the writing of history, in the modern sense of the term, did not originate in Israel before the monarchy (ca. 1000 B.C.)¹ and that the patriarchal stories are only legends or epics created by Hebrew theologians to explain Israel's election by God and organization into a 12-tribe confederation.²

One cause of this pervasive skepticism is the philosophical presupposition that miracles are not possible now and therefore never have been possible. Any ancient biblical story that contains elements of the miraculous must be suspect and is to that extent disqualified as genuine history.³ A second objection to the historicity of the patriarchal stories is that they are narratives about individuals and do not concern themselves with larger historical themes such as international political and military relationships.⁴ This arbitrary view of what can and cannot constitute the subject of history-writing is, of course, indefensible since it is up to the historiographer to define what he will or will not include as subject matter. Since God, after all, was obviously

concerned to relate His personal interaction with a few select individuals (the patriarchs), why should one expect the Book of Genesis to recite the details of the epochal events of the ancient Near Eastern world?

This is not to say, however, that the patriarchal narratives are totally unrelated to any larger historical context, for there are hints here and there of the movements of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph within a real world and in touch with other persons and events whose existence can be attested through scholarly historical investigation. Since it is impossible in this article to explore this matter and its ramifications in any complete way, the discussion will be limited to one complex of events, out of many that could be cited.

Ebla and the Patriarchs

Beginning in 1964 an Italian team of archaeologists under the direction of Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome undertook the systematic excavation of an impressive mound in northern Syria known as Tell Mardikh.⁵ Though many previous travelers and geographers had suggested that Tell Mardikh might be in the vicinity of the famous Ebla of ancient Akkadian inscriptions, this was not proven until Matthiae uncovered the dedicatory inscriptions of King Ibbit-Lim in 1968.⁶ In this text the king identified himself as the ruler of Ebla. In subsequent campaigns in 1974 and 1975 both public and royal archives containing over 15,000 clay tablets came to light. Though relatively few of these have been deciphered, translated, and published, it is clear that they constitute one of the most important archaeological discoveries of all times.

Though there is no unanimity on the matter, the most likely date of the archives and hence of Ebla's period of greatest importance is about 2500 B.C.⁷ The chronological structure of the Old Testament requires a birth-date for Abram of about 2166 B.C.,⁸ so it is clear that the Ebla texts precede the patriarch by at least 300 years. Terah, father of Abram, migrated with his family from Ur to Haran (Gen. 11:31), a major trading center on the upper Habur River in Mesopotamia. Since Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran and went to Canaan (Gen. 12:4), he must have lived in Haran around 2100 B.C. Haran was only 150 miles from Ebla⁹ and thus one may assume that the two cities had much in common, including language. Abram, with-

out question, spoke the Sumerian and Old Akkadian languages in Ur but when he moved to Haran he must have adopted the native language, Amorite, a tongue much more similar to Canaanite and Hebrew. The language of the Ebla texts has been described as "Proto-Canaanite,"¹⁰ a term which suggests that Ebla and Haran shared a basically common language. When Abram migrated on to Canaan he naturally learned the Canaanite dialects of that area, one of the major ones being what is now known as Hebrew. Giovanni Pettinato, the major decipherer and translator of the Ebla inscriptions, has suggested that there is a connection between the name of the Eblaite king Ebrum and the word "Hebrew."¹¹ While this is impossible to prove, the linguistic equation of the terms does show the intimate connection of the Eblaite and Hebrew languages.

Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives

These preliminary observations lead to the question of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives in general and to the value of the Ebla finds in establishing that historicity. Fundamental to the assessment of the historicity of any period is the attitude of the historian toward the sources which attest to that period.¹² Since the patriarchs are never mentioned in extra-biblical texts, the historian must rely exclusively on the Bible for specific historical documentation. If he views the biblical narratives as reliable historical raw material, he will, of course, feel comfortable in allowing them to speak for themselves and to become the essential data with which he reconstructs the larger historical horizon. If, however, he views them skeptically, insisting that they are historically suspect unless and until they can be defended externally, these narratives become of little value in determining what really happened in the period being studied. Unfortunately, as Momigliano points out, "there is a widespread tendency both inside and outside the historical profession to treat historiography as another genre of fiction: for whatever reason."¹³ Until this "negative bias," as Miller describes it,¹⁴ can be overcome so that the biblical texts are allowed the benefit of the doubt, subject to historical-critical analysis, there seems little hope that any amount of supporting extra-biblical evidence can be persuasive.

Typical of this skeptical, almost nihilistic way of assessing the primary (biblical) sources for the history of the patriarchal

period is the recent massive publication of Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, in which he reduces the patriarchal period to "a synthetic creation of canonical Israelite tradition in which scattered memories of the proto-Israelite experiences of some Israelite groups are intermixed with later Israelite experiences and beliefs and cast in the form of 'a history of genealogically related eponymous ancestors.'" ¹⁵ Because the traditions are so insecure historically, he says, one cannot begin with them but must see them as only quasi-historical retrojections from a much later period. ¹⁶ Only when their essential historicity has been established on other extra-biblical grounds can the patriarchal accounts then begin to function as truly historiographic sources. ¹⁷ This is too heavy a burden for any historical text to bear, however, for it requires that the veracity of the text be demonstrated by the confirmation of other texts whose own veracity, it would seem, must first be proved. It would be much better methodologically to accept the premise of Warner that the task of the historian is not to see how well the data of the Bible and of the extra-biblical documentation synchronize or are otherwise similar, but to insure that there is nothing in the extra-biblical sources which directly contradicts the proposed reconstruction of biblical history. ¹⁸ In other words the patriarchal narratives should be allowed, like any ancient texts, to be judged on their own merits within the context of what can be understood about their milieu. Unless they can be shown to be inconsistent with that milieu (when correctly understood) they must be regarded *prima facie* as historically reliable documents.

Of course with the rise of modern archaeological research the patriarchal period has been seen increasingly as historical or at least as "essentially" historical. To the "Albright school" much of the credit must go for this relatively new assessment of the patriarchal tradition. Albright himself pointed out years ago that apart from "a few die-hards among older scholars" there is hardly a single biblical historian who is not at least impressed with the rapid accumulation of data supporting the "substantial historicity" of patriarchal tradition. ¹⁹ Ironically, just as this much more positive appreciation of the historicity of the patriarchal period is coming under severe attack at the hands of Thompson, van Seters, and other scholars, even more spectacular support for the traditional view has coincidentally come to light with the recovery of the Ebla archives. A major purpose of this article is to show precisely how this is so.

As suggested earlier, the internal chronological structure of the Old Testament establishes the parameters of the patriarchal age (from the birth-date of Abraham to the death-date of Joseph) as 2166–1806 B.C. Archaeologically this conforms to the so-called Late Early Bronze (EB IV) through Early Middle Bronze (MB II) ages.²⁰ The patriarchal stories, then, must be viewed within the cultural and historical context suggested by all the data available from this period. Only if these stories run counter to these data in either detail or spirit can they be called in question. And even then it must be shown that the extra-biblical data themselves have been correctly understood.

Most historians now concede that the patriarchal accounts fit best in the context of the earliest part of the second millennium (MB II).²¹ This is on the basis of such evidence as personal names, occupational history of Transjordan and the Negev, the scope of travel, religious matters, social and legal usages, Mesopotamian alliances, and so forth. As Kitchen argues, all these factors point to a date of around 2000–1700 for the patriarchs.²² This is all the more certain in light of the most recent archaeological discoveries at Tell Mardikh, Bâb edh-Dhra', Numeira, and other sites to be discussed presently. Notwithstanding the negative posture of the reactionary scholars mentioned above, it is becoming increasingly clear that one can no longer reject the overwhelming testimony in support of an early MB patriarchal setting just because, as Selman puts it, "it causes difficulties for widely accepted but unproven theories"²³ of source- or redaction-criticism.

The Amorite Hypothesis

Of important relevance to the whole question of patriarchal backgrounds is the so-called "Amorite hypothesis" popularized by Kenyon in her Schweich Lectures of 1963. As the result of extensive excavation at Jericho and analysis of other sites she concluded that the Amorites of the Bible arrived in Palestine about 2300 B.C. as nomads and destroyers of a preexisting urban civilization. After some 400 years or so, she said, the indigenous Canaanites and the Amorites had amalgamated in Syria, probably around Byblos, and created a new urban way of life which extended throughout Palestine.²⁴ Though this hypothesis is not universally accepted — de Geus, for example, dismisses it as "an argument by analogy"²⁵ — it is safe to say that it enjoys wide-

spread favor across a broad spectrum of biblical and historical scholarship.

Dever pinpoints the emergence of this homogeneous and vigorous urban culture in Palestine to the MB II A period (2000–1800) and attributes it to the arrival of the Amorites from the north and the east. He distinguishes these later Amorites from those of the EB IV–MB I period primarily because the earlier were semi-nomadic in character whereas the later were already urbanized and introduced to Palestine a radically new material culture which they had developed in Syria.²⁶

The Amorites, who presumably originated in the northern reaches of the Syro-Arabian Desert and south of the northern curve of the Fertile Crescent, migrated not only to Palestine but to central Mesopotamia and Egypt as well. It is likely that their impact on Palestine was earliest and initially most profound because, as de Vaux proposes, they were less liable to opposition there from the native inhabitants.²⁷ An important nuance in the understanding of the Amorites has come with the studies of Kupper,²⁸ Rowton,²⁹ Liverani,³⁰ Luke,³¹ and others who stress the “dimorphic” character of Syrian nomadic life. This maintains that the simplistic way of viewing the Amorites and other nomads as exclusively or primarily pastoralists is erroneous. An Amorite might be as much a sophisticated, urbane city-dweller as a wandering tentman.

The Bible clearly traces the Upper Mesopotamian origin of Abraham to Haran and indicates that he left Haran for Canaan by way of Damascus (Gen. 11:31; 12:4-6; 15:2). Haran lay on the Upper Balikh river where it served as a major emporium for east-west trade.³² From there it was only 130 miles southwest to Aleppo and the main Mesopotamia-Egypt highway. The Aleppo-Damascus route passed through the city of Ebla, making it almost certain that Abraham and his entourage visited that major metropolis.³³

Chronologically the Bible places Abraham’s migration at about 2100 B.C. or precisely in the MB I and Ur III era.³⁴ Thus his movement coincides with that initial southern sweep of the later, urbanized Amorites and may indeed have been a part of that Amorite penetration into Canaan.³⁵ Dever proposes that the major inflow of Amorites to Palestine was at the end of the Ur III period (ca. 2000)³⁶ but this would not significantly affect the position that Abraham was connected with the earliest elements of this migration.

Superficial reading of the patriarchal stories might lead to an understanding of Abraham and his clan as wandering pastoralists. Closer analysis reveals, however, that they were, to use Gottwald's terminology, "transhumant pastoralists."³⁷ That is, they enjoyed a sedentary, at least semi-urbanized way of life in which tent dwelling was practiced at certain times and in certain places but was not characteristic. Wiseman suggests that the patriarchs ought to be identified with that lifestyle in which there was at least limited transhumance undertaken by town or village communities moving into tents for the summer pasturage of cattle or sheep, for special religious festivals, or for work at harvest time.³⁸

Archaeological evidence, as Albright³⁹ showed 60 years ago, conforms to this pattern of newly developed village life in the Palestinian hill country in the period required by the Bible for the patriarchs, namely 2000–1800 B.C. For example, Shechem, the first site Abraham visited in Canaan, gives evidence of initial urbanization in the MB II A period (ca. 1900 B.C.).⁴⁰ The biblical chronology would tend to favor his stop there at 2100 or a little later but it is important to point out that the narrator does not even hint that Shechem was a village then. He merely points out that Abraham built an altar at a site which (later?) was identified as Shechem. In any case it is clear that central Canaan was dotted with cities and towns in the midpoint of the patriarchal period (1850 B.C.) as, for example, the Egyptian "Execration Texts" amply attest.⁴¹ Thus the dimorphic character of patriarchal life which is described in the biblical texts themselves finds striking confirmation from what is now known about the Amorites and their settlement patterns at precisely the same period.

The Relevance of Ebla to the Patriarchal History

Of greater pertinence to this article is the information now becoming available from the publication of the cuneiform texts from Tell Mardikh = Ebla. Though the heyday of Ebla preceded the lifetime of Abraham by at least 300 years, later phases of its history have a direct bearing on the patriarchal question. According to Matthiae, the excavator of the site, Mardikh II B 2 covered the period 2250–2000 B.C.⁴² This, then, would be the city visited by Abraham en route to Canaan. It is the pottery of the next phase, however (Mardikh III A — 2000–1800 B.C.), which corresponds to that of the Amorite migration proper, thus sup-

porting the proposal made above that Abraham may have been in an early stage of the Amorite movement or may have even preceded its main thrust.

EBLA AND CANAAN

Ebla's relationship to Canaan involves more than a shared ceramics culture, however, and embraces a period much earlier than that of the Amorite/patriarchal movement and settlement there. Pettinato draws attention to texts from the "archival period" (ca. 2500 B.C.) which contain itineraries, lexical lists, commodities transactions, and similar information and which mention Canaan and Canaanite cities. This is of interest first of all because one of the alleged signs of the unhistorical character of the patriarchal stories has been their reference to Canaan, a geographic name hitherto first attested at Alalakh, hundreds of years after the patriarchs.⁴³ One Ebla tablet describes the preparation of a white statue as a gift for "the lord of Canaan" (*dbe kà-na-na-im*), a reference which antedates Alalakh by a millennium!⁴⁴ More particularly of interest are the references to cities such as Byblos, Ashdod, Jaffa, Akko, Sidon, Beirut, Alalakh, Megiddo, Lachish, Damascus, Homs, and Hama, many of which are mentioned in the Old Testament.

THE CITIES OF THE PLAIN

This leads to a consideration of the "cities of the plain," familiar to students of the Bible in connection with the stories of Abraham and Lot found in Genesis 14 and 18–19. It has become almost a dogma of critical scholarship to insist that Genesis 14, which recounts the battle between Abraham and his allies and the four kings of the East, is unhistorical precisely because the five cities mentioned in the story are never referred to in any ancient literature apart from the Old Testament. The assumption is that unless a person, place, or event in early Israel's history can be validated by extra-biblical documentation it must be unhistorical.⁴⁵ The fallacy in such method ought to be obvious for if this principle were applied to all of ancient (and even modern) history virtually nothing could be recovered from the past in the name of history.

Freedman describes a conversation he had with Pettinato in 1976 in which Pettinato revealed that a large tablet had been unearthed at Ebla on which were listed the cities with which Ebla had commercial dealings.⁴⁶ With amazement Pettinato had

observed that the five cities of the plain were on this tablet and that they were listed in exactly the same order as in Genesis 14:2! In their cuneiform syllabic spelling they are *si-da-mu*, *è-ma-ra*, *ad-ma*, *si-ba-t-um*, and *be-la*. As any student of comparative Semitic languages can see, these names in Eblaite are precisely the phonetic equivalents of the names in Hebrew.

Just before this startling revelation had been publicized John Van Seters and Thomas L. Thompson had independently published their position in regard to Genesis 14. They maintained that the chapter was totally untrustworthy as history and in fact was written 1,000 years after Moses. It reflected, in their view, not the situation of patriarchal times but rather that of the authors of the story who lived in the time of the Babylonian Exile. This hypothesis argues that the names of the cities, if not completely fictitious, are at best dubious and that the story of their conquest by the eastern kings is absolutely without historical basis.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, Pettinato, who announced the connection between Genesis 14 and the Ebla texts in a public meeting in 1976 (which this author attended), has disclaimed his own conclusions more lately. In a travesty of modern scholarship he has backed away from his original and very dogmatic assertion that Ebla mentioned the cities of the plain. The reason, tragically, is not that the linguistic evidence compels a shift in his thinking but the realities of modern Middle Eastern politics have been brought to bear. The Syrian government, under whose auspices the site of Tell Mardikh has been excavated, has become alarmed at the obvious relationship between Genesis and the Ebla texts. They feel that these materials lend some kind of support to the antiquity of the Hebrew people and possibly to the claims of Israel on certain parts of the Arab world. They therefore threatened to prevent further work at the site and publishing of the inscriptions unless these damaging Ebla-Genesis connections were disavowed. Because Pettinato wished to continue on the project he apparently acceded to these pressures and relinquished his previously held convictions. Ironically, Pettinato has been removed as head epigrapher (decipherer) anyway and has been replaced by Alfonso Archi. But even in his latest publication Pettinato concedes that *si-da-mu* (Sodom) and *sa-bi-im* (Zeboiim) might be mentioned in the Ebla inscriptions.⁴⁸

Despite the disclaimers of an identification of Ebla *si-da-mu* with Hebrew *sēdōm* or Ebla *è-ma-ra* with Hebrew *'āmōrâ* by

scholars such as Biggs,⁴⁹ others argue strongly for their phonetic compatibility. Dahood presents evidence concerning Sodom that it appears in the Ebla geographical gazeteer along with 288 other toponyms in Syria-Palestine as *sa-dam*^{ki} (text TM 75.6.2231 obv. X 4). In the same column (obv. X 12) the name *ak-kà-bù*^{ki} is listed. This name, Dahood suggests, is none other than the Red Sea port of Aqaba and so the equation *sa-dam*^{ki} = *sēdōm* is strengthened. The variation *si-da-mu*^{ki} (TM 75.6.2377 obv. IV 8) is only that, an alternative spelling typical of cuneiform orthography.⁵⁰

Though the question of five cities of the plain may now be uncertain because of the acrimonious climate surrounding the publication of the tablets, there is persistent support for the attestation of at least Sodom and Zeboim. Even this is remarkable enough to cause Freedman, for one, to rethink the whole matter of the transmission of tradition. Such accuracy in names, he says, requires a written source bridging the period from the events themselves (2300 B.C. in his view) to whatever time the story found its place in the canonical literature. He admits that if this analysis of text transmission holds up then “we critical scholars must reconsider many of our assumptions as well as the methods used to transmit information.”⁵¹

A parallel line of evidence in support of the historicity of the cities of the plain and therefore of the patriarchal stories associated with them has been the exploration and excavation of sites near the Lisan,⁵² the peninsula in the southeast part of the Dead Sea. Long ago Albright, commenting on one of these sites, associated it with Bronze Age towns which he thought were buried beneath the shallow waters of the south end of the Dead Sea. These in turn he identified with “the half-legendary Cities of the Plain” and said that their destruction in the Early Bronze Period coincided with that of the biblical cities.⁵³ The abandonment of the principal site, Bâb edh-Dhra’, must be dated according to Albright sometime before the foundation of Jericho IV, the Middle Bronze town, or about 1800.⁵⁴

Rast and Schaub have devoted the past several years to an extensive and systematic excavation of Bâb edh-Dhra’ and environs with the result that the date proposed earlier by Albright has had to be pushed back by some centuries. According to them both Bâb edh-Dhra’ and nearby Numeira were destroyed about 2350 B.C., though the former was reoccupied at least briefly. How the devastation came about is unclear though they conclude that

it "is possible that some natural phenomenon such as an earthquake occurred" ⁵⁵ In the meantime, Albright had altered his own chronology on the basis of pottery finds. These he dated no later than 2000 B.C. or, more likely, around 2100. ⁵⁶

This archaeological necessity of placing the dates of the destruction of the cities of the plain back by several centuries has obvious and perhaps disturbing implications for the traditional dates of the patriarchal period. If these cities are mentioned in the Ebla archives (2500 B.C.) and if they are to be identified with Bâb edh-Dhra', Numeira, and the other three Dead Sea sites (es-Safi, Feifeh, and Khanazir), all of which were destroyed no later than 2200/2150 B.C., ⁵⁷ how can it be that Abraham and Lot were contemporaneous with the cities when a biblical chronology requires their destruction ca. 2067 B.C.? ⁵⁸

So radical are these implications that some historians are now willing not only to rescue Abraham from fiction or a possible Late Bronze provenience, but to move him back a thousand years and make him earlier than any conservative had ever suggested! Freedman, for example, now says that "the reason that the story has never been located historically is that scholars, all of us, have been looking in the wrong millennium. Briefly put, the account in Genesis 14, and also in chapters 18–19, does not belong to the second millennium B.C., still less to the first millennium B.C., but rather to the third millennium B.C." ⁵⁹ One might quibble with the phrase "all of us," since most conservatives have always placed Abraham in the third millennium though not as early as Freedman now suggests. ⁶⁰ Nonetheless conservatives who for years have been battling in support of any early date for the patriarchs now find themselves in the position of battling for a late date! All that can be said in view of the available evidence is that non-inscriptional materials such as pottery and other artifacts do not make for chronological precision (and the cities of the plain have as yet produced no texts). Furthermore it is impossible to say at this point that Bâb edh-Dhra' and the other sites are to be identified with the biblical cities of the plain anyway. Finally, a date of 2067 for the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah is not sufficiently late to disqualify them from a possible connection with the last levels of occupation at Bâb edh-Dhra' (2150 according to Rast and Schaub) and it certainly is early enough to permit the names of the cities to appear in the Ebla archives. Yet 2067 is not too early to allow for Abraham to have participated in the early stages of the Amorite movement.

Ebla and Patriarchal Religion

The apparent references in the Ebla texts to the cities of the plain are not the only points of contact with the Old Testament. More well attested are aspects of religious life shared in common to some extent. First among these are divine names.

DIVINE NAMES

Almost from the beginning of modern Old Testament higher criticism, a major line of demarcation between the alleged Elohist and Yahwist documents of the Pentateuch has been the introduction of the name Yahweh to Moses as opposed to "El names" familiar in pre-Mosaic times.⁶¹ The hypothesis argues that the divine name Yahweh (or its shorter form Yah) was learned by Moses, probably at Midian or Sinai, and that any references to God by that name in the patriarchal stories were placed there by the Yahwist who thereby was attempting to connect late traditions which knew of Israel's God as Yahweh with earlier ones which knew Him only as El (or Elohim, El Shaddai, etc.) The case for this was supported by the absence of the Yah(weh) name in any pre-Mosaic extrabiblical literature.⁶²

The Yah element is, however, attested as early as the Mari texts (ca. 1750–1700 B.C.)⁶³ and probably as early as Fara (ca. 2600 B.C.) and Ur III (2100–2000).⁶⁴ Though these examples are usually overlooked or denied by adherents to the documentary hypothesis, it appears that the repeated occurrences of Yah at Ebla must now cause a major reevaluation of the hypothesis.

Pettinato has demonstrated conclusively that two major divine names surface again and again in the ancient Ebla onomastica — *-il* and *-ya* — and that these are usually generic terms for "God" and not the names of particular deities.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he points out, the *-il* element predominated in personal names until the reign of Ebrum and the *-ya* element thereafter.⁶⁶ While some opponents of this notion of the existence of *-ya* at Ebla argue that it is only a hypocoristicon⁶⁷ (a diminutive form of a name such as Johnny for John), this objection does not hold for the appearance of *ya-* in first position in the name as in *dⁱia-ra-mu*, "Ya is exalted." Particularly striking is the determinative *d* which indicates that the element following is a divine name.⁶⁸

The following list shows personal names in which the divine elements *-il* and *-ia (= ya)* appear respectively in columns I and II but which are otherwise identical:⁶⁹

I	II
<i>en-na-il</i>	<i>en-na-ia</i>
<i>iš-ra-il</i>	<i>iš-ra-ia</i>
<i>iš-má-il</i>	<i>iš-ma-ia</i>
<i>mi-kà-il</i>	<i>mi-ká-ia</i>
<i>ḥa-ra-il</i>	<i>ḥa-ra-ia</i>
<i>ti-ra-il</i>	<i>ti-ra-ia</i>
<i>tám-ṭa-il</i>	<i>tám-ta-ia</i>
<i>eb-du-il</i>	<i>eb-du-ia</i>

Since it is impossible to deny that the names of column I end in a divine element, there can be little question that those of column II do also and that that element, therefore, is the same as the Old Testament Yah. This does not mean that the people of Ebla worshiped Yahweh uniquely as Israel did, but only that Israel's God was not unknown to them.

In addition to the divine name Yah, about 500 others appear in the Ebla documents, including biblical Chemosh. The usual spelling in the Masoretic text is כְּמוֹשׁ (*kemôš*) but in one place (Jer. 48:7) it is כְּמִישׁ (*kemiš*). Now the same deity appears at Ebla with the name Kamis.⁷⁰ This makes clear the fact that this god was not only known in a period nearly 2,000 years earlier than Jeremiah but that Jeremiah and the Masoretic tradition preserved the original pronunciation of the name. Surely this has something to say about the reliability of the Masoretic vocalic transmission.

EBLA AND CREATION

In a startling revelation going back to one of his earliest publications of Ebla material,⁷¹ Pettinato suggested the presence of a creation epic among the archives and in a later article pointed out that "it contains irrefragable elements resembling the account of the creation of the earth and the solar light [found in Genesis]. The affinity with Genesis 1," he said, "appears evident."⁷² Finally he has published the text (TM. 75. G. 1682) which appears to be technically not an epic but a hymn. The relevant translated lines follow:⁷³

Lord of heaven and earth:
the earth was not, you created it,
the light of day was not, you created it,
the morning light you had not [yet] made exist.
Lord: effective word
Lord: prosperity

Lord: heroism
 Lord:
 Lord: untiring
 Lord: divinity
 Lord: who saves
 Lord: happy life

The full implications of this poem would require a separate lengthy article but at least a few observations can be made. First, the tenor of the hymn is almost monotheistic in spirit. Creation is attributed to only one god. Second, the order (heaven, earth, light, and morning) is identical to that in Genesis 1:1-5. Third, the inference is that creation is *ex nihilo*, not the manufacture of things from an original and eternal primordial substance. Fourth, the epithet of the god as the "effective word" following the statement of his creative work is identical to the biblical concept of God who creates by the spoken word (Gen. 1:3) and who, in fact, is that Word Himself (John 1:1-3).

Ebla and Political Structure

In the world of human government the Ebla texts also prove to be of interest and of significance to ancient Israel. In Akkadian the normal word for king is *šarrum*, usually equivalent to Sumerian *en*. At Ebla, however, the translation of *en* is *malikum*, a word common to Northwest Semitic as seen in Hebrew מֶלֶךְ (*melek*). This shows the tendency of the Eblaite language to identify with Northwest rather than East Semitic. But of more importance than that in the present discussion is the fact that the *malikum* shares his authority with persons known as "elders" (ÁB x ÁŠ).⁷⁴ This is a totally unexpected and novel political structure in the ancient Near Eastern world except in the Old Testament and possibly in Early Dynastic Sumer.⁷⁵ In Israel's history the tribes in the premonarchic era were governed by elders and other tribal leaders (Josh. 23:2; 24:1; Judg. 21:16; Ruth 4:2, 11; etc.). Even with the establishment of kingship, however, the elders continued to exercise great authority on the local level (1 Sam. 30:26; 2 Sam. 3:17; 5:3; 12:17; 1 Kings 8:1; 20:7-8; 2 Kings 6:32; Ezra 10:8, 14; etc.). This shows the remarkable tenacity of ancient tradition and also the fact that the Israelite monarchic structure had its roots in tribalism. One might now argue on the basis of the Ebla texts that other societies, such as those in upper Mesopotamia and Syria at least,

also developed from tribalism and even with the sophisticated monarchic urbanism typified by Ebla still betrayed their tribal heritage by retaining a council of elders. This is certainly in keeping with the previously discussed dimorphic character of the earliest attested nomadic societies.

Another office at Ebla which has caused a great deal of surprise to Bible scholars but which tends to support and clarify an Old Testament political institution is that of judge. Pettinato⁷⁶ cites documents (e.g., TM. 75. G. 1261) in which the term for judge (*di-ku₅*), is synonymous with that for king (*lugal*) showing that a judge was therefore a ruler and not necessarily an adjudicator. This is helpful in understanding the role of the judges as essentially political and military and not as courtroom officials.

The final example from the political realm which can be mentioned is that of the existence of treaty and covenant texts from Ebla. In the last 30 years or so, Old Testament scholars have come to recognize that the biblical covenant sections such as Exodus 20–23 and all of Deuteronomy were formally patterned after treaty documents of the ancient Near Eastern world, particularly those of the Hittite New Kingdom period (ca. 1400–1200 B.C.).⁷⁷ This view has been challenged by those reluctant to identify Deuteronomy with such an early model with the result that appeal is often made to comparisons with much later Neo-Assyrian treaty documents.⁷⁸

Now, however, the Hittite comparisons appear to rest on an even more secure base since the Ebla treaties antedate the Hittite by more than a millennium. Not enough of the material from Ebla has been published to establish formal comparisons between the Ebla and biblical legal genres in every respect. Pettinato does cite one treaty text, however, in which the element of curse, an element indispensable to a normal covenant pattern, is clearly similar to that of biblical curse formulas:

Whenever (he) does wrong, may the god sun, the god Hada, and the star who are witnesses, his decision scatter in the steppe; for the merchants who undertake a journey, water let there be none; may you have no stable abode; you, a journey of perdition may you undertake, O Tudia!⁷⁹

Of even greater importance is the fact that there is reported to be a document in which a treaty is combined with stipulations in the form of case law.⁸⁰ If so, this is the only example of such a mixed type known outside the Old Testament. The structure of Deuteronomy which consists of a formal covenant framework

in which the stipulation section (chaps. 5–26) is cast in the casuistic form (i.e., “if you . . . then I will,” etc.) is, in light of Ebla, no longer unique but finds a long-standing precedent.

Ebla and Hebrew Lexicography

The final area of Ebla-Old Testament relationships to be considered here is that of comparative lexicography. The fact that Eblaite was a West Semitic language in vogue 1,000 years before Moses and that it is preserved in nearly 20,000 clay tablets leads one to expect that many lexical problems in the Old Testament such as *hapax legomena* may finally be clarified. Again, it is unfortunate that even the few texts that have been published depend on the decipherment and reconstructions of only a few scholars who have as yet made most of them available only in transliteration or translation. The following proposals then must be considered tentative at best.

For many years the Hebrew word for “ark” (תֵּבָה) was derived from an Egyptian etymology, but it now appears as Eblaite *ti-ba-ti il-il*, “arks of the gods,” when defining the Sumerian *dub-lá-ki*, “sacred construction” (TM. 75. G. 1302 obv. II 11-III 1). It is also attested in the toponyms *ti-ba-ù^{ki}/tibā-hū*, “he is the Ark” (MEE 2, 40 rev. IV 6), and even *ia-ti-ba^{ki}*, “Ya is the Ark” (TM. 76. G. 523 rev. IX 21).⁸¹

Another example is the clarification of the *hapax legomenon* אֲבָרָךְ in Genesis 41:43.⁸² The NIV translates the relevant passage “Make way!” a reference to the command to the Egyptians to defer to Joseph. Ebla now yields a lexeme *'agarakum* and its variant *'abarakum* meaning “superintendent.” Perhaps then the Genesis passage should say “men shouted before him, ‘the superintendent!’”

The last example, also from the Joseph narratives, concerns the *hapax* חֶמֶד, translated “bread” in the NIV (Gen. 40:16).⁸³ The context has always required such an understanding but now Ebla attests the name of a profession, “the baker” as *lú ḥa-rí*, literally “man of the bread.” Thus the Hebrew word can rest on etymological as well as contextual bases.

Conclusion

Obviously the excavations at Tell Mardikh are of monumental significance to biblical studies even given the

caveat that one cannot be sure of the published reports because of the personal and political differences among the scholars involved. If even 10 percent of the alleged comparisons should prove to be valid, Ebla will have established itself as a major resource against which all future Old Testament study must be done. It is beyond question that traditional and conservative views of biblical history, especially of the patriarchal period, will continue to be favored by whatever results accrue from ongoing Ebla research. It is likewise true, however, that one must not repeat the mistakes of "pan-Babylonianism" or "pan-Ugaritism" in dealing with this revolutionary material. It has a role to play in furthering the understanding of the Bible; but in the final analysis the Bible, the inerrant Word of God, stands or falls on its own intrinsic merits.

Notes

1 O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 50.

2 For the earlier period of criticism see J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1965). First published as *History of Israel* in 1878, Wellhausen maintained that "we attain to no historical knowledge of the patriarchs, but only of the time when the stories about them arose in the Israelite people; this later age is here unconsciously projected, in its inner and outward features, into hoar antiquity, and is reflected there like a glorified mirage" (pp. 318-19). Essentially the same position is held almost exactly 100 years later by Norman Gottwald, for example, in his book, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), esp. pp. 40-41.

3 See the analysis of this as a factor in historiography in J. Maxwell Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 12-17.

4 The patriarchal stories are generally referred to as sagas rather than history. This saga-history distinction is attributed first of all to Hermann Gunkel (*Genesis, Übersetzt und erklärt*, 1922) but has been accepted and refined by virtually all subsequent critical scholars. See, for example, Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1961), pp. 30-42. John T. Luke points out, however, that the patriarchal stories have historiographic intent and to dismiss them as anything but history because they lack historiographic form is to "preclude the outcome of this dispute by dictating the rules" ("Abraham and the Iron Age: Reflections on the New Patriarchal Studies," *Journal of the Society of the Old Testament* 4 [1977]:37).

5 The best account of the history of the Tell Mardikh discoveries is that of Chaim Bermant and Michael Weitzman, *Ebla: A Revelation in Archaeology* (New York: Times Books, 1979), pp. 124-52.

6 Paolo Matthiae, *Ebla: An Empire Rediscovered*, trans. Christopher Holme (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981), pp. 58-64.

7 Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981), p. 73.

8 Eugene H. Merrill, "Fixed Dates in Patriarchal Chronology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (July-September 1980):241-51.

9 Tell Mardikh = Ebla is about 45 miles south-southwest of Aleppo, Syria, and

about 60 miles north-northeast of Ras Shamra (= Ugarit).

10 Pettinato, *Archives*, p. 56.

11 Giovanni Pettinato, "The Royal Archives of Tell Mardikh-Ebla," *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (1976):44.

12 For biblical history in particular see Sean Warner, "Patriarchs and Extra-Biblical Sources," *Journal of the Society of the Old Testament* 2 (1977):50-61, esp. p. 59.

13 Arnaldo Momigliano, "Biblical Studies and Classical Studies: Simple Reflections about Historical Method," *Biblical Archaeologist* 45 (1982):225.

14 J. Maxwell Miller, "Approaches to the Bible through History and Archaeology: Biblical History as a Discipline," *Biblical Archaeologist* 45 (1982):215-16.

15 *The Tribes of Yahweh*, p. 40. Even more radical reductionism is apparent in the "anti-Albright" reactionary works of T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); and J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975).

16 *The Tribes of Yahweh*, p. 32.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

18 Warner, "Patriarchs and Extra-Biblical Sources," pp. 53-54.

19 William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 2. The first edition appeared as early as 1949.

20 Though there is no universal acceptance of any one set of dates, most scholars date the EB IV period at ca. 2300–2100, the MB I 2100–2000, and MB II 2000–1800 B.C. For these dates see W. Dever, "Palestine in the Second Millennium BCE: The Archaeological Picture," in John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, eds., *Israelite and Judaeon History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 84.

21 So John Bright in even the latest edition of his work, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 85.

22 Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Historical Method and Early Hebrew Tradition," *Tyn-dale Bulletin* 17 (1966):82.

23 Martin J. Selman, "Comparative Methods and the Patriarchal Narratives," *Themelios* 3 (1977):14.

24 Kathleen Kenyon, *Amorites and Canaanites* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 76. For further confirmation see K. Prag, "The Intermediate Early Bronze–Middle Bronze Age: An Interpretation of the Evidence from Transjordan, Syria, and Lebanon," *Levant* 6 (1974):107.

25 C. H. J. de Geus, "The Amorites in the Archaeology of Palestine," *Ugaritic Forschungen* 3 (1971):58.

26 Dever, *Israelite and Judaeon History*, p. 86.

27 Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, trans. David Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 63.

28 J. -R. Kupper, *Les nomades en Mésopotamie au temps des rois de Mari* (Paris, 1957).

29 M. Rowton, "The Physical Environment and the Problem of the Nomads," *RAI* 15., ed. J. -R. Kupper (Liège, 1966), pp. 109-21.

30 M. Liverani, "The Amorites," *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 100-133.

31 J. T. Luke, "Pastoralism and Politics in the Mari Period: A Re-Examination of the Character and Political Significance of the Major West Semitic Tribal Groups on the Middle Euphrates, c. 1828–1753 B.C." (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1965).

32 The name Haran itself derives from the Akkadian *harrānu*, "highway"; cf. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956), 6:106-13.

33 For the routes see Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), #9.