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Ebla—Queen of Ancient Syria

Like a brilliant mirage shimmering across the desert sands, the teeming ancient city of Ebla¹ has now emerged in something of its ancient splendour from the veil of sand and mud that entombs the huge ruin-mound known today as Tell Mardikh in North Syria, some 44 miles (70 km) south of Aleppo.

The First Decade

However, the spectacular discoveries at Ebla are no mirage. Rather, they are the just reward of over ten years of systematic, dedicated work by the Italian archaeological expedition to Syria led by Professor Paolo Matthiae. Impressed by the huge size (140 acres) and prominent position of Tell Mardikh, Matthiae began a long-term ‘dig’. For the first ten years (1964-1974), he successfully explored key areas of the then-unidentified ancient city. The lozenge-shaped mound had once been a walled town with four gateways, several temples, and large areas of private houses—all of mud brick—around a higher citadel or ‘acropolis’ in the centre. Here, in the ‘city centre’, he found remains of a palace on the north side, and of yet another temple towards the west side.

On the time-scale of antiquity, the history of the city could be traced level by level, beginning with a prehistoric settlement (‘I’) and a first town on the acropolis site (‘IIA’), within about 3500-2400 BC. Then came two periods when the city first reached

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its full extent, with town-houses and temples around the acropolis crowned with its palace and main temple, *c.* 2400-2000 BC (‘IIB’, phases 1 & 2); each period ended with massive destruction, and then a rebuilding. Thus, from *c.* 2000-1600 BC, phoenix-like, the city again rose from its ashes, over its full area (‘IIIA & B’) before being devastated once more. Thereafter, it was a much humbler community that clung to the central acropolis through three more cultural periods for the next sixteen centuries (‘IV’, 1600-1200 BC; ‘V’, 1200-530 BC; ‘VI’, 530-60 BC). In Roman and Arabic times, the mound finally went to sleep, used only for a few poor burials (‘VII’, AD).

All this (with much valuable detail) was very welcome to archaeologists and ancient historians, although it hardly made headlines. Then in 1968 there was found a broken royal statue inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform, dedicated to the goddess Ishtar by Ibbit-Lim, king of Ebla. Did the huge mounds of Tell Mardikh conceal the ancient city of Ebla? The

¹ The account given in this chapter is based exclusively upon the official, first-hand reports by Profs Matthiae and Pettinato themselves, not upon the flurry of press reports (of very variable quality). To assure the authenticity of this sketch, running references are given to the Matthiae and Pettinato reports. For abbreviations used, see Bibliography.

geographical range of Ebla as a North-Syrian city, so far known from inscriptions as far afield as Sumer and Egypt, was feasible. The history of Ebla as profiled in these sources also fitted the fortunes of Tell Mardikh: a great city subdued by the mighty Sargon of Akkad *c.* 2300 BC, destroyed by his grandson Naram-Sin *c.* 2250 BC, and much less important in later times. As the archaeological, inscriptional and geographical evidence all seemed to fit, Matthiae and his cuneiform colleague Pettinato favoured this identification of the site. Elsewhere in the world, scholars disagreed amongst themselves, some for, some against, as scholars will ...!

The Great Discovery

But the debate was stopped in its tracks in 1974/75. New excavations on the west side of the acropolis showed that the base of a large square tower was part of another royal palace.² The tower occupied the north-east corner of a great Court of Audience. A richly-decorated ceremonial staircase down the inside of the tower led to a throne-dais, sheltered by a colonnade along the north wall of the court. South from the tower ran the east wall of the court, also with a colonnade. Halfway along it, three steps through a doorway led into further buried rooms of the palace.

Discovery of this huge ‘new’ palace where once the kings of Ebla sat in state to hold audience was remarkable—but much more was to come. In 1974, a room (no. 2506) just north of the tower yielded 42 clay tablets and fragments inscribed in cuneiform.³ By their script, all belonged to about 2300 BC, contemporary with the em-

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pire of Akkad in Mesopotamia, far to the east. Forty-one of the tablets were essentially administrative accounts for various products, especially metals, textiles, wood and pottery. The real surprise was the language used in the tablets. Alongside the traditional Sumerian terminology borrowed from Mesopotamia, the scribes also wrote entries in their own language—Eblaite. This proved to be a North-West Semitic dialect, showing close links in its grammar and vocabulary with later biblical Hebrew, Canaanite and Phoenician. Dated at around 2300 BC, Eblaite is the oldest known language of this group, up to 1000 years before the tablets of Ugarit, for example. In biblical terms, it is 500 years before the patriarchs, 1000 years before Moses, 16 centuries before Isaiah, 20 centuries before Alexander the Great. For the present, therefore, Professor Pettinato has classified the ‘new’ language (Eblaite) as ‘Early Canaanite’ or ‘Palaeo-Canaanite’.

In 1975, the leads given by these finds were confirmed in astonishing fashion. At the north end of the great court’s eastern colonnade, a small room yielded 1000 tablets and fragments, while a second room nearer the south end contained up to another 14,000 tablets and fragments. These lay row upon row, just where they had fallen from the burning wooden shelves when the palace was destroyed by Naram-Sin’s troops about 2250 BC.⁴ This overwhelming mass of written documents, some 15,000 all told, was conveyed in 100 caseloads to the museum in Aleppo. From preliminary reports on the first ten thousand or so tablets by Prof Pettinato, and accounts of the archaeology of the site by Prof Matthiae, it is

² For this phase, see Matthiae, *OR-44*, pp. 337 ff.; *CRAIBL-76*, pp. 190 ff.

³ For what follows, see Pettinato, *OR-44*, pp. 361 f.

⁴ Following Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, pp. 203 ff.

possible to sketch an outline of Ebla and its ‘empire’ at the height of its power and glory. What follows is based upon their first-hand reports in Italian, French, German and English, omitting the more dubious flourishes in secondary sources.

The City and Society of Ebla (c. 2300 BC)

From about 2400 BC until about 1650/1600 BC, ancient Ebla probably occupied the whole of its 140-acre site, the entire city being surrounded by strong walls, pierced by four great city gates of varying size. Dominating the main area of the ‘lower city’ from its higher position at the centre, there rose the ‘acropolis’ or citadel—the nerve-centre of government where the royal palaces and administration were located. With the archaeological remains of walls, gates and buildings can be combined data from the tablets. One tablet in particular⁵ permits us to see in outline the organization of this city which, at one period, had a population of 260,000 people.⁶ The acropolis or ‘governorate’ contained four main cen-

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tres. First was the *Palace of the King*. This doubtless comprised the actual residence of the king, queen and royal family, besides the central offices for Ebla’s state administration and ‘foreign office’—as illustrated by the archives themselves, headed by the great court of audience. To run this, we hear of 10 leading officials with 60 subordinates or ‘dependants’—six aides per leader. Second was the *Palace of the City*. This bureau probably ran the affairs of the city of Ebla itself (as distinct from the wide-ranging territories beyond). Its staff too had 10 leaders, but with just 55 subordinates. These two corps of officials belonged to one common function whose role has not yet been worked out. Third was the *Stables*—most likely the focus of the immense commercial activity of Ebla, with merchants and emissaries travelling to and fro, between Ebla and innumerable foreign cities and kingdoms. This institution possessed no fewer than 63 leaders, but these had only 60 aides between them (one each, but for three without any). Fourth was the *Palace of Service (?)* or *of Servants (?)*—possibly the offices that handled the labour-supply for running the city and state administration. It had 20 leaders with 35 aides (2 each for 15 leaders, only one each for the other 5). It is clear that the more numerous leaders in the Stables and Services ‘ministries’ were of lesser status (only 1 or 2 aides each), concerned with more mundane affairs than the civil service ‘mandarins’ in the Royal and Municipal ‘palaces’ with 5 or 6 aides each. Correspondingly, the leaders in the Stables and Services departments bore a title (Sumerian *ú-a*; Akkadian *zaninu*) meaning ‘providers’—they were responsible for supplies (food, income, etc.) for their ‘ministries’. Thus, the royal citadel or acropolis hummed with state affairs and bureaucratic activity—perhaps with 4,700 people working there according to one tablet.⁷

On the acropolis reigned the King, usually denoted by the Sumerian term *en*, ‘lord’, corresponding to Eblaite *malik*, ‘king’ (cf. Hebrew *melek*). By his side, the Queen (Eblaite *maliktum*, cf. Hebrew *malka/maleket*) shared in state affairs, as did the crown prince (home affairs) and the son second-in-succession (foreign affairs).⁸ In dealing with other rulers, the kings of Ebla used a twotier system. Kings who were their equals they called *en/malik*,

⁵ Tablet TM. 75, G. 336 (c. 2300 BC), transcribed and discussed by Pettinato and Matthiae, *RSO-50*, pp. 1-30, and briefly by Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 47.

⁶ A figure quoted by Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 47, from a further text.

⁷ Mentioned by Pettinato, *RSO-50*, p. 13, n. 29. Wider services required 11,700 men, Matthiae, *BA-39*, 107.

⁸ This paragraph depends on Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 47 and n. 8 (text cited).

‘sovereign’, like themselves. Vassals or local kinglets of lesser power and status they called *lugal* (Sumerian, ‘chief man’, ‘king’) or *diku* (‘judge’).

So much for the ‘upper crust’ on the acropolis. What of the ‘lower city’? This, too, was divided into four ‘quarters’ or city-districts, each with a main city gate. Absolute certainty is not yet possible in identifying the named gates and districts with those discovered archaeologically. However, the first or *City District*⁹ with

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the ‘City Gate’ (north-west one) and the 2nd District with the ‘Sipish Gate’¹⁰ (north-east one) had each 20 leaders with 100 and 98 subordinates respectively (5 aides per leader, again), comparable in status with their chief colleagues on the acropolis. Smallest was the *3rd District*, having only 10 leaders and 30 aides (only 3 per leader), perhaps in the south-west quarter (? Dagan Gate). Of middle rank was the *4th District* (? and Reshep Gate; southeast area?), with 20 leaders and 50 aides. So, like any great city, Ebla probably had its favoured and lesser neighbourhoods—‘residential’ and otherwise. The first three districts and their 50 leaders came under a separate (chief? inspector. The Eblaite word for these numerous sectional leaders or officers is *nase*—same as the Hebrew *nasi*, ‘leader’, ‘ruler’, in the Old Testament (cf. below). In the tablet that lists them, they are assigned grain-rations of half a measure each, using a term hitherto unknown.

This tablet is a representative of the first, and largest, group of documents in the Ebla archives: administrative and economic texts. These include many such ‘ration-lists’ for palace personnel, envoys to and from foreign parts, and offerings for the gods and their temples. Well represented is agriculture: grain-crops, vineyards, cattle-raising. Even more so, ‘industry’: metalworking (gold, silver, copper), gems, textiles, wood-working and pottery. Foreign trade in metalware and textiles was recorded on huge ‘supertables’ over a foot square (35 x 30 cm), bearing up to 30 columns of text (up to 50 lines each) on each face of a tablet—some 6,000 lines of inscription per tablet! Business ledgers indeed, for the ‘balance of payments’!¹¹

Home affairs represent one side of a second class of tablets: historical and judicial texts. These include letters between high officials on matters of state, royal decrees, legal contracts of sale and purchase, and of division of property, plus collections of laws—centuries older than those of Ur-Nammu of Ur or of Hammurabi of Babylon. Politically important marriages and appointments to office also feature.

The History and World Horizons of Ebla (c. 2400-1650 BC)

1. The Clash of Empires: Ebla and Akkad (c. 2400-2250 BC)

⁹ Compare our modern use of ‘the city’ for innermost London, or the ‘inner city’ for the central part of any of our large cities.

¹⁰ Gate of the sun-god.

¹¹ Cf. Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 45, § A, I; Pettinato, *OR-44*, p. 365; Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 205.

Until the great discoveries of 1975, no-one had even the slightest inkling of the former power of Ebla in the 24th/23rd centuries BC. In that epoch of ancient and world history, it was another power entirely that seemed to have the world stage to itself: the empire of Akkad.¹² During most of the third millennium BC, ancient

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Mesopotamia saw the brilliant flowering of Sumerian civilization, divided politically among a series of rival city-states: Ur, Kish, Lagash, Uruk, and others. But after serving at the court of the king of Kish, a Semite (Akkadian) set himself up as a king—Sargon¹³—in a new city of his own: Akkad or Agade. Sargon of Akkad brought the whole of Mesopotamia under his sway, to the Persian or Arabian Gulf, and pushed north and west to Mari and the borders of Syria and Anatolia. He thus founded the first-ever Semitic empire, about 2350 BC. He briefly subdued Ebla, with other cities. At Sargon's death, two of his sons successively lost most of their father's empire, and it was his grandson Naram-Sin (c. 2250 BC) who restored the dominion of Akkad to its full extent, marching westward and destroying Ebla—which he hailed as a great victory. How great was not known in modern times until 1975...

The archives of Ebla show now that the world stage was not monopolized by Akkad; the limelight was originally shared equally with Ebla. The following table may help in appreciating the revised history of the epoch.¹⁴

Ebla	Mari	Assyria	Akkad
(?Gumalum)			
Igrish-Halam			
Irkab-Damu	<i>Iblul-II</i>		
Ar-Ennum ¹⁵	<i>Enna-Dagan</i> (of Ebla)		
			<i>Sargon</i>
<i>Ebrum</i>		<i>Tudiya</i>	
			<i>Rimush</i>
<i>Ibbi-Sipish</i>			
	<i>Shura-Damu</i> (of Ebla)		<i>Manishtushu</i>
<i>Dubuhu Ada</i>			
			<i>Naram-Sin</i>

Of the first Eblaite king named above—Gumalum—nothing is yet known, not even his proper date.¹⁶ The first well-placed king, Igrish-Halam, reigned unchallenged over Ebla and north Syria while Sargon had not yet arisen to conquer either the Sumerian city-states or more distant lands. Irkab-Damu sought to build up a strong mercenary army, seeking to obtain good soldiers from Hamazi, far away to the east.¹⁷ After a promising start, Ar-Ennum was less

¹² Excellent account by C. J. Gadd, in *Cambridge Ancient History*,³ I/2, 1971, pp. 417-463 (Ch. IX).

¹³ Le., *Sharru-ken*, 'legitimate king', probably a surname that replaced his personal name.

¹⁴ Contrast the accounts given in the best histories published before 1975, e.g., Gadd, *Camb. Anc. History*, cited just above.

¹⁵ Or, Reshi-Ennum (Pettinato, *RLA*, V, p. 12).

¹⁶ On him, cf. Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 209, n. 53, who suggests that he may have reigned just before or after Igrish-Halam. For all that follows, see Pettinato, *BA-39*, pp. 47-48, and Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, pp. 209-214.

¹⁷ Cited by Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 48. & n. 14. According to latest indications, the king Irkab-Damu should not be last of his line, but be placed between Igrish-Halam and Ar-Ennum., Dubuhu-Ado may not have had chance to

fortunate. Further east, on the middle Euphrates, King Iblul-II of Mari had gained control over Assyria. But then Ar-Ennum of Ebla sent his general Enna-Dagan eastwards, who con-

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quered the new-born 'empire' of Mari, compelling Iblul-II to pay a massive tribute to Ebla of 11,000 lbs weight of silver and 880 lbs of gold. Enna-Dagan was then put in charge of Mari, as subject of Ar-Ennum of Ebla. But, by now, Sargon of Akkad had won control of all southern Mesopotamia, and was now looking northwestwards to Syria and Anatolia, sources of valuable timber and metal. He conquered Assyria, then Mari, northernmost Syria, and hammered on the gates of Ebla itself, whose submission and tribute he exacted,¹⁸ perhaps before claiming sovereignty up to the Taurus Mountains and returning in triumph to Akkad.

The defeat of Ar-Ennum probably cost him his throne. Instead, the powerful dignitary Ebrum took over the rule of Ebla. Whether or not he was a son of Ar-Ennum, we do not know. However, the new king diligently restored the widespread rule of Ebla throughout north Syria and beyond. In due time, in Sargon's old age or after his death, Ebrum once more extended the sway of Ebla eastwards. He¹⁹ again subdued Mari as his predecessor had done, installing his son Shura-Damu as vassal-king there. This time, the empire of Akkad under Sargon's son Rimush was powerless to reply—the new ruler of Akkad was too beset by revolts nearer home to worry about lands in the distant north-west. Going one step further, the ambitious Ebrum succeeded in imposing an international commercial treaty upon a new king of Assyria, Tudiya, who was definitely the lesser partner. Hitherto, Tudiya had been known to us only as the first name in the Assyrian King List, first of 'seventeen kings who lived in tents', so remote did he and they seem in later tradition. This treaty is but one of several international treaties found in the Ebla archives, heralds of seventeen centuries of ancient Near Eastern treaties. This one contains an introduction, listing the leading dignitaries of Ebla, then proceeds in twenty paragraphs of main text with the founding and regulation of a commercial centre (*karum*) and its merchants, and ends with a splendid curse-formula as sanction upon the Assyrian king, should he break the treaty—clearly making him virtually Ebla's vassal.²⁰ Such, now, was the triumph of Ebla that even Akkad itself paid tribute—perhaps not from the capital but from some northern province only, to buy off Ebla's encroachments. During the troubled reigns of Sargon's sons Rimush and Manishtushu, the eyes of Akkad looked south and east, leaving the north-west to Ebla's supremacy.

Now, in the relatively long reigns of Ebrum and his son and successor Ibbi-Sipish, was the golden age of the 'empire' of Ebla. From almost all quarters of the ancient Near East, messengers, merchants and tributaries formed the sinews of the influence and power of Ebla. Most of Syria west to the Mediterranean, south to

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succeed his long-lived father . Ibbi-Sipish whose reign may have been that actually ended by Naram-Sin. Cf. P. Matthiae, *Comptes rendus de l'Academie des inscriptions & belles-lettres*, 1977, pp. 164 ff.

¹⁸ Cf. Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 210, n. 54.

¹⁹ So, Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 47, and *OR-44*, p. 367. Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 210, & n. 54, p. 211, n. 65, envisages the new victory over Mari as occurring under Ebrum's successor, Ibbi-Sipish.

²⁰ See summary, Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 48.

Hamath, north well beyond Aleppo,²¹ and east to Mari and Assyria, was ruled by the kings of Ebla, mainly through vassals. But commercial and trading relations reached much further. Northwards, Ebla's envoys climbed through the Taurus mountains onto the Anatolian plateau to trade with the famous centre at Kanesh and even to Hattu(sa)²²—future Hittite capital seven centuries into the future. Eastwards, along or within the upper and middle Euphrates, we meet with cities like Carchemish, Urshu, Nahur, Mari and Tuttul.²³ Southwards through Syria, via Hamath inland and ports like Ugarit or Byblos or Tyre on the coast, Ebla's commercial tentacles reached on into Palestine, already termed 'Canaan'.²⁴ Familiar names appear: Hazor, Megiddo, Dor, Joppa, Lachish, Gaza, all the way south to Sinai itself. An Ashtarot is perhaps the Ashteroth-Qarnaim located in Transjordan in Genesis 14:6. Salim (or rather, Urusalim) is almost certainly the Salim (later, Jerusalem) of Genesis 14:18, some five or six centuries before its next occurrence in the 'Execration Texts' from Egypt, c. 1800 BC.²⁵ Only Egypt, proud, aloof, and independent under the Sixth-Dynasty pharaohs of the 'pyramid age', seems not yet to occur on Ebla's wide horizons. But, apart from Lebanese timber and Sinai's minerals, the interest of the pharaohs was oftener directed far south up the Nubian Nile.

The reign of Ibbi-Sipish's son, Dubuhu-Ada, may have been short. By now, however, Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin ruled in Akkad and sought to restore his ancestor's domains in full. At home, Ebla's nearest vassal, the ruler of Armi (Aleppo), seemed now more powerful than his lord. At length, when Naram-Sin marched west, he defeated the hired levies of Ebla, ransacked and destroyed the once great city, about 2250 BC. The great commercial network of Ebla collapsed completely under the blow, leaving Naram-Sin 'king of the four quarters' of the known world, as his titles proudly proclaim him. However, in later years, Naram-Sin in turn suffered eclipse as his unwieldy empire broke up around him, and his son's reign ended in a chaos of usurpers, so that in a few decades the empire of Akkad followed that of Ebla into oblivion.

2. The Later Ages of Ebla (c. 2250-1600 BC)

Akkad was never to rise again, and its very site is lost to this day. But after a brief interval, Ebla was rebuilt to its former extent (level IIB, 2), and regained something of its former municipal splendour, but not its political power. The acropolis had a new palace on the north side. On the west, a massive new ceremonial stairway led up over the buried ruins of the former palace (with its 15,000 tablets...) to a restored main temple. In Syria, political supremacy

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lay with other city-states (such as Aleppo). In Mesopotamia, the Third Dynasty of Ur held sway, whose influence reached as far west as Byblos,²⁶ but without the military pressure of the Akkad conquerors.

²¹ Seemingly called Armi at this early period.

²² Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 213 & n. 71; Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 46.

²³ Pettinato, *OR-44*, p. 365.

²⁴ mentioned in the epithet, 'Dagan of Canaan', Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 48.

²⁵ Cf. (e.g.) Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 46 & n. 7.

²⁶ Ibdati king of Byblos is mentioned in Ur-III documents, cf. J. Bottéro, *Cambs. Anc. History*,³ 1/2, 1971, p. 560.

About 2000 BC, Ebla was again sacked and again rebuilt (level III). Massive brick fortifications crowned a smoothed-off mud, sloping rampart all round (pierced as ever by the four gates), to defend the city, its temples, and yet another new palace on the acropolis. Of the kings of Ebla about 1900 BC, we know only the names of Igrish-Khepa and his son Ibbit-Lim. The latter set up a statue to the goddess Ishtar in her temple, in ‘the 8th year of Ishtar’. But Ebla now was a satellite of Aleppo, capital of the strong kingdom of Yamkhad, often mentioned in the vast archives of Mari in the 18th century BC (but Ebla, never). Finally, in the 17th century BC, the Hittite king Hattusil I reduced the power of Aleppo, and his son Mursil I sacked it—and at the same time probably Ebla as well, by about 1600 BC. Henceforth, Ebla was a mere village on its acropolis down to Persian and Hellenistic times.

The Culture of the Golden Age of Ebla (c. 2300 BC)

1. Schools and Scholars

To maintain the elaborate fabric of government and society, the ‘empire’ of Ebla needed skilled scribes. Thus, the royal archives contained special works of reference, based on Sumerian models current in Mesopotamia since at least 2500 BC. Besides paradigms of verbs in Sumerian and Eblaite, these tablets included ‘lexical’ texts: long classified lists of the Sumerian words for animals, birds, fishes, terms for professions, types of personal names, geographical names (‘gazetteers’), and all manner of objects—199 such tablets have so far been found at Ebla. Among them are 32 (perhaps up to 56) bilingual vocabularies, having each Sumerian word translated into Eblaite (i.e., early Canaanite). One superb example (with 18 duplicate copies!) contains 1000 words in both languages—an inestimable treasure for scholars today, as it was handy for scribes in antiquity.²⁷ Aided also by the rest of the archives, these special tablets will enable us to see the early history of many hundreds of words familiar from biblical Hebrew and its relatives such as Ugaritic and Phoenician.

2. Earliest Literature of the Levant

Hitherto, the world’s oldest written literatures have been those of the two great river-valley civilisations—Egypt on the Nile, and the

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Sumerians and Akkadians of Mesopotamia. Now, we have a third ‘world’s earliest’ centre, at Ebla, offering literature in the oldest-known West Semitic language (Eblaite) as well as in Sumerian. The mythological stories show this blend well; written in Eblaite, they celebrate Sumerian deities such as Enki, Enlil, Utu, and the goddess Inanna.²⁸ The *collections of proverbs* will rival those of Sumer and Egypt as representatives of the world’s oldest wisdom literature. In the religious realm come some brief *hymns* to the gods, and *magical incantations*.²⁹

3. Religion³⁰

²⁷ Cf. Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 209, n. 52 (numbers of tablets), and Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 45, § A, II & V.

²⁸ Press reports of creation and flood stories have so far received no official confirmation.

²⁹ Cf. Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 45, IV; Matthiae, *CRAIBL-76*, p. 209.

³⁰ Cf. Pettinato, *BA-39*, pp. 48-50.

Ebla was populated by gods (about 500!) as well as by over a quarter-million human inhabitants. Naturally, in so large a pantheon, it is the leading figures that really mattered. Linked with Canaan, Mesopotamia and Anatolia, cosmopolitan Ebla drew its chief gods from three regions at least. Most at home were the West-Semitic deities. These included: *Il* or *El*, the 'senior god'; *Dagan* (OT, Dagon), god of grain; *Rasap* (OT, Resheph), god of plague and lightning-flash; the sun-god *Sipish* (cf. Babylonian *Shamash*; OT shemesh, 'sun'); the weather/storm god *Adad*; *Ashtar*, a male equivalent of Astarte (OT, Ashtoreth); the goddess *Ashera* (cf. OT Asherah); *Kashalu*, perhaps the same as Koshar, the artificer-god of later Ugarit; *Malik* (cf. Ammonite Milcom?); and *Kemish*, perhaps familiar 15 centuries later as Kemosh, god of the Moabites. Distinguished foreign members of Ebla's pantheon included such venerable Sumerian deities as *Enlil*, lord of the world order, and *Enki*, god of magic and wisdom. Even more exotic were gods of the Hurrians ('Horites') from the north and north-east; such were *Ashtabi*, a warrior-god, and the goddess *Adammu*.³¹ Local forms of the great gods were popular, e.g. *Dagan* of Tuttul, *Dagan* of Canaan, and so on. The Sumerian-Eblaite vocabulary tablets show us how the theologians of Ebla equated Syrian deities with their Mesopotamian cousins. Thus Resheph = Sumerian Nergal, and *Sipish* = *Utu*, for example.

The ancient gods of Ebla had to be housed, fed and honoured as befitted their station in life. The administrative tablets mention the temples of *Dagan*, *Ashtar*, *Resheph* and *Kemish*. The regular cult of the gods required bread and drink offerings, plus animal sacrifices, especially on festival days—such as on the feasts of *Ashtabi* and *Adammu*, for example. The royal family were patrons of the state gods. Thus, in one month, the king (en) of Ebla gave as offerings '11 sheep to *Adad*', '12 sheep for *Dagan*', '10 sheep for *Resheph*'. The literary texts preserve brief hymns sung to the gods, probably on such occasions. The actual temples of the golden age

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of Ebla (c. 2300 BC) lie buried for the most part under later remains. However, the excavations have unearthed several temples of the later periods, c. 2200/2000 BC, and especially c. 2000/1650 BC.³² The lower city boasted three in the south quarters (B1, B2, C) and one in the north districts (N). These sometimes had a large sanctuary within massive walls that once towered up to some height, with service-rooms around the outside. Most impressive of all was the great temple on the acropolis (site 'D'), with portico, vestibule and ample sanctuary, a distant forerunner in its layout of Late Bronze and Iron Age temples in Hazor and north Syria, and of the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. The furnishings of such a temple are illustrated by the fine stone libation-basin sculptured with scenes of the gods, doubtless used in the long, complex rituals of offering customary in all ancient Near-Eastern temples. From the tablets of c. 2300 BC, we learn also about the servants of the gods in such temples—priests, priestesses, and 'prophets'. For this latter group, two terms are used: *mahhu* (already known from later Akkadian), and *nabi'utum*, a word related to the Hebrew *nabi*, 'prophet'.

³¹ On this pair, cf. E. Laroche, *Recherches sur les noms des dieux hittites*, 1947, p. 46; E. von Schuler, in W. Haussig (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Mythologie*, I, 1965, p. 177. *Ashtabi* or *Ashtapi* was the equivalent of the Mesopotamian gods *Ninurta* and *Zababa*.

³² On temples discovered, cf. briefly Matthiae, *OR-44*, pp. 344-346, fig. 3, pls. 31-34, with ref to earlier publications.

Naturally, the personal names of the people of Ebla often related to their gods, e.g. *Ebdu-Rasap*, ‘servant of Resheph’; *Mi-ka-Il*, ‘who is like El/God?’ (cf. Hebrew *Mi-cha-el*). Some names end in the element *ya* or *a(w)*, as a seeming alternative to El. Prof Pettinato has questioned whether perhaps *El* and *Yaw* here alternate as names of god(s), somewhat as Elohim and YHWH in the Hebrew Bible.³³ If the form *Yaw* was actually an early form of YHWH, then of course the common misconception about Exodus 6:3, that the name YHWH was unknown before Moses, would be eliminated at a stroke, together with much of the ‘critical’ theories based in part upon such misconceptions. However, many West-Semitic names end in *-a* or *-ia*, a convenient abbreviation for the name of a deity (any deity) left unstated. Therefore, for the present, it is altogether more prudent to treat the *-ya* ending in Eblaite names as just such an abbreviation, rather than to base large assumptions upon it (however intriguing), until fuller and definite information becomes available.

Ebla and the Old Testament

Ebla in 2300 BC is indeed a fascinating place—but how does it relate to the Old Testament? At first blush (and admittedly with a mischievous twinkle in the eye), one might just reply, ‘Not at all!’ No biblical characters or events feature in the vast archives from Ebla, and Ebla itself occurs nowhere in the Old Testament.

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However, the overwhelming importance of most Near-Eastern discoveries for the Old Testament consists in the enlightening background that they supply, rather than in specific mentions of biblical people and happenings. On that score, Ebla certainly deserves fullest consideration, even on the basis of the necessarily limited information so far available.

1. *On General Approaches*

Time and again in Old Testament studies, we are told that ‘history knows of no such person’ as, say, Abraham or Moses, or ‘...of no such events’ as the battles of Genesis 14, for example. However such phrases are totally misleading. They simply cover the ignorance not of ‘history’ personified but of the person making this claim. Until 1975, Ebla was nothing more than a shadowy name: a once-prominent north-Syrian city alongside many more, such as Aleppo, Carchemish, Emar and the rest. If anyone before 1975 had stood up and dared proclaim that Ebla had been the centre of a vast economic empire, rival to that of Akkad, under a dynasty of six kings, he or she would have been dismissed with derision. History ‘knew’ of no such sweeping dominion, no such line of kings, no such preeminence. But since 1975, of course, the archives exhumed have changed all that!

Therefore, one lesson that Ebla reinforces is that it is always extremely foolish to argue from a negative, especially in view of our still very uneven and incomplete knowledge of the total history of the ancient Near East. Many gaps are closed—many others, in several regions, are not. As already mentioned, Akkad itself, the very capital of Sargon and Naram-Sin, has so far never been found in modern Iraq, even though its once-extensive remains must lie buried somewhere in that land. But this negative fact has never impelled any rational observer to doubt its former existence or importance. Therefore, it is entirely premature to dismiss on

³³ Cf. his guarded remarks, *BA-39*, p. 48.

purely negative grounds the possible existence of biblical characters such as Abraham or Joseph, Moses or Solomon, for example.

A good example from outside the Bible is that of the Assyrian king Tudiya, already noted above for his treaty with Ebla. Until 1975, this shadowy name that heads the Assyrian King List (composed *c.* 1000 BC, in its first form) was treated with the greatest scepticism along with his near fellows—his name was even dismissed as ‘free invention, or a corruption’!³⁴ Whereas in fact, the name is real, the man is real, he was indeed Assyrian king as the List records, and as such signed a treaty with Ebrum king of Ebla. Thus, the genealogical tradition of the early part of the Assyrian King List (linked as it is with Hammurabi’s ancestral line back

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from *c.* 1650 BC) is to this extent vindicated as preserving faithfully the memory of real early people who were Assyrian rulers. Not dissimilar material in the Old Testament, therefore, such as genealogical material in Genesis 11 or patriarchal traditions, should be treated with similar respect.

2. *The Earliest Background for Biblical Hebrew*

To the Orientalist, it is commonplace to handle from Egypt three thousand years of documents written in successive forms of ancient Egyptian; or from Mesopotamia, Sumerian and East-Semitic (Akkadian) documents covering practically the same long timespan. But until now, this has not been so for the family group of West-Semitic dialects to which biblical Hebrew belongs. Before 1929, practically no West-Semitic texts were known from much earlier than about 900 BC, except for the obscure proto-Sinaitic fragments, and some Canaanite words and forms in the Amarna tablets of the 14th century BC (in Babylonian cuneiform). But during the 1930’s, the twin discoveries at Ugarit and Mari drastically enlarged our knowledge of West Semitic in the 2nd millennium BC. At Ugarit, those tablets written in a local cuneiform alphabet used also a local Northwest Semitic language—Ugaritic—quite closely related to both Hebrew and Canaanite/Phoenician. All these tablets were written in the 14th/13th centuries BC prior to the fall of Ugarit in *c.* 1200 BC, while some compositions originated rather earlier. At Mari, the enormous archives of some 22,000 tablets (even bigger than Ebla) of about the 18th century BC contained many personal names expressed in a form of West Semitic often labelled ‘Amorite’, an early cousin of Ugaritic and El-Amarna Canaanite. But now, Ebla has taken our knowledge of West Semitic nearly half a millennium further back, to *c.* 2400 BC, almost to the mid-third millennium BC. West Semitic in its various forms now at last has an ancient history of two-and-a-half thousand years comparable in outline with Egyptian and Akkadian. A highly simplified table may serve to illustrate its successive phases set out in parallel with those of Egyptian and Akkadian for comparison.

Egyptian	Date	West Semitic	Akkadian
Old Egyptian	Mid-3 rd mill-nm BC	Eblaite, or ‘Palaeo-Canaanite’	Old Akkadian
Middle and	Early-2 nd mill-nm BC	‘Amorite’ (Mari)	Old-Babylonian & Old-Assyrian

³⁴ Cf. (e.g.) F. R. Kraus, *Könige, die in Zelten wohnten*, 1965, p. 4/124.

Late Egyptian	Later-2 nd mill-nm BC	Canaanite, Ugaritic	Middle Babylonian & Middle Assyrian
Late-Eg.; Demotic	1 st mill-nm BC	Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic; Moabite, etc.	Standard & Neo-Bab.; Neo-Assyr.; Late-Babyl.

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Seventy or a hundred years ago, no such vast depth of perspective was possible; and to suit the purely theoretical reconstructions of Old Testament books and history by German Old Testament scholars in particular, many words in Hebrew were labelled 'late' 600 BC and later, in effect. By this simple means, mere philosophical prejudices could be given the outward appearance of a 'scientific' linguistic foundation. This kind of manipulation is still a basic element in such reconstructions down to the present day.

However, the immense growth in our knowledge of the earlier history of words found in Old Testament Hebrew tends now to alter all this. If a given word is used in Ebla in 2300 BC, and in Ugarit in 1300 BC, then it cannot by any stretch of the imagination be a 'late' word (600 BC!), or an 'Aramaism' at periods when standard Aramaic had not yet evolved. It becomes instead an early word, a part of the ancestral inheritance of biblical Hebrew. More positively, the increased number of contexts that one gains for rarer words can provide useful confirmation—or correction—of our understanding of their meaning.³⁵

Thus, to go back to the survey of city-officials at Ebla, the term used for those scores of 'leaders' was *nase*, the same word as *nasi*, a term in biblical Hebrew used for leaders of the tribes of Israel (e.g., Numbers 1:16, 44, etc.), and applied to other purely human rulers such as Solomon (1 Kings 11:34). Old-fashioned biblical criticism declared the word to be 'late', a mark of the hypothetical 'priestly code' for example.³⁶ The word *ketem*, 'gold', is in Hebrew a rare and poetic synonym for *zahab*, and is commonly dismissed as 'late'.³⁷ Unfortunately for this mis-dating, the word was borrowed into Egyptian from Canaanite back in the 12th century BC,³⁸ and now—over 1000 years earlier still—recurs as *kutim* in the Palaeo-Canaanite of Ebla, 2300 BC.³⁹ The rare word *sāgā* (two forms), 'be/grow great', is similarly neither an Aramaism nor 'late',⁴⁰ but is firmly attested in Ebla (2300 BC) in the personal name Shiga-Damu, 'Damu is great'.⁴¹ The short relative form *she*, *sha*, may well be 'northern', but hardly 'late',⁴² as it now occurs (as *shi*) in Eblaite—northern but very early!⁴³ As remarked in Chapter 2, the Hebrew word *tehom*, 'deep', was not borrowed from Babylonian, seeing that it is attested not only in Ugaritic as *thmt* (13th century BC) but also at Ebla a thousand years earlier (*ti'amatum*).⁴⁴ The term is Common Semitic. As an example of a rare word confirmed in both existence and meaning, one may cite Hebrew 'ereshet, 'desire',

³⁵ One must, of course, make full allowance for differences in meaning that can occur in different West Semitic dialects, and in different periods of time.

³⁶ Cf. long since, S. R. Driver, *Literature of the Old Testament*, 1913, p. 134:38/39.

³⁷ As (for example) in Brown, Driver & Briggs, *A Hebrew & English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1907 (& reprints), p. 508b.

³⁸ Attested in Great Papyrus Harris 1, under Ramesses III/IV; see refs., Kitchen, *Ancient Orient & OT*, 1966, p. 144 & n. 13.

³⁹ Cited by Pettinato, *OR-44*, p. 369 & n. 44, p. 371 & n. 83.

⁴⁰ As Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 960a, b, would have it.

⁴¹ Pettinato, *OR-44*, p. 372 & n. 98.

⁴² Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 979a.

⁴³ Pettinato, *OR-44*, p. 372 top; *RSO-50*, p. 11 & n. 17: 'gate of (*shi*) the city'.

⁴⁴ Cf. list, Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 50.

which occurs just once in the Bible, in Psalm 21:2 (Heb. 21:3). Besides being found in Ugaritic in the 13th century BC,⁴⁵ this word now appears a millennium earlier at Ebla as *irisatum* (Eblaite or Old-Akkadian) in the Sumerian/Eblaite

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vocabulary tablets.⁴⁶ Finally, the supposed ‘late’ verb *hadash/hiddesh*, ‘be new/to renew’ goes back—again—via Ugaritic (*hadath*) to Eblaite (*(h)edash(u)*).⁴⁷ And so on, for many more besides.

The lessons here are—or should be—clear. Set against 2½ thousand years of the history and development of the West Semitic dialects, the whole position of the dating of the vocabulary and usages in biblical Hebrew will need to be completely reexamined. The truth appears to be that early West Semitic in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC had in common a vast and rich vocabulary, to which the later dialects such as Canaanite, Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, etc., fell heirs—but in uneven measure. Words that remained in everyday prosaic use in one of these languages lingered on only in high-flown poetry or in traditional expressions in another of the group. Thus, not a few supposed ‘late words’ or ‘Aramaisms’ in Hebrew (especially in poetry) are nothing more than early West-Semitic words that have found less use in Hebrew but have stayed more alive in Aramaic. Conversely, supposed ‘Hebraisms’ in Aramaic are sometimes just words more alive in ordinary Hebrew, but inherited also in Aramaic as part of older, traditional usage. And, as illustrated above, the impact of this oldest West-Semitic language of Ebla—especially when allied with evidence from ‘Amorite’ and Ugaritic—promises to be drastic indeed upon the gross misuse of the ‘late word argument’ by Old Testament scholars intent on propping-up the long outdated 19th century reconstructions of Old Testament history and literature, based essentially on false philosophical presuppositions instead of upon verifiable facts.

3. Lies, * lies, and statistics!**

This saying is a child of our modern times, born of the welter of numbers that engulfs our lives, and of the uses and misuses to which they can be put. Numbers, however, can present great problems also in studying the ancient biblical Near East. Some—as today—represent the misuse of numbers, as when the court scribes of Sargon II of Assyria (c. 722-715 BC) deliberately inflated totals of booty claimed from one version of a text to another. Thus, 1235 sheep taken in one edition became 100,225 in a later one!⁴⁸ Other problems involved are quite different. In texts long transmitted by repeated recopying, the accurate transmission of numbers required particular care and was not always maintained. And sometimes the ancients provide us with first-hand statistics of indubitable authenticity that still surprise us.

Ebla illustrates this theme in several respects. Imperial Ebla at

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⁴⁵ C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 1965, p. 367, No. 379.

⁴⁶ Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 50.

⁴⁷ ‘Late’ (Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 293b, f.); in Ugaritic, Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 1965, p. 395, No. 843 (esp. 3 Aqhat 9); Eblaite, Pettinato, *OR-44*, p. 372 & n. 92.

⁴⁸ Cf. long since, A. T. Olmstead, *Assyrian Historiography*, 1916, pp. 7-8, 42 & n. 2.

the height of its power must have had a vast income. From one defeated king of Mari alone, a tribute of 11,000 lbs of silver and 880 lbs of gold was exacted on one occasion.⁴⁹ This *ten tons* of silver and *over one third of a ton* of gold was no mean haul in itself. Yet it was simply one ‘delectable extra’ so far as the treasury-accounts of Ebla were concerned. In such an economic context, the 666 talents (about twenty tons) of gold as Solomon’s basic income from his entire ‘empire’ some 15 centuries later (1 Kings 10:14; 2 Chronicles 9:13) loses its air of exaggeration and begins to look quite prosaic as just part of a wider picture of the considerable (if transient) wealth of major kingdoms of the ancient biblical world.⁵⁰ Again, the vast city and acropolis of Ebla with an area probably ten times that of Solomon’s Jerusalem enjoyed a comparably larger administration. Where Solomon in Jerusalem had 12 officers in Israel to provide the royal supplies (1 Kings 4:7), the kings of Ebla had had 103 ‘leaders’ (*nase*) and 210 ‘aides’ to look after services for the four palaces of their acropolis already described above, not to mention the staff of 4,700 people employed there.

The comparisons just given do not prove that Solomon actually did receive 666 talents of gold, or that his kingdom was organised just as Kings describes. But they do indicate clearly (i) that the Old Testament data must be studied in the context of their world and not in isolation, and (ii) that the scale of activity portrayed in the Old Testament writings is neither impossible nor even improbable when measured by the relevant external standards.

4. Personal Names

Not a few of the proper names of inhabitants of Ebla have struck Pettinato and others by their obvious resemblances to a wide range of personal names of individuals in the Bible. Among the kings of Ebla, Pettinato has singled out Ebrum or Ebrum as possessing the same name as Eber of Genesis 11:14-16, a distant ancestor of Abraham, and as a possible equivalent of the term *ibri*, ‘Hebrew’⁵¹ (cf. ‘Abram the Hebrew’, in Genesis 14:13). That Ebrum is the same name as Eber (omitting the old ending *-um*) is quite probable—but there is no reason to suppose that they are the same person. Even inside Ebla, one finds quite a number of people, all different but bearing the same name—the ‘John Smiths’ of their time.⁵² The Ebla example of Ebr(um) merely shows how early and how authentic Eber is, as a real personal name, not just a legendary invention, back in the 3rd millennium BC—which is as much as one might expect. The link with *ibri* (if correct) is of little consequence, except (again) to demonstrate the probable antiquity of the term.

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Perhaps of greater interest are such names as Ishmail (‘Ishmael’), Ishrail (‘Israel’)⁵³—borne by ordinary flesh-and-blood citizens of Ebla, *c.* 2300 BC, five centuries or more before either the Ishmael and Israel of the biblical patriarchs (son and grandson of Abraham) or the well-known Yasmakh-El of Mari (*c.* 1800 BC) and Yisrail of Ugarit (*c.* 1300 BC), also real flesh-and-blood individuals. The most important contributions of the Ebla occurrences of these and other such names⁵⁴ are (i) to emphasize once more that these are names used by real human

⁴⁹ Pettinato, *BA-39*, 47 & n. 11.

⁵⁰ Cf. also H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness that was Babylon*, 1962, pp. 255-257, and in chapter 6 below.

⁵¹ *BA-39*, p. 47.

⁵² As is exemplified below, from the text edited by Pettinato, *RSO-50*, pp. 1 f., esp. pp. 3-8.

⁵³ Cited by Pettinato, *BA-39*, pp. 48, 50, etc.

⁵⁴ Sundry unconfirmed reports suggest that such names as Esau, Saul, David, etc., also occur in the Ebla tablets. If so, exactly the same applies to them as to Ishmael and Israel considered here.

individuals (never by gods, or exclusively (if ever) by tribes, or by fairytale figures), and (ii) to indicate the immense antiquity of names of this type, and of these names in particular. It should occasion no surprise to find other Ishmaels and Israels in antiquity besides the biblical characters that bear these names. Many parents today have their own personal or special reasons for giving particular names to children—but the names so chosen are usually already-existing ones, not strange new ones invented for the occasion. So, too, in antiquity. Among the city ‘leaders’ of Ebla discussed already, we find three men all called Bedunum (Recto, III, 4, 6, 15), all in one section; three men called Ennaia (or ‘Hanania’; Recto, IV, 5, V, 6; Verso, VI, 4); four men called Tilaia (Recto, IV, 3, 12; Verso, III, 12, V, 7), besides several pairs of men with each the same name. This feature of popularity of names is, of course, well known from many other sources besides Ebla in antiquity.

5. Places

Not a few towns of biblical interest appear in the Ebla tablets, which preserve (in most cases) the earliest-known mention of these in written records. Well east of Ebla, on or near the Khabur river, Nahur is mentioned—a centre familiar from the Mari archives—which might also be the ‘city of Nahor’ (Genesis 24:10). Nahor was a relatively common name, found also for the grandfather and the brother of Abraham (Genesis 11:24-26). However, if the ‘city of Nahor’ is to be taken as a personal reference to one of these men, then it may simply be a synonym for Haran where Terah died.

More useful, potentially, are the Eblaite mentions of familiar Palestinian place-names such as Hazor, Megiddo, Jerusalem, Lachish, Dor, Gaza, Ashtarot (-Qarnaim), etc. Several of these places are known archaeologically to have been inhabited towns in the 3rd millennium BC (Early Bronze Age III-IV), and these tablets confirm their early importance, possibly as local city-states. Finally, Canaan itself now appears as a geographical entity from the later 3rd millennium BC, long before any other dated external

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mention so far known to us—it will be interesting to learn what extent is accorded to Canaan in the Ebla texts.

6. Religion

Several of the West Semitic or ‘Canaanite’ gods familiar from the Old Testament and at Ugarit now have their histories extended some centuries back into the 3rd millennium BC—such include Dagan, El, Adad, Resheph, Ashera, Kemosh, etc.; as distinct from Adad, Baal has not been reported so far. As for the abodes of deity, the biggest temple at Ebla (acropolis, ‘D’, c. 1800 BC) shows a three-part plan that became one of the basic types of temple-plan in Syria-Palestine thenceforth. This comprised a portico, vestibule, and inner sanctuary or holy-of-holies. Over a millennium later, this scheme reappears in one of the temples at Hazor (area H) in the 13th century BC, as well as being reflected in Solomon’s temple (as Matthiae has also noted⁵⁵), besides other Syrian temples.

In matters like priests, cult and offerings the records from Ebla so far merely reinforce for Syria-Palestine what we already know for Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia in the 3rd, 2nd

⁵⁵ Matthiae, *OR-44*, pp. 345-6 and fig. 3 (p. 347); for the Hazor temple, cf. Y. Yadin, *Hazor, the Rediscovery of a Great Citadel of the Bible*, 1975, pp. 96 ff.

and 1st millennia BC, and from the records of North-Syrian Qatna and Ugarit for the 2nd millennium BC. Namely, that well-organized temple cults, sacrifices, full rituals, etc., were a constant feature of ancient Near-Eastern religious life at *all* periods from prehistory down to Graeco-Roman times. They have nothing to do with baseless theories of the 19th century AD, whereby such features of religious life can only be a mark of 'late sophistication', virtually forbidden to the Hebrews until after the Babylonian exile—alone of all the peoples of the ancient East. There is simply no rational basis for the quaint idea that the simple rites of Moses' tabernacle (cf. Leviticus) or of Solomon's temple, both well over 1000 years later than the rituals practised in half-a-dozen Eblaite temples, must be the idle invention of idealising writers as late as the 5th century BC.

The occurrence of *nabi'utum* (cf. Hebrew *nabi*) as a class of 'prophet' alongside the better-known *mahhu*⁵⁶ will add another chapter—the earliest yet—to the 'prehistory' of prophecy. It is certainly the oldest attestation of the term; knowledge of the function of such men at Ebla must await publication of the tablets.⁵⁷ The Eblaite *mahhu* may have had similar functions to those known from Mari in the 18th century BC. These men indeed delivered the 'message' of Dagan or other gods to the king of Mari—but always briefly, and purely in the king's political or military interests, sometimes with promise or threat, depending on the king's response. Never, however, do they adopt the stance of a Nathan, an Amos or a Hosea, or an Isaiah, to reprove and admonish on

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vital issues of personal morality, social justice, or obedience to God as man's due to him. Apart from the eloquent (but relatively 'secular') pleas for just conduct of affairs in Egyptian works such as the Eloquent Peasant or the Admonitions of Ipuwer, the moral and spiritual tone of the later Old Testament prophets remains without real parallel in the ancient world.

7. In Conclusion

From the foregoing, it should be evident that, in terms of background, Ebla has much to offer already to biblical studies, especially in relation to its early date, on West-Semitic languages, and a wide range of information on the most diverse topics. We may expect a very great deal more, when—eventually—the documents themselves are published in full and can be studied in depth.

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁵⁶ Pettinato, *BA-39*, p. 49.

⁵⁷ A study of prophetism at Ebla is promised by Pettinato (cf. *BA-39*, p. 52, n. 17).