

A BUSINESS DOCUMENT FROM THE TIME OF ABRAHAM

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I herewith present the decipherment of a small cuneiform tablet from the library of my esteemed colleague, Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., given to him by the late Dr. Arno Gaebelein many years ago. It turns out that the text is singularly unspectacular, but as with every shred of new documentary material it adds its tiny part to the total of our knowledge of the ancient Biblical world.

Before I present this text and its significance, I would like to use the opportunity to make a plea to Evangelical scholarship. The proverbial hen's teeth may be used to describe the number of cuneiform scholars of the Evangelical camp. Those who wrote in clay produced almost imperishable documentation of their life and times. In no other part of the world do we find such a wealth of extant original documents. Admittedly, cuneiform studies are vast and complex and a few specialists dominate the various areas of study. With no little irony a certain famed cuneiformist of an Eastern university has received the sobriquet DINGIR meaning "god" in Sumerian. Be that as it may, it happens that tools are becoming increasingly available for any serious scholar to learn to handle at least a portion of this source material, and this should be a fascinating challenge to Biblical scholars since it opens a vast area of understanding. Reading these documents in translation while useful is about as satisfying as it is for a theologian to be limited to the English Bible. Moreover, only a few cuneiform specialists are interested in Biblical studies but Biblical scholars can be enriched by working in cuneiform since their minds will be swift to appreciate what is relevant to Bible studies in language, religion, history, etc.

Evangelical scholars must guard against a solely reactionary scholarship. Positive contributions in any field have always brought with them recognition and respect from those who are dedicated to serious research no matter what their theological position. When some degree of such respect is attained then other views and pronouncements on theological matters may often be given a fairer hearing.

Cuneiform studies logically begin with Sumerian since this was the classical language of the cuneiform world, though Ugaritic is somewhat of an exception since it was written in alphabetic cuneiform. Any student of Hebrew can become at home in Ugaritic in a comparatively short time. Even the script is easy to learn and a complete tool, including most extant texts in transcription, a grammar and glossary is available in English in C. H. Gordon's Ugaritic Textbook. For years I have been trying to tell my students of the primacy of Ugaritic for an

understanding of Hebrew poetry. They became really enthusiastic when Time Magazine popularized one of C. F. A. Schaeffer's Ras Shamra excavations and acclaimed Ugaritic as second only to the Dead Sea Scrolls in importance for Biblical studies. And yet I have been unable to convince certain Old Testament professors that Ugaritic is this important for Biblical studies.

Dahood's Psalms, Vol. 1, in the Anchor Bible is replete with Ugaritic information which clarifies many obscure texts. But Ugaritic also shows that some Akkadian materials especially in the area of identification of Akkadian mythological motifs in the O. T. must now be reassessed. For example, the use of the word thmt in Ugaritic makes it unnecessary to assume a direct borrowing of the Akkadian goddess Tiamat as the primordial flood. On the other hand, with Ugaritic as the bridge, genuine correspondence with Hebrew from Akkadian sources can be confirmed. Indeed, Ugaritic has now become the testing ground to make sure that Akkadian, Arabic, or any other cognate material really applies to northwest Semitic of 2nd and 1st millennium B. C.

It is not my purpose now to give even a sampling of these riches but only to say that any post-graduate Evangelical seminary which does not include Ugaritic in its curriculum for serious Hebrew exegesis of the O. T. is operating at least twenty-five years behind time.

The cuneiform text before us is not in Ugaritic but it is in the Sumerian language. Being one of the many thousands of neo-Sumerian business documents, it contains nothing new and yet has considerable to say to the Biblical scholar. Sumerians were meticulous bookkeepers because their economic life was inseparably tied to their religion. They have therefore left us the best documented economy of all antiquity. Each city had its temple in which was concentrated the economic as well as the religious life of the community. The human personnel were regarded as agents and employees of the gods. The concept of government was thus theocratic, the city state ruler was called an Ensi who was responsible to the deity. This was so ingrained into the Sumerian way of thinking that it was not at all unusual for them to speak of the gods making expenditures. The gods themselves are said to receive clothing and other commodities. It seems unnecessary to imply that such clothing was always for use on the images, although some texts make it clear that sometimes idols were clothed in expensive fabrics.

The ordinary Ur III document usually contains records of business transactions or inventories, etc. but the most important feature is the fact that they have date formulae frequently giving the day, month, and year in which the transaction took place. The following is a typical text.

From Mr. Ahuni, Mr. Urningar received (the carcasses of) two milch sheep and two gazelles which died. (They were received) on the 14th day of the second month (according to the menology) of city Puzurisdagan, in the year after the cities of Sumurum and Lulubum were destroyed for the ninth time.

These texts tell interesting things about the people, their culture and times. For example, Mr. Ahuni's name is Semitic while Urningar is Sumerian. Such was the mixed population of lower Mesopotamia toward the end of the third millennium. Semites were migrating in increasing

numbers into the fertile and highly developed land of the Sumerians. The Sumerians were soon to disappear through assimilation but not before bequeathing their system of writing, much of their religion and language to the Semites. Among the Semitic immigrants was an Amurru family of Terah, the father of Abraham.

The date formula referring to cities destroyed for the ninth time may be a reminder of the stratification of tells or better it could mean that there was not really complete destruction but a battle was won and a city pillaged and partially burned. It was the lot of these cities to face hostile forces many a springtime "when kings went forth to battle" (II Sam. 11:1). This cliché may also suggest an answer to Von Rad, Alt, and others who find little historicity in Joshua because Joshua "destroyed" so many towns and yet they remain undestroyed. In the Book of Joshua there were significant victories but in reality God's command was only partially carried out. Joshua 11:18 says, "Joshua made war a long time with these kings." Jerusalem was conquered but it remained a Jebusite city until David's time.

The year formula reminds us of Amos 1:1 where the prophet uses a date formula to give the time of his prophecy as "two years before the earthquake." Often the neo-Sumerian formulae are confusing because the name of the year was frequently changed depending on the significance of events which took place in that year. A single year may have several names and dozens of variants of the same name. The date formula consists of two main parts, that of the month and that of the year. This month formula reads literally itu-šeš-da-ku-min-kam, which means "the month of the 2nd new moon (nanna) festival." This was the name of the 2nd month in the city Puzurisdagan but it was also of a month name according to the menology of the well-known city of Ur. Each city had its own menology. Therefore the provenience of a given document is determined by the month name on it. N. Schneider produced exhaustive studies of these formulae in Analecta Orientalia which enables one to date and place a given text.

The Ur III and Isin Larsa periods are represented by many thousands of business texts yet it is claimed that the published material represents only a small portion of what is still in libraries and museums. Two young historians, T. B. Jones and J. W. Snyder, presented a catalogue and discussion of some 350 of these documents in 1961 (Univ. of Minnesota Press). I have worked on numerous texts from the Philadelphia Free Library, Logan Square and the Firestone Library at Princeton; the former has about 3,000 texts (not all Ur III) and the latter over 2,000 (mostly Ur III). In the year I was born Edward Chiera produced an inventory of the Princeton collection but it has received little attention since that time.

Unfortunately our document of weights and measures from Dr. Buswell's library has no date formula. Therefore we cannot tell its provenience nor can it be set into an accurate relative position as to date. There is however no question that it derives from around the year 2000 B.C. The script reveals that it comes from the neo-Sumerian period or the slightly later Isin-Larsa period. This tablet was evidently a merchant's list of his own weights and measures. The merchant had weights of copper, bronze and stone, also a bronze and a wooden dry measure and two basket or reed measures.

The text is as follows:

Transliteration

Translation

Obverse

1 giš ninda ma-na lal zabar	A one mina bronze weight (shaped like) a wooden container
1/2 ma-na lal zabar	A one-half mina bronze weight
1/3 ma-na lal zabar	A one-third mina bronze weight
10 gin lal zabar	A 10 shekel bronze weight
10 ma-na lal urudu	A 10 mina copper weight
5 gin lal zabar	A 5 shekel bronze weight

Reverse

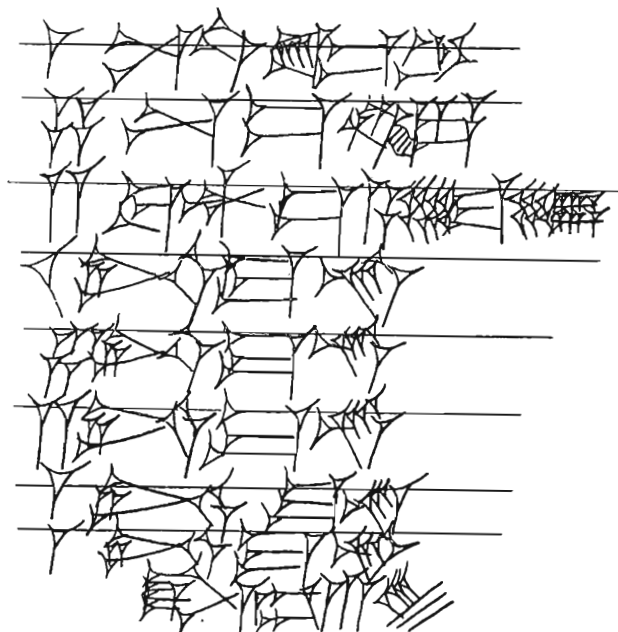
1 qa zabar ninda	A one qa bronze container
4 qa giš ninda kal	A four qa strong wooden container
2 ba-an giš a-tu tir	Two containers made of A-TU reeds (cane)
10 za ma-na	A ten mina stone
5 za ma-na	A five mina stone
2 za ma-na	A two mina stone
1 za ma-na	A one mina stone
1 za ma-na ša du min kam	A one mina stone of another kind

obv.



5

rev.



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The metal weights of bronze and copper mentioned here are in units called in Sumerian MANA and GIN. The Sumerian word mana is related to maneh (pound) of the Bible. Ezekiel 45:12 is not completely clear but if taken at face value would imply an ideal measure of 60 shekels to the maneh (LXX makes it 50). I Kings 10:14-17 in describing Solomon's riches gives his annual income in the largest weight, the kikkar (talent, also attested in Ugaritic) and other treasures are measured in terms of the maneh and shekel. Luke 19:13, 16, 18 uses the Greek equivalent mina in the parable of the nobleman who expected his ten servants to invest his riches. Throughout the ancient world 60 shekels often made a mina and 60 minas made a talent. Although this system did not always prevail the sexagesimal character of the system was borrowed from the Sumerians and passed down through the ages and is still used by us in our compass and clock.

The Sumerian GIN is most probably the Semitic shekel which must not be thought of in terms of coinage which was not invented until the Kingdom of Lydia in the 7th century B.C. But this was a weight (LAL) which archeological evidence sets at varying amounts averaging about 11 grams. The noun is attested in Ugaritic while Hebrew sometimes also uses a verb of the same root meaning "to weigh." Recent Ugaritic prose mentions a nsp which ties in with a stone inscribed neseḫ from Lachish. It is lighter than a shekel and the Arabic naṣṣun meaning "one-half" suggests one-half shekel. Its relationship to the Biblical pim is not clear though Exodus 38:26 makes clear that the beqa was one-half shekel. This nsp clearly means one-half shekel (c. Ugaritic Textbook, texts 1017:6 and 2101:13).

Of the many Ur III texts I have studied none is like this simple list of weights and measures. Many deal with merchants balancing their accounts. For example, in another Ur III text a certain Turzida, a merchant, gives a statement of his accounts in the first Umma month in the third year of Bur-Sin. Turzida mentions "eleven shekels of silver" described as kū-babbar šu-nir ensi-ka translated "silver with the emblem of the ensi." This reminds us of the early practice of standardizing weights and measures. The characteristic Nuzu phrase being "according to the standard of the palace." But here is indicated, I believe, an element in the prehistory of coinage. Silver was in constant danger of being alloyed. Bearing the šu-nir of the ensi served to guarantee its purity. The same problem is amusingly reflected in the Tell el Amarna tablets where Tušratta complains to Amenophis III when he refers to the latter's gift as Libit hurašē kima ša ērē mazu ("a brick of gold like washed copper"). That there were grades of silver and that some were definitely unacceptable is seen in the description of Abraham's purchase of the field of Machpelah for 400 shekels of silver. Here only the verb šaqal "to weigh" is used when Abraham weighed out the silver which is called kesep ōbēr lassōhēr ("silver up to commercial standards," literally "silver which crosses with the merchant").

Our little document also mentions dry measures. A one qa bronze container, a four qa wooden container and 2 containers or baskets made of a certain type reed. How important these containers were in the economy is seen in a text which records day by day and almost hour by hour feeding of one large ox for thirty days.

The tablet reveals that the ox consumed a little over one-half bushel of chaff and grain per day (24 qa to be exact). The attendant was careful to record to the fraction of a qa exactly how much chaff per day, how much fine and ordinary grain per day the animal consumed. He records the totals of each type grain consumed by the same creature in a thirty-day period. He

determined how much of each type feed was needed to bring about even monthly stipulations because only $13\frac{1}{3}$ qa of ordinary grain per day could give him exactly 400 qa for the month and only $6\frac{2}{3}$ qa of fine grain could give him 200 qa for the thirty days. Only a Sumerian ox could have the distinction of having so exact an account of his daily feed consumption recorded by man for four millennia. The text is from the town Umma in the days of king Šu-Sin.

No matter how much one may have read about the Ur III texts or even have perused the translations of many of these texts there is simply nothing that can compare with the reading of one such document from the original language and script. This is the essence of source-scholarship and whether it is the original text of the Bible-documents or other documents from the ancient world, Evangelical scholars must be prepared to advance along with the exciting source materials from the world of Bible times if we are to do more than repeat what other men say or stand by powerless to interpret for ourselves the ever increasing epigraphic evidence.