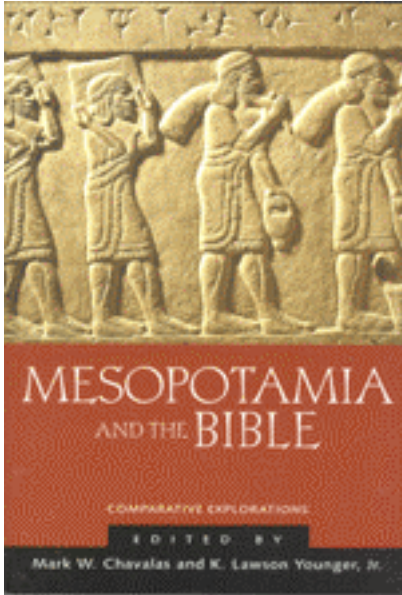


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Younger, K. Lawson, Jr., and Mark W. Chavalas, eds.

Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations

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This volume of fourteen articles is a valuable resource for biblical scholars who wish current information on Mesopotamian studies, including Syria and Ugarit, from the earliest times to the Neo-Babylonian era. Each article is supported by thorough footnotes and an extensive bibliography. There are two indices: biblical references and authors. This volume holds special interest for biblical scholars who concentrate on the patriarchal era and for those who deal with the interplay between Mesopotamia and the kingdoms of northern Israel and Judah. Although interested in insights into the Bible offered by comparisons with the culture and thought of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, the authors display great caution in making specific comparisons, save for the contribution by R. Hess (“The Bible and Alalakh”), which is essentially a catalogue of common themes and customs found in the Alalakh texts and the Bible. Consequently, the volume is not plagued by parallelomania. In fact, a few articles, such as the one by D. Deuel (“Apprehending Kidnappers by Correspondence at Provincial Arrapha”) about the important role of letters in the administration of Nuzi as illustrated in three letters that led to the resolution of a case of kidnapping, make no reference to Scripture. The primary value of this publication, then, lies more on providing current information on aspects of Mesopotamia studies than on the illumination of the biblical text. Those looking for a treasury of data from Mesopotamia that enlightens the biblical texts will be disappointed,

while those interested in the discussion of methodologies for doing comparative studies will find several articles alive with suggestive ideas.

The lead article by M. Chavalas (“Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century of Tension”) is a detailed account of the spirited origin of Assyriology. Given that the impetus for embarking on archaeological studies in Mesopotamia in the mid nineteenth century C.E. came primarily from parties who wanted to prove the accuracy of the Bible, there were initially many false interpretations of data discovered in Mesopotamia as well as inaccurate interpretations of details in the biblical narratives in light of findings from Mesopotamia. This tension is illustrated well by S. Holloway in “The Quest for Sargon, Pul, and Tiglath-Pileser in the Nineteenth Century,” which recounts numerous attempts to identify the Assyrian king identified as Pul in the Bible. Following the decipherment of Akkadian, Assyriology developed into a self-standing discipline. Early Assyriologists had to overcome numerous prejudices and misconceptions in order to win general acceptance of their work as providing an accurate account of Mesopotamian history. This tension prodded some of the first Assyriologists to vaunt the priority and superiority of Mesopotamian culture and to cast a shadow over the efforts of scholars who sought to work in both disciplines. In the ensuing decades solid groundwork has been laid for a more circumspect comparative study of Mesopotamia culture and the Hebrew Bible, as attested by the contributions in this volume.

In “Syria and Northern Mesopotamia to the End of the Third Millennium BCE,” M. Chavalas provides a survey of recent archaeological work in northern Mesopotamia (current-day eastern Syria and central Iraq) from the early Neolithic period down to the Bronze Age. Such work has been intensified in face of the numerous large-scale building projects being undertaken in this region.

In a complex article entitled “Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method: Historiography and Temple Building,” R. Averbeck deals at length with two issues. First, he enters into an involved discussion about the possible identification of Genesis–Kings as history writing through a comparison of history writing in pre-Sargonic royal inscriptions. For making comparisons between cultures, he advocates following methods proposed by Hallo and Talmon. He also enters into a critique of the positions of Van Seters and Thompson as to the nature of history writing. On the basis of the analogy that certain Sumerian texts functioned in their society as a historical record of the past and contain sound historical information even though they were written from both ethnic and “theological” viewpoints, Averbeck claims that Genesis–Kings, having a similar social function for the Israelites, also must be classified as history writing and be accepted as containing reliable historical information. This argument is suggestive but not compelling, for two crucial matters for the viability of the comparison are not established in the discussion: (1) that the genre of the pre-Sargonic royal inscriptions is similar to the genre of Genesis–Kings; and (2) that these texts had similar functions in the respective

societies. Second, Averbek compares the account of Gudea's temple building found in the Gudea Cylinders with the biblical accounts of temple building. At the end of the article he presents a list of shared motifs and concepts, providing numerous biblical references after each entry. Although Averbek defends this approach as a way of escaping atomistic comparisons, this illustration of a holistic approach to the comparison of texts would have been more forceful had one of the biblical accounts been compared with Gudea's account, especially since the various temple-building accounts in the Bible come from different time periods and are set in different literary genres. This concern is especially important in light of the methodological procedures for making comparisons of texts from different cultures promoted in this article.

R. Veenker ("Syro-Mesopotamia: The Old Babylonian Period") reviews the events of the Old Babylonian period, focusing on Hammurabi, the dominant figure of this era known for his contribution to justice in the codification of laws. In a weak effort at comparison of Hammurabi with the Bible, Veenker points out the greater severity in the penalty for theft in Hammurabi's Code from that in the Covenant Code of the Hebrews. Afterwards he cites the texts of a few laws from Hammurabi's Code, placing underneath each the corresponding biblical law; this is done without any comment. He also surveys several Babylonian literary pieces, noting some themes that also appear in Scripture.

Drawing on the texts from Mari (1830–1750 B.C.E.), V. Matthews ("Syria to the Early Second Millennium") demonstrates the value of employing anthropological and ethnographic methodologies for reconstructing the sociopolitical history of an ancient city-state. He pays special attention to the complex social patterns developed by pastoralists in order to survive in different political and ecological environments. He then suggests that these patterns may provide models for interpreting scriptural accounts of shepherds grazing their flocks within an area controlled by a city-state such as the contacts of Abraham and Isaac with the ruler of Gerar (Gen 20; 26). Matthews correctly cautions against stretching biblical accounts to fit a particular social pattern attested in Mesopotamia.

D. Fleming looks at the importance of the findings at Emar in "Emar: On the Road from Harran to Hebron." He argues that the culture of inland peoples, that is, those living in the area from the highlands of Canaan to the Arabian Desert, was distinct from that of the coastal areas. He goes on to propose that since the Israelites were a part of this inland culture, texts from this region, even though written in Akkadian, hold the promise of offering greater insight into the background of the early Israelites than texts from coastal regions such as Ugarit or the cultural centers of Mesopotamia. Texts from Emar have two distinct advantages: (1) most come from institutions that were separate from the king; and (2) many are religious texts. A key find at Emar is the regulations for the *zuku* festival, a seven-day festival observed every seven years (a lesser *zuku* festival being celebrated every year) with special ceremonies on the seventh day. This festival began at full moon

and marked the new year. This discovery means that Israelite calendars in the law do not have to be explained as adaptations to a Babylonian calendar. The citizenry celebrated the main rites of this festival outside the city at a shrine of upright stones without royal or priestly leadership. The ritual of the people taking an oath, possibly the meaning of *zukru*, to their god Dagan offers a dramatic comparison with the Israelite custom of formalizing their relationship with God by an oath. This practice affords a stronger parallel to Israel defining its relationship to Yahweh in terms of covenant than that offered by international treaties. Furthermore, this parallel challenges the claim that Israel was unique in defining its relationship with its deity in terms of a covenant.

In a solid article on the contributions of the Ugarit discoveries to biblical studies, W. Pitard considers three issues: (1) the relationship of the Ugaritic texts to Canaanite culture; (2) the impact of the myths and epics from Ugarit on biblical studies; and (3) the grammatical and literary insights into ancient Hebrew gained from a description of the Ugaritic language. In the second issue he pays special attention to the impact on biblical studies provided by the enhanced understanding of the roles of El and Baal among the Canaanites gained from the Ugaritic texts. In addition, Pitard examines the funerary practices at Ugarit, noting that there is little evidence of similar practices among either the peoples of southern Canaan or the Israelites.

W. Schniedewind (“The Rise of the Aramean States”) reviews the sparse information available for a reconstruction of the rise of the Aramean states. He augments that information through a socioanthropological comparison with the rise of the Edomites and the Nabateans. He suggests that such an analogy may serve to illuminate the rise of the early Israelite states. In considering the meaning of “Aramean,” Schniedewind sets forth an explanation for the Israelite creedal identification of their forefather as a fugitive Aramean.

B. Arnold (“What Has Nebuchadnezzar to Do with David? On the Neo-Babylonian Period and Early Israel”) investigates the social forces employed by Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar to achieve the unification of several tribal groups of diverse ethnicity and varying attitudes, some even being hostile to unification, to form the mighty Neo-Babylonian Empire. These social forces included major military victories, making Babylon the capital, vast building projects throughout the region, and fostering literary activity, including the composition of historical documents. Arnold then postulates that these strategies may serve as an analogous model for evaluating the activities of David and Solomon recorded in the Bible, specifically their use of social forces to change Israel from a loose federation of tribes into a strong state. On this basis Arnold calls into question five dominant assertions current in the scholarly explanation of the rise of ancient Israel: (1) the Israelites emerged out of the Canaanite population; (2) the Israelites had the same culture as the local inhabitants; (3) Israelite accounts of the conquest were composed on the pattern of late Mesopotamian models; (4) the biblical picture of the era

of the judges is unlikely; and (5) Israel never had a grand united monarchy. Arnold, however, is judiciously cautious in assessing the strength of this analogous model for validating details in the biblical account of Israel's rise as a nation.

Two articles treat in detail the several deportations from Israel, first by the Assyrians and later by the Babylonians. K. Younger Jr. ("Recent Study on Sargon II, King of Assyria: Implications for Biblical Studies") describes the extensive influence Sargon had on the southern Levant, especially northern Israel. He covers Sargon's campaigns in this region, the deportations of Israelites, the various fates of these deportees, and the deportations made into the area of Samaria. E. Yamauchi ("The Eastern Jewish Diaspora under the Babylonians") seeks to determine the number and size of the deportations from Judea made by the Babylonians by comparing the scriptural data with Babylonian records. He also evaluates the reports of the number of exiles returning to Judea after Cyrus's decree. In addition, Yamauchi looks at the life of Jewish exiles under the Babylonians and briefly considers the religious developments and other changes that took place in Jewish communities under the Persians.

The articles in this work are rich, informative, and methodologically suggestive. Some are primarily informative, while others participate in the lively discussion of defining methodologies for making appropriate comparisons between Mesopotamia and the biblical account of ancient Israel. Little attention, however, is given to specific comparisons of Mesopotamian thought and customs with those of the ancient Israelites.