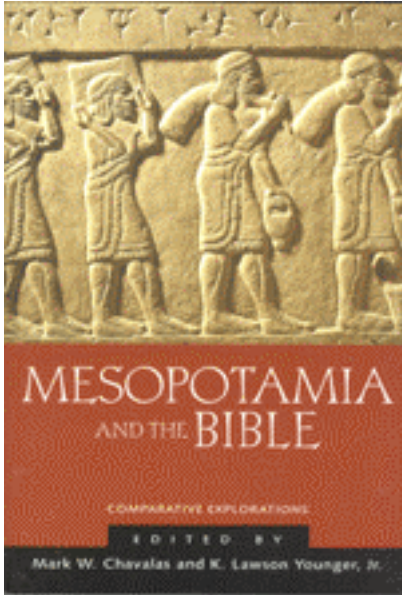


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Younger, K. Lawson, Jr., and Mark W. Chavalas, eds.

Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations

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The core of this collection of papers represents the work of a meeting of the Near East Archeological Society held in Philadelphia in November 1995. The editors note that the decision was made “to publish the proceedings in a slightly altered and expanded format,” as well as to “take a very loose definition of Mesopotamia as encompassing some regions of Syria immediately west of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley that were obviously connected culturally to traditional Mesopotamia” (8). This later statement is of particular significance, since half of the fourteen essays consider the territory included in this broader definition of Mesopotamia.

Mark Chavalas, “Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century of Tension,” introduces the topic through a review of the development of Assyriology, carefully describing the reasons for the strained relationship between the two disciplines. This consideration of the history of Assyriology also chronicles the methodological concerns in the application of insights from Assyriology to biblical studies, while setting the stage for the remainder of the presentations in the book and making clear the fact that there has been little connection between the two disciplines beyond those at superficial levels. The following paper by Steven Holloway, “The Quest for Sargon, Pul, and Tiglath-Pileser in the Nineteenth Century,” examines early attempts to sort out these biblical figures and relate

them to the emerging information about the Assyrian Empire. As such, it describes the initial relationship between the two disciplines as they wrestled with solutions to the cluster of problems associated with reconciling information about Assyrian kings in inscriptional and biblical evidence. Given the increasing complexity of Mesopotamian textual and artifactual studies and the difficulties involved in an appropriate application of this material to biblical studies, it is not surprising that the gulf that formed early in the relationship of the disciplines has simply continued to grow.

The importance of Sumerian literature as an indirect influence on biblical materials is discussed in the contribution by Richard Averbeck, “Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method: Historiography and Temple Building.” Giving careful attention to the methodological issues involved, Averbeck discusses history and history writing, using the accounts of temple-building activities in the Gudea Cylinders and the biblical texts to demonstrate what he terms “the four major principles of comparative research ... proximity in time and place, the priority of inner biblical parallels, correspondence of social function, and the holistic approach to texts and comparisons” (121).

As these brief notations on the first few essays indicate, the contributions are broad-ranging and take a variety of approaches to the task at hand. Essays that address our knowledge of northwestern Mesopotamia and Syria—what is sometimes described as forming part of “Greater Mesopotamia”—include the following: Mark Chavalas, “Syria and Northern Mesopotamia to the End of the Third Millennium BCE”; Ronald Veenker, “Syro-Mesopotamia: The Old Babylonian Period”; Victor Matthews, “Syria to the Early Second Millennium”; Richard Hess, “The Bible and Alalakh”; Daniel Fleming, “Emar: On the Road from Harran to Hebron”; Wayne Pitard, “Voices from the Dust: The Tablets from Ugarit and the Bible”; and William Schniedewind, “The Rise of the Aramean States.” The list of titles and topics provides a reasonably clear picture of the diversity of materials surveyed and addressed in these articles. Sometimes contributors simply describe what is known of a particular state or culture at a particular time; in other instances discussion of literary genre, legal or religious practice, or some other cultural connection is addressed. Overall, careful attention is paid not to “succumb either to ‘parallelomania’ or to ‘parallelophobia,’ ” to cite a phrase employed by Chavalas in his introductory article (43).

It is not surprising that such attention is paid to this region of western Mesopotamia, given the connection biblical traditions make with the area as both territory on the theoretical boundary of the land given to Israel by God and as somehow constituting the ancestral homeland. Thus a more nuanced understanding of the history, texts, and traditions of the region can only be welcomed. Such analysis provides important resources to assist our understanding of materials found within the Bible.

The final four contributions each moves in its own direction. In his piece, David Deuel describes a legal situation in central Mesopotamia by threading together evidence found in bureaucratic documents. As well as providing an example of forensic detection, “Apprehending the Kidnappers by Correspondence at Provincial Arrapha,” provides insights into the activities of bureaucratic systems. K. Lawson Younger Jr.’s “Recent Study on Sargon II, King of Assyria: Implications for Biblical Studies” unpacks the evidence amassed by recent scholarship to flesh out the portrait of Sargon II, whose sole biblical notation is found in Isa 20:1. However, as Younger demonstrates, the influence of Sargon on Hezekiah and on the southern Levant in both his life and death merits our attention. When Bill Arnold asks: “What Has Nebuchadnezzar to Do with David? On the Neo-Babylonian Period and Early Israel,” he draws on comparative analysis to note significant insights into the possibility of loosely organized tribes quickly emerging into statehood. The implications of his research for our reconstruction of early Israel offers important cautions to the minimalization of biblical attestations. The final contribution, Edwin Yamauchi’s “The Eastern Jewish Diaspora under the Babylonians,” surveys evidence concerning the deportations experienced by Israel and Judah, life in exile, and a variety of related topics that help the reader to determine what we can know about the exilic situation based on evidence from both biblical and Assyriological researches.

As this brief description indicates, the book does not take a uniform approach to the task; rather, contributors were free to approach the topic from a variety of tacks, choosing specific problems or texts and comparing them with the Bible or more broadly examining the elucidation of a particular aspect of Mesopotamian culture. This blend of approaches makes the overall collection quite readable, and the affordable price is welcome. It is hoped that the approach, the cost, and the topics addressed will serve to introduce many biblical scholars to Mesopotamian culture. Dare we dream that this volume may introduce a wider audience of the reading public to Assyriology through an existing interest in the Bible? My encounter with just such an enthused reader during the time I was preparing this review makes such a possibility seem viable.

A couple of final points. A map is included in Arnold’s article, but a reference map or maps locating at least the major sites discussed would prove helpful to many readers. There are indexes to texts and authors discussed in the book, but there is no subject index. Still, though these minor points affect the usefulness of the book, they do not diminish the overall value of the volume.

The bridging of the disciplines begun here is most welcome and anticipates the plan of the Society of Biblical Literature to publish a history of Assyria for biblical scholars as the first in a series of volumes intended to address the gap between Assyriology and biblical study. In short, this is a volume well worth the purchase price, and it will serve to

introduce interested readers to what should prove to be an important area of collaboration in the immediate future.