

NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERY ILLUMINATES THE PAST

by Lester L. Grabbe

The normally se-date world of ancient Near Eastern archaeology is buzzing with the excitement of a new discovery—a discovery which some think will rival that of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Others are throwing caution to the winds and calling it the “find of the century.”

Finds up to the present include approximately 17,000 clay tablets written in a language related to the Hebrew of the Old Testament. Furthermore, these tablets describe a city and culture some centuries older than the patriarch Abraham but in his same general area. The finds are too recent to do more than whet one's appetite for the moment. Only careful and lengthy study will show their precise value for the research of language and history of the Bible. Yet the tantalizing data already found and released to the scholarly world suggest that some excitement is not unfounded.

The archaeological site is Tell Mardikh, a mound in northern Syria about 45 miles south of Aleppo. The mound (or “tell” in archaeological parlance) marks the remains of the once flourishing city of Ebla. (According to one text, the city had a population of 260,000.) Ebla was destroyed about 1600 B.C. Yet it had been a major city-state and perhaps even the capital of an empire for many centuries before its final destruction. The tablets so far discovered cover approximately the period between 2500-2200 B.C., as dated paleographically (from the writing) and from the archaeological strata.

Synopsis of the Excavation

I first learned of the new finds in the autumn of 1975. I was visiting at



Wide World

Cambridge with J. A. Emerton, professor of Hebrew. He asked whether I had heard of new cuneiform tablets in a northwest Semitic language. I had heard nothing; he had heard only a few rumors. Much of the mystery was dispelled by the publication of two articles in the journal *Orientalia*. Other announcements in the popular press relayed some further information along with a lot of unverified claims and some rather wild-sounding speculations.

The first really clear account of the situation came on October 29, 1976, in St. Louis at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature together with some other learned societies.

The SBL arranged for the men associated with the Ebla discovery to be present and address the entire group. These were the archaeologist, Professor P. Matthiae, and the language specialist, Professor G. Pettinato.

Professor Matthiae gave a history of the dig. It had actually begun more than a decade ago in 1964. The size of the mound has indicated it must have once been an important site. It covered about 140 acres, far larger than many important tells excavated in Israel. A statuette unearthed in 1968

gave the first definite clue to the identity of the ancient city. It mentioned the word *Ebla* twice. Ebla was already known from other records to have been an important city in the second and third millennia B.C. However, that identification was disputed by some scholars.

The year 1974 brought the long-awaited written artifacts. These were 42 clay tablets in the cuneiform script (see photo) commonly used to write the

Babylonian, Assyrian and Sumerian languages. Like most such tablets, they were extremely small. Even the larger ones were only about 3 by 3½ inches. Nevertheless, the ancient scribes were able to squeeze quite a bit of writing onto such small “pages.”

The year 1975 brought the real cache of approximately 16,000 tablets. Another thousand or so turned up in 1976. The result is a library which will take many decades to publish, analyze and evaluate. Naturally, this says nothing of anything still left to be excavated in later seasons!

The big news was not just the number of tablets, but the discovery that many of them were written in an hitherto unknown language. However, this language has close affinities with such known languages as Aramaic, Ugaritic and Hebrew. Since there are few remains of the early Hebrew language outside the Old Testament, any early records are of great interest to Bible scholars, even if those records are in a language only related to Hebrew rather than in Hebrew itself.

A New Language

The Hebrew language is called “Canaanite” in the Old Testament. It

and Phoenician make up the Canaanite dialects. Professor Pettinato has labeled the new language of Ebla "Old Canaanite," as if it were the ancestor of Hebrew. He may be correct in this.

However, his identification is not likely to go unchallenged. Other languages such as Ugaritic (discovered in 1929) have been included in Canaanite by some scholars whereas others disagree. If the new Eblaite language is indeed the father or

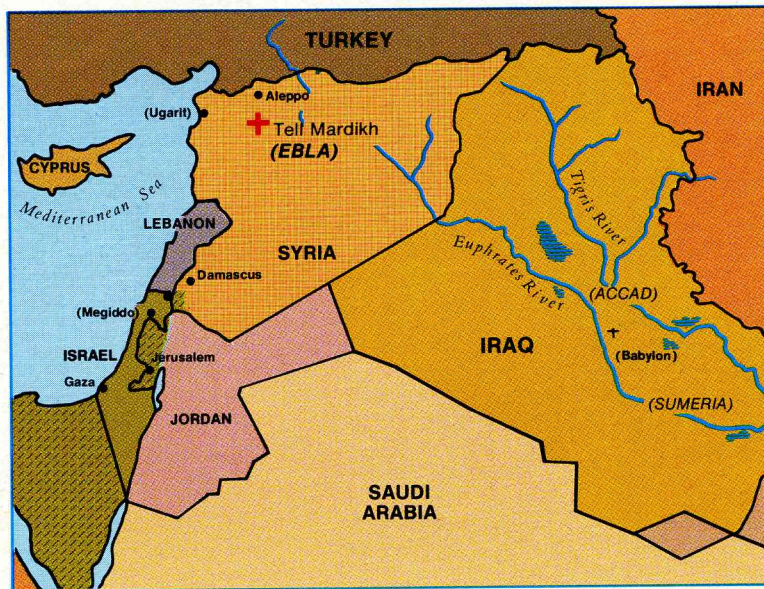
grandfather of Hebrew, it is likely to be of more significance for Old Testament studies than if it is more distantly related.

The question is not one that will be answered easily. But it may very well turn out that Eblaite is only the grand-uncle of Hebrew rather than the grandfather!

Perhaps one of the more intriguing types of literary material among the tablets is a number of dictionaries. They give the Sumerian equivalents of Eblaite words and vice versa. Their importance is enhanced in that they help advance knowledge of Sumerian as well as give valuable help in deciphering the new language. Their arrangement is surprisingly modern. These dictionaries were necessary since Sumerian was a common literary language of the time even though the people of Ebla did not speak it.

New Data

The new texts have been studied in only a preliminary way so that no more than hints of good things to come can be given. However, the fact that only preliminary work has been done is itself reason to be cautious with any really or apparently new facts. (Some initial reports have



not met the proper qualifications of careful scholarship.)

It has been reported that a number of names well known from the Bible have turned up. One text alone contains 250 geographical names. Jerusalem (Ursalima) is supposed to occur. The names of Sodom and Gomorrah were also announced, though exactly how they are written in the cuneiform script has not been shown. This is of great interest since the names had been known only from the Bible. Scholars had not generally doubted the existence of these cities, but they are now definitely confirmed as historical.

Personal names in the texts often remind one of names of biblical characters and may indeed be forms of these names. These include Israel (*ish-ra-il*), Abram (*ab-ra-mu*), and Saul (*sa-u-lum*). The name David (*da-u-dum*) is also reported. However, one hesitates at this identification since the name David was also long believed to occur in the Mari texts (from about the eighteenth century B.C.). Later studies showed this to be an incorrect reading. Likewise, the name Benjamin, which had originally been identified in the Mari texts, turned out

to be a misreading.

The account of a great flood in Genesis 6 through 8 is not unique to the Bible. It is found in several ancient Near Eastern literatures; the Babylonian account is well preserved and has been known since the late nineteenth century. A flood story is also reported for the Ebla tablets.

A number of the geographical names are not actually identified as to location. It is only by inference that they are taken to

be the same as names in the Bible or other ancient literatures. However, one tablet mentions an "Ur" in the area of Haran. This is of considerable interest since Genesis 11 shows that Abraham migrated from "Ur of the Chaldees" to Haran before going on to Canaan. Since the discovery of a Sumerian Ur near the Persian Gulf, most scholars have assumed this was the Ur of the Bible. Yet several have argued that "Ur of the Chaldees" was actually a city in northern Mesopotamia much nearer to Haran. The Ebla listing now lends further credence to this latter theory.

The Italian scholars have announced most of their preliminary findings with proper scientific caution. One example will illustrate this. The name *Yahweh* for the God of Israel seems unique. The wording of Exodus 6:3 suggests that the name *Yahweh* was unknown before the time of Moses.

Yet some of the early reports stated that the name *Yahweh* had appeared in the Ebla tablets. After Pettinato's lecture, he was asked about this. He pointed out that "Michael" (*mi-ka-il*) occurs in a number of texts. (It probably meant "Who is
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like El?" as does the Hebrew *Mika'el*.) Yet alongside this is the name Micah (*mi-ka-ya*, perhaps meaning "Who is like Yahweh?"). Pettinato simply stated that the two names occurred but refused to draw premature conclusions from them. This is proper scholarship.

The Future

Whether the material from Ebla will really turn out to be "one of the greatest discoveries of our time or any other" remains to be seen. Trying to compare the value of scholarly findings can easily descend into childishness, since all finds have their value. All—whether big or small—take their place as resources from which to draw for research about the ancient world. Without using hyperbole, however, one can certainly state that the discoveries at Ebla are of great significance.

Proper analysis of the texts will take considerable time. Only preliminary conclusions can be drawn for the next indefinite number of years. Many hypotheses will be advanced; many will have to be rejected or modified after further study. But some will stand the test and become part of a basis on which to build further work.

It is not likely that the study of the Bible will be revolutionized. The significance of the Bible is in its religious, ethical and moral teachings. But new discoveries can help us to understand better the matrix in which the Bible grew. □

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WHY NOT?

by Jon Hill

Why Were You Born?

Murray was a nice enough fellow. He was president of a company that sold printing supplies, and I was in the printing business. We were at a printers' convention in Los Angeles.

Printers are a strange lot: half their blood is ink and the other half alcohol. They've seen the world, know all about it—if you don't think so just ask one—and they don't like any of it. They are hard-bitten, but generally friendly and most have a sense of humor. It's from them I learned the phrase: "For the man who thinks, the world is comic; for the man who feels, it is tragic." Since most of them thought they were thinkers, but many were secretly concerned, it was an interesting tragicomic time.

Murray asked, "What is it you guys print?" I had a copy of one of our booklets with me, so I handed it to him as a sample. The title was *Why Were You Born?* He glanced at the paper stock, size, printing quality, was pleasantly surprised that this was only one among dozens of booklets we print hundreds of thousands of—and then the title caught his eye. "May I have this?" he asked. "Of course," I said. "We give all our literature away free—it's a public service."

"Thanks!" he said with a grin. "I've just got to have this. I've always wondered why I was born. I'm sure most people have the same question, but I never heard anybody ask anybody else. I'm going to ask everybody here!" And with that he disappeared to confront the world of printer's devils.

Murray did ask nearly everyone there, "Why were *you* born?" Some gave a short laugh, turned to another customer, and dismissed good old Murray as having had one too many. Others paused to really consider: "I was born to make money!" Practical, cosmopolitan. "I was born to make a living, get married, have children and die." Pedestrian. "I was born to eat, drink and make merry, for tomorrow" Evading the question. "Nobody knows why he was born, stupid. We're just here!" Belligerent, superior. "I was born to learn some lessons before I die, and maybe develop a little character." Getting warm, but too serious for a printer. "I was born to help make the world a better place to live in—and failed so far": bitter, somewhat cynical, sarcastic. "Ask a priest!": passing the buck. "Why, you unprintable, no good son of an expletive, if you don't know why the blank you were born why ask me?" Better move on, fight coming up!

Well, Murray had a ball that day, and like to have broken up the convention. Three months later I asked him if he ever had read that booklet. "No, not yet," he admitted, "but I still ask everyone the question when I get a chance—their answers kill me!"

I don't know if Murray has ever read the booklet yet, but why don't *you*? There is a very good answer—one you probably never heard before: fantastic, interesting and real.

And it's free—write for your copy today.

Why not?