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THE ANCIENT KINGDOM OF EBLA

What may well prove to be one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the century, outstripping even the celebrated Dead Sea scrolls, was announced in 1976 by a team of Italian archaeologists working at a site in Syria.

Drs. Paolo Matthiare and Giovanni Pettinato, of the University of Rome, leading a group which was excavating Tell Mardikh, a sun-baked mound some thirty miles south of Aleppo in Syria, reported that they had uncovered the remains of an ancient city-state of a distinctively Semitic character.

As has happened previously in archaeological work, early soundings uncovered a large collection of inscribed clay tablets amounting to around 16,500 in number. Although these have only been partly deciphered up to the present time, they have revealed that the ancient kingdom was known as Ebla, and that it flourished between the twenty-sixth and the twenty-third centuries before Christ in Syria. There is no mention of Ebla in the Bible, but the name does occur occasionally in the literature of the ancient Hittites, Egyptians and Sumerians.

Like the ancient Canaanites and others, the people of Ebla had their own distinctive way of writing their language, and this was unfamiliar to the archaeologists. On examination it proved to be a mixture of syllables of the kind common to cuneiform writing, and logograms, or symbols which stand for a concept or an entire word.

The process of deciphering was fortunately hastened by the fact that people in the ancient world, like their modern counterparts, often needed dictionaries when reading or writing the languages of other nations. The Eblaites, who apparently had important cultural and commercial connections with the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia, were no exception to this practice. At an early stage the archaeologists came across a bilingual vocabulary list of about a thousand words in both Sumerian and Eblaitic, and this provided an important clue to the nature of the local language.

When words began to be recognised in the clay tablets, the archaeologists were astonished to discover that Old Testament persons and places were mentioned frequently, and that the syllabic spelling of the names was almost identical with their counterparts in Hebrew. For example, the tablets spoke of Abraham (*Ab-ra-mu*), Esau (*E-sa-um*), Eber (*Ib-run*), Israel (*Is-ra-ilu*) and others,

all of which are clearly recognisable. Places that have been identified so far in the tablets include Megiddo, Hazor and Jerusalem. The latter (*U-ru-sa-li-ma*), is of particular interest to scholars because it constitutes the earliest known mention of this celebrated site, and is perhaps a thousand years older than any other surviving literary reference. To add to the mounting excitement, the archaeologists discovered in the collection of tablets accounts of the creation of the world and its subsequent destruction by a great deluge. Both of these correspond very closely indeed to the Genesis narratives, and are evidently copies of quite early literary sources.

It is now apparent to all those who have examined preliminary reports of the discovery that an important Canaanite empire was in existence in Syria some 4,500 years ago, and also that the tablets will have a great deal to tell us about the origins of the Hebrews. It was at this time that the nomadic ancestors of this people came from Sumer in southern Mesopotamia, and moved north and west in the general area of Syria and northern Palestine, settling ultimately in Canaanite territory in the time of Joshua.

Of great importance for the historian is the fact that the precursors of the later Hebrews are mentioned by name in the Tell Mardikh texts. Thus Eber, an early ancestor of Abraham, is usually thought of by scholars as the individual who gave his name to the later Hebrew people. The presence of his name, and those of certain of his descendants, in the tablets would indicate that if such persons as Eber, Abraham and Esau did not actually live in the kingdom of Ebla at some period, they certainly belonged to the same west-Semitic culture and were very familiar with that area of Syria.

Our knowledge of the earliest phases of Hebrew history will also be enriched by the obvious Canaanite background of the Eblaic tablets. We may expect to glean more information about the peoples and conditions in existence before the flood, and perhaps to obtain a corroborated and expanded form of some of the early genealogies in Genesis. Already the texts have shown that Eblaite religion was a composite of Sumerian and Canaanite gods, the latter including, Baal, Chemosh and Dagon, familiar to readers of the Old Testament. Dagon seems to have been the principal Eblaite god, who was perhaps an agricultural deity and represented as having the hands and head of a man but the body of a fish.

Of the many promising features connected with this remarkable new discovery, one is that the tablets seem to have been unearthed at the central court of Ebla, where provisions were housed and tribute was collected. The literary nature of many of the tablets would perhaps indicate that a scribal school was attached to this court. Since ancient Near Eastern kingdoms normally had a library attached

to the palace, it may be that subsequent excavations will uncover another large hoard of tablets from the royal archives at Ebla. So exciting has this prospect proved that archaeologists and Biblical scholars who normally express themselves in measured prose are employing exaggerated, almost ecstatic, language in their description of the possibilities presented by this situation.

There is no doubt, of course, that this totally unexpected discovery will bring about far-reaching changes in the opinions of scholars, especially those of the liberal school, about the nature and quality of the early material in Genesis. To the astonishment of the archaeologists, the new sources are very much closer to the Old Testament than any other literary material which has yet been discovered.

The very fact that narratives about creation and the flood were in existence in written form at least 2,300 years before Christ was born has furnished a conclusive refutation of the view that such Old Testament material had been handed down orally until about the time of king David (c. 1,000 BC), and only then committed to writing with any consistency.

Theories of the composition of Genesis will likewise come in for severe reassessment, and if the new discoveries are at all in accord with similar scribal material from the Near East, they will deal a decisive blow to the literary-critical theories so beloved of nineteenth century European scholars and their followers. One of the more realistic attempts to explain the composition of Genesis has seen it as comprised mostly of eleven tablets, written in Mesopotamian fashion, and readily identifiable from the narratives themselves. It is interesting to note that the Eblaite creation and flood narratives were preserved in tablet form, and it will be instructive to compare and contrast them with the Genesis material once the Ebla tablets have been published.

Even at this preliminary stage, scholars are being compelled to regard the very early historical records of Genesis with much greater seriousness than has been the case previously in a great many circles. Now this material has become rooted as never before in a sophisticated Canaanite culture which was flourishing in Syria about 2,500 BC.

Some scholars are already saying, and with evident justification, that the Eblaite sources have opened up an entirely new chapter in the history of the Near East. What can also be said is that this material is probably the most significant of its kind ever to be recovered, and that its effects on Old Testament study will be noticeable for many years to come.

Quite obviously, only the very earliest stages of the discovery can be discussed at the present time, and at that in only the most preliminary and tentative manner. Further articles will appear on this topic when more substantial information is forthcoming.

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We were unable, owing to a postal failure, to include this article in our last issue. Later reports (*Times* 15 Jan. 1977) emphasise that the State of Ebla flourished a thousand years before the Israelites appeared in the Middle East. "The recurrence of names such as Abraham, Ishmael and David means only that such names were common in the area at the time" — it does not prove that the inhabitants of Ebla were the ancestors of the Jews, for much can happen in a thousand years. Interestingly, one tablet records a merchant's invoice of goods despatched to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which are mentioned very early in Genesis (10:19). The Eblaites were conquered in 2,300 BC and finally destroyed by the more war-like Mesopotamians — *Editor*

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