

Genesis

and Ancient Near Eastern Literature

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The recovery of ancient Near Eastern literature has basically revolutionized our understanding of the Bible and of no book more so than Genesis. A glance at the authoritative volume, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*,¹ will confirm this. Only Psalms and Proverbs outnumber Genesis in the parallels suggested by the various translators.² But the parallels to Proverbs all come from the well-nigh universal tradition of preceptual epigrams, most of them Egyptian. And when it is remembered that the five books of Psalms contain over 2,500 verses, compared to the 1,500 in Genesis, it will be seen that, proportionately, the first book of the Bible is most widely and most significantly paralleled in the literature of the ancient Near East.

Textual Comparison

The reasons behind these statistics are not difficult to find. Alone among the books of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis has the whole ancient Near East for its stage. Its first eleven

chapters are set entirely in Babylonia, its last twelve in Egypt. The intervening 27 chapters occupy the geographical terrain between these two countries. They tell of repeated semi-nomadic movements back and forth throughout the entire broad stretch of Syria-Palestine including both sides of the Euphrates and Jordan rivers. The presence of ancient Near Eastern literary motifs in the tales of Genesis is thus no more startling than that of classical ones in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman dramas. Many of them are identified in this commentary, together with the similarities and differences between the biblical and other ancient Near Eastern treatments of common themes. It is not the purpose of this overview to anticipate them here one by one. Rather, we wish to sum up the evidence by analyzing the nature of the knowledge gained through the confrontation of Genesis and its ancient literary cognates.

To "prove" the accuracy or validity of one literary text by another is, of course, at once the most difficult and the most heatedly debated task of the critics. Many have wanted to employ the discoveries of archeology for this very purpose, many more for the opposite reason, and still others have despaired of resolving the issue. Unanimity is indeed impossible to achieve here, but at least we can

¹ Edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2nd ed., 1955). [Hereafter the work is referred to as Pritchard, *ANET*.]

² See the Index of Biblical References, *ibid.*, pp. 520-523.

hope to agree on what kind of questions we wish to prove. Put this way, it quickly becomes clear that we cannot gain greater confidence in the biblical version of the end of immortality simply because similar accounts have been found in the cuneiform sources (cf. chapters 2 and 3 below). Nor, on the contrary, are the rather variant Egyptian and Sumerian versions of creation needed to "disprove" that of Genesis. Whether Genesis accurately reports on these events is not the proper question. Rather we must ask: Does the text of Genesis, as we have it, accurately report what the ancient Israelites believed or asserted to have happened?

It is today generally assumed that an extended period of oral transmission introduced distortions into the traditions, that these distortions were aggravated by successive generations of scribes when the oral traditions were reduced to writing, and that their final canonization involved picking and choosing among the conflicting textual traditions on grounds other than that of their presumed antiquity or reliability.

On this premise, much modern criticism of Genesis has devoted itself to textual emendations and other attempts to recover a presumed original text. Such an "original text" is, however, unlikely ever to be found by the spade of the Palestinian archeologist, and all efforts to reconstruct it must therefore remain speculations not subject to scientific verification. Now the history of other ancient Near Eastern literatures has shown that, at least in a literate environment, textual transmission was indeed subject to occasional periods of substantial change and adaptation. To illustrate this point, we may cite the Mesopotamian versions of the story of the Flood. As a historical event and a chronological turning point, the concept of a great flood was an early and familiar fixture in cuneiform literature. The Sumerian King List³ teaches that kingship came down (re-

spectively, came back) from heaven after the Flood and the idiom "before the Flood" (*lām abūbi*) signified pristine time. The earliest literary treatments of the theme are in Sumerian;⁴ their hero is Ziusudra, ruler (or "son") of Shuruppak and last of the antediluvian dynasts. The first Akkadian flood story is associated with Atar-chasis whose epic is preserved in copies of the second and early first millennia B.C.E.⁵ Finally, the flood story was incorporated into the eleventh tablet of the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic, where its hero is Uta-napishtim, who is variously equated with both Ziusudra and Atar-chasis.⁶ The Gilgamesh Epic in its final form cannot, as of now, be traced further back than circa 1100 B.C.E., and the extent to which it departed from its older Sumerian and Akkadian prototypes can be gauged even in translation. Certainly no Assyriologist would have ventured to reconstruct either of them from the late canonical version. Such an example inspires similar caution in current attempts to recover the original version or documents from which the canonical biblical text is presumed to have developed.

But, more than this, the recovery of the separate stages of many ancient Near Eastern compositions has revealed, by the side of a certain amount of editorial revision, a tenacious faithfulness to many received texts which is little short of astounding. Over widely scattered areas of cuneiform or hieroglyphic writing, and in periods separated by many centuries, certain canonical texts were copied verbatim and with an attention to textual detail not matched until the Alexandrian Greeks, or the Koranic specialists of the

³ See the translation by A. L. Oppenheim, *ibid.*, pp. 265-266.

⁴ See the translations by S. N. Kramer, *ibid.*, pp. 42-44 and in *Expedition*, 9, 4 (1967), pp. 12-18.

⁵ Partial translation by E. A. Speiser in Pritchard, *ANET*, pp. 104-106.

⁶ See the translation by Speiser, *ibid.*, pp. 93-97.

Good Caliphs, or the Tiberian Masoretes who codified the Bible, counting, vocalizing, and accentuating its every letter. To cite just one example: The Sumerian myth of the warrior-god Ninurta probably was composed before the end of the third millennium; its first actual manuscripts date back to circa 1800 B.C.E., and it is known also in neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian copies beginning a thousand years later in which the Sumerian text is accompanied by an interlinear translation into Akkadian. Yet for all the time interval, the differences between the earlier and later Sumerian versions are little more than orthographic and dialectal. Such fidelity to a received text tradition has taught most biblical critics a new respect for the possibility of an equally reliable textual tradition underlying the Hebrew canon. It is little enough that we know of the technical details of textual creation and transmission in Israel before the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁷ Now we must at least reckon with the possibility that the process rated as much care as in the surrounding Near East before we venture to "improve" on the received text.

Thus ancient Near Eastern literary texts are seen to have met with different fates in the course of their millennial transmission; in some cases adaptation and reediting on a scale which defies prediction; in others extreme fidelity to the received text. Yet for all their differences, both examples impose the same conclusion for the biblical text: We cannot hope to achieve certainty in recovering a more authentic text than that codified by the Masoretes after the Arab conquest. Even with the discoveries at Qumran and else-

where, we still have far fewer pre-Masoretic manuscripts than the Masoretes disposed of, and like them we lack a conclusive methodology for choosing between conflicting readings.⁸

Exegetic and Hermeneutic Parallels

But the history of ancient Near Eastern literature is relevant not only to the text of the Hebrew Bible but to its meaning. To return to the case of the Ninurta Epic, the Akkadian translations, added to the late versions, are, generally speaking, quite literal, but despite the best efforts of the late Assyrian and Babylonian scholars they are frequently faulty. They commit errors which modern philologists, with better knowledge of the original Sumerian, can often recognize as errors and sometimes correct. In other instances, they deliberately understand the Sumerian text in a new way not intended in the original. In still other cases, they obviously despaired of making any sense of the original and simply created *de novo* a meaning for the passage. All three of these tendencies can likewise be detected, albeit less clearly, in the absence of translations, i.e., in texts handed down from first to last in one and the same language. The conclusion to be drawn from all this is important for biblical criticism: The integrity of a textual tradition is no guarantee for the preservation, intact, of a continuous tradition of interpretation. On the contrary, the meaning assigned to a passage may change from age to age in part *in order to preserve* the integrity of the text. Here, then, we may use ancient Near Eastern literature to confirm a cardinal tenet of biblical criticism: Given the traditional text of a certain passage, we may hope to come closer to its original meaning than the traditional interpretations have done. In this attempt, specific ancient Near Eastern parallels are frequently of crucial help. Our examples here are taken from two levels.

⁷ Cf. J. Philip Hyatt, "The Writing of an Old Testament Book," *Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, 1 (1961), pp. 22-31; reprinted from *Biblical Archaeologist*, 6 (1943), pp. 71-80.

⁸ See F. M. Cross, Jr., "The Contribution of the Qumran Discoveries to the Study of the Biblical Text," *Israel Exploration Journal*, 16 (1966), pp. 81-95.

On the level of exegesis, or exposition of the text, the comparative approach may serve to illumine a word, form, or phrase which has proved a philological crux to all other approaches. Thus, for example, when Joseph is introduced to the Egyptians as Pharaoh's vizier, it is to the accompaniment of a shout "Abrek" (41:43) which has puzzled commentators ever since. Modern scholars have tended to see in it an Egyptian word meaning "Attention!" or a Coptic word meaning "incline." But the Greek translation prepared in Egypt by Jews who might have been expected to recognize such forms understood the word differently (as "herald"). Other ancient versions came up with Hebrew or even Latin etymologies which defy both literary and linguistic considerations. Such counsels of desperation led to discord among the tannaitic rabbis, as Rashi reports *ad loc.* But it is now known that Akkadian *abarakku* means "chief steward of a private or royal household" and that this title was widely attested wherever and whenever cuneiform was used, and beyond that as a loanword in Phoenician.⁹ This almost certainly solves our textual problem. It also raises new questions.

Though now open to rational explanation without resort to emendations, popular etymology, or midrashic exegesis, the single word does not stand alone but in a context. Thus we move on to the level of hermeneutics, the interpretation and evaluation of the biblical context.

The presence of an Assyrian title (if this is conceded) in the midst of the Joseph stories raises significant questions about their date of composition and their source or sources of inspiration. Similarly the camels of the Ishmaelites (37:25) arouse suspicion, given the sporadic evidence, at best, for their use in Egypt before Ptolemaic times.¹⁰ Again we must avoid extreme positions. These stories are not to be rejected because they are not verbatim transcripts of eyewitness accounts;

neither are they to be elevated above all criticism on the grounds of poetic (or theological) license. A sober appraisal must acknowledge the existence of different and even conflicting evidence within the stories themselves that bear on their possible place and date of origin. That they contain Egyptian elements is undeniable. There are proper names such as Potiphar with reasonable Egyptian etymologies; loanwords generally conceded to be Egyptian such as those for reed, magician, linen, and two different ones for signet ring; whole motifs paralleled in Egyptian literature such as the "Story of Two Brothers"¹¹ or the late tradition of seven lean years followed by years of plenty.¹²

But these elements bear some closer scrutiny. That an Israelite author should have some knowledge of Egyptian geographical and personal names is of no particular literary significance, given the near proximity and repeated contacts of the two cultures. As for the loanwords, they must be viewed in the perspective of biblical Hebrew as a whole. On the most conservative estimate, some forty Egyptian loanwords are attested with greater or lesser frequency in the Hebrew Bible.¹³ Of these, only five occur in the Joseph stories. None of them is unique to these stories, and one cannot, therefore, describe them as inordinately full of authentic local diction. Finally, the thematic similarities cited are not of a kind to suggest that the Joseph stories are directly dependent on the Egyptian parallels or both on a common source. In sum, these stories are simply embellished

⁹ Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 499 (3rd ed., p. 653) and note 1.

¹⁰ Béatrix Midant-Reynes and Florence Braunstein-Silvestre, "Le chameau en Egypte," *Orientalia*, 46 (1977), pp. 337-362.

¹¹ See chs. 39-40, Gleanings, and the translation by J. A. Wilson, Pritchard, *ANET*, pp. 23-25.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹³ See T. O. Lambdin, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 73 (1953), pp. 145-155. [Hereafter this journal is referred to as *JAOS*.]

with Egyptian names, words, and literary motifs, all of which may have enjoyed a fairly wide currency. The presence of an intrusive Assyrianism or apparent anachronism in the story may or may not be a hint that the cycle of stories originated in an Assyrian setting, or in Egypt, or even in Israel, when these were under Assyrian rule. More important is the general conclusion to be derived from this example: Given sufficient familiarity with the literature, language, and proper names of an ancient Near Eastern culture such as Egypt, we can better evaluate the amount of influence it has exercised on a specific biblical composition. If in the case cited this amount is relatively negligible, that does not make the conclusion negative. Rather, it frees us to look for other sources, including native ones, of the biblical treatment.

Epigraphic Evidence

So far we have dealt, broadly speaking, with the text of Genesis and its context and with the considerable contribution of ancient Near Eastern literature to our evaluation of the one and interpretation of the other. But we need not confine our search to the biblical text or to the immediate parallels (and contrasts) from the cognate literatures. Rather, we may hope to gain a greater understanding of biblical people, places, and events than the text of Genesis explicitly vouchsafes us. True, we cannot expect to know more than the author or authors of Genesis knew, but we can sometimes hope to know more than he, or they, told. Here too ancient Near

Eastern literature comes to our aid, though the examples will be chosen from the Syro-Palestinian area which, lying between the high civilizations of Babylonia and Egypt, did not always match them in general literacy or specifically literary productivity. But we may take a broader view of written evidence and include in it not only strictly literary (so-called "canonical") writings but also historical (or "monumental") and economic ("archival") texts. Then this area too comes alive with a considerable corpus of inscriptions to fill in the interstices of Genesis.

Again we must put a reasonable limit on our expectations. The patriarchal narratives are no longer pure legend, like the tales of the antediluvians, and not yet the polished artifice of the "romance of Joseph." But neither are they to be understood as straightforward history. Therefore it is fruitless to look in the cuneiform or hieroglyphic inscriptions for references to the Patriarchs or in Gen. 12-36 for the names of ancient Near Eastern kings. Much effort has gone into both attempts, but even Gen. 14, potentially the most promising source in this regard, has resisted all such efforts. And small wonder, when it is remembered that the first identifiable foreign royal names reported as such in the Bible are Hiram of Tyre and Pharaoh Sheshonk of the Twenty-second Egyptian Dynasty, both dating to the tenth century B.C.E., while the first allusion to a Mesopotamian king¹⁴ is the unnamed deliverer, probably Adad-nirari III of Assyria, who was a contemporary of Jehoahaz of Israel in the ninth century (II Kings 13:15). And, conversely, his predecessor "Jehu son of Omri" is the first Israelite king whose name (and portrait!) has turned up in the extra-biblical sources. No such individual connections can yet be provided for the second millennium, not even for its latter centuries. We should not therefore expect them for the patriarchal period, let alone its antecedents.

¹⁴ An earlier ninth-century Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III, is recalled as Shalman in Hosea 10:14, according to M. C. Astour, *JAOS*, 91 (1971), pp. 383-389. And a still earlier one, Tiglat-pileser I (ca. 1100 B.C.E.), is alluded to in Psalm 83:9, according to Abraham Malamat in B. Mazar, ed., *World History of the Jewish People*, 3 (1971), p. 134.

What we do find, instead, are more general connections with the geography, history, and institutions of the third and second millennia as these are revealed one after another in the monuments and archives of the area. Two examples must suffice. The ongoing excavations at Ebla near Aleppo (Syria) have recovered, virtually intact, the archives and library of five successive kings who ruled a far-flung empire based on trade, diplomacy, and warfare during the second half of the third millennium before succumbing to the even greater ambitions of their rivals from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Thousands of large and well-preserved tablets have been found, employing the cuneiform script and Sumerian language of Mesopotamia but revealing at the same time a local Semitic dialect having affinities with both East Semitic (Akkadian) and Northwest Semitic (Amorite, Hebrew, etc.). Although only a handful of the texts have so far been published, they already show that, contrary to earlier estimates, Syria in pre-patriarchal times was a flourishing center of urban life whose greatest ruler, Ebrum (or Ebrum), bears a name intriguingly similar to Eber, longest-lived of the post-diluvians in the "line of Shem" (11:10), the "ancestor of all the descendants of Eber" (10:21).

For the first half of the second millennium, the history of the Middle Euphrates area has been thrown into wholly new and sharp relief by the discoveries at Mari. The palace of this ancient city has yielded an archive of over twenty thousand tablets which are particularly valuable for illuminating tribal structure, terminology, and genealogies. In the last connection, even the seemingly tedious family trees of Genesis assume a new significance. Some tribes and clans, for example, are linked to the Patriarchs by concubinage with an eponymous ancestress; it has been shown that these represent the splitting off of tribal segments and their

migration, freely or otherwise, to the margins of the tribal terrain.¹⁵ This is in effect stated, if obliquely, in the case of Abraham's "sons" by Hagar and Keturah (Gen. 25:6). But it is also implied where not actually stated, e.g., for the origin of Amalek (Gen. 36:12) on the strength of ample evidence for the process of tribal subdivision at Mari. The genealogies of Genesis, and their complements in Chronicles and elsewhere, have long been regarded, at best, as an artificial framework imposed on the text; at worst, they have been ignored altogether. But in the light of the cuneiform sources they may yet turn out to yield up, for those who can read between the lines, the most authentic remnants of early Israelite history.

It may be noted in passing that the reverse is also true, i.e., that ancient Near Eastern documents frequently defy understanding without help from the Bible. To return to Mari, its scribes wrote in Akkadian, the language of the settled East Semitic population of Babylonia. For tribal terminology, however, they had to turn to the West Semitic vocabulary of the nomadic and semi-nomadic Amorites. This language was much closer to biblical Hebrew, which therefore contributes fundamentally to the understanding of its tribal terminology. Many more examples could be cited to show that the comparative method thus works in both directions, but this is not the place to do so. Suffice it to say that, within its limitations, the method deserves an honored place in the canons of biblical criticism. The limitations of the comparative method have been well defined by W. A. Irwin thus: "The Bible itself is our first and altogether best source for the study of the Bible . . . the Bible itself with whatever

¹⁵ Malamat, "The Settlement as Reflected in Tribal Genealogy," in H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 38, 63-66.

we can make of it by all best known procedures is alone to tell us what the Bible is and what it means."¹⁶ But surely the comparative

¹⁶ Presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, 1958; cf. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 78 (1959), p. 3.

method is one of the very best procedures for telling us what the Bible is and means, and what we make of Genesis today inevitably depends, in some measure, on the proper utilization of the literature of all of the ancient Near East.

Travels in CANAAN
 Routes of Abraham and Isaac,
 Jacob and Esau

(Modern names and places)

Ascheri

