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# Comparative Bible Research and the Mari Archives. Comments and Reflections

*Jack M. Sasson\**

## Resumen

La investigación comparativa tiene como objetivo cumplir funciones recíprocas, permitiendo que el conocimiento de una cultura enriquezca el de otra. Para este número de la Revista *Claruscuro*, que conmemora el 85º aniversario de la resurrección de Mari, comienzo el artículo con las circunstancias y premisas que lanzaron tal evaluación antes de centrarme en Mari entre otros descubrimientos arqueológicos importantes entre las dos Grandes Guerras. Desde ese entonces, la explotación de los ricos archivos de Mari para ilustrar los documentos bíblicos generados hasta un milenio después ha experimentado picos y ocultaciones, armonizando con permutaciones académicas en el estudio de la Biblia. Trato estas cuestiones, pero también reflexiono sobre lo que podríamos estar perdiendo en una era de absorción singular en un escenario posterior del primer milenio para la integración de la tradición hebraica.

**Palabras claves:** Biblia; Mari; Estudios comparativos

## Abstract

Comparative research aims to fulfil reciprocal functions, allowing knowledge of one culture to enrich that of another. For this issue of *Revista Claruscuro*, greeting the 85th birthday of Mari's resurrection, I open on the circumstances and premises that launched such an assessment before focusing on Mari among other major archeological discoveries between the two Great Wars. Since then, exploitations

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of Mari's rich archives to illustrate Biblical documents generated as much as a millennium later has experienced peaks and occultations, harmonizing with scholarly permutations in the academic study of the Bible. I touch on these occasions, but also reflect on what we may be missing in an era of singular absorption with a later First Millennium setting for the integration of Hebraic lore.

**Key-Words:** Mari; Bible; Comparative studies

On this celebration of an archeological discovery made in Syria almost a century ago, I aim to develop a narrative with an extended moral<sup>1</sup>. In shaping a decent trajectory for it, there will be omissions and commissions; but they are easily remedied by minimal familiarity with antiquity. I will eventually focus on one archive from Western Asia to illustrate how it affected the study of the Hebrew Bible. The parable can be constructed from any of the great archaeological resources of recent centuries, including Ebla, Ur, Kaneš, Ḫattuša, El Amarna, Ugarit, Nuzi, and Nineveh; but I give it to you from the archives most familiar to me, those from Mari, present day Tell Hariri. The site is on the right bank of the Euphrates, a few kilometers north of the ever-smoldering Syro-Iraqi frontier.

## A Century (or so) ago

I set the scene by traveling a century or so back in time, so just before Mari began to reveal its secrets in the early 1930s. No one needs reminding that by the end of World War I, Biblical scholarship had hit one of its many recurring intellectual snags and was looking for fresh methods or resources with which to invigorate its arguments. During the Nineteenth Century, two major research tools had been refined, leading to dissonant yet mutually affirming courses by which to test biblical verities.

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1. The core of this study is an unpublished October 2013 keynote presentation at a Copenhagen conference, "Changing Perspectives in Old Testament Studies: Past, Present and Future." While this is an extensively reshaped version, I am retaining some of its hortatory character. Let me hope it is never too late to thank my hosts there, Anna Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, Ingrid Hjelm, Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas L. Thompson. A volume holding most of the presentations on that occasion is Hjelm and Thompson 2016. In this essay, I will quote or cite translations of Mari documents from Sasson 2017, not because they are superior but because they are in English. Readers should go there for detailed reference to the original editions, with French translations, frequently also with extended commentaries. I also revisit some notions and conclusions I have developed in previous publications.

## Historical verities

The earliest of the two instruments applied a rigorous principle then current in historical studies that required cross-examination of multiple sources when reconstructing the past. The Roman adage, “*Testis unus, testis nullus*” that is, “one witness is no witness,” was the operating principle. When it came to the Bible, the absence of credible extra-biblical witnesses rankled. In reaction, researchers eventually extracted from Scripture four testable documents, divergent in style and vocabulary, each with a distinctive theosophy, the earliest stemming from the monarchic period. The whole corpus was said to stabilize roughly in the Persian period, when a sequence of calamities and good fortune bolstered attachment to god, tradition, and land. In effect, these restored sources were charting Israel’s multiple memories of its traditions rather than registering exact moments of its past, and so not likely to benefit from outside evidence. This program hardly aimed to debunk the Bible; for Christians of impeccable faith were carrying it out. Rather, by promoting an Israel that allegedly had progressively lost track of the moral God, they hoped to bolster a divine logic behind the advent of Christianity. For them, while the Bible was not always historically accurate, its message was always true and profound<sup>2</sup>.

Needless to say, not everyone shared in this vision, if only because underplaying the historicity of biblical narratives might incite doubts on the authenticity of God’s message. Much later, Roland de Vaux offered a succinct formulation of the dilemma. “If the historical faith of Israel is not founded in history,” he argued, “such faith is erroneous, and therefore, our faith is as well”<sup>3</sup>. Luckily for those sharing such beliefs, even as Julius Wellhausen was canonizing the above narrative in 1883, a series of decipherments, among them of Phoenician, Egyptian, Akkadian, and Hittite, had restored voices that had been silent since Roman times<sup>4</sup>. The results were widely displayed in mass media such as in the *Illustrated London News* (since 1842), and they stimulated a two-pronged reaction.

2. Every major Biblical dictionary (usually under “Source / Literary Criticism” or “Documentary Hypothesis”) rehearses this story. A good overview is in Barton 1984.

3. De Vaux, 1965: 7, “. . . si la foi historique d’Israël n’est pas fondée dans l’histoire, cette foi est erronée, et la nôtre aussi.” De Vaux is reacting to Von Rad’s opinion that historicity may not be of crucial importance to people of faith.

4. On Wellhausen, see Knight 1982, with many contributions evaluating his influential contributions to Biblical scholarship.

## Historicism

Providentially, the recovery of a cavalcade of rulers who took flesh as if just to authenticate Scripture quickened the first prong. Egyptian pharaohs began to flaunt their own deeds and although none of them directly admitted to coveting Abram's Saray (Gen 12) or contending with Moses (in Exod), recovery of their records gave fair hopes that they might indeed have done so. Hyksos rulers took on names —read then as Jacob-El, Anat-El, and the like—, that lent credence to Josephus's setting for Israel's entry into Egypt. Thereafter (1890s), references to the Habirus in the Amarna tablets mesmerized the multitudes: Could they have been Hebrews?<sup>5</sup>

From Mesopotamian inscriptions came to life Sargon II, Sennacherib, Ashurbanipal, and Nebuchadnezzar, as if to validate their presence in Scripture. Especially after Babylonian king lists proved stocked with West Semitic names, there was also reason to believe that an Amorite hegemony ruled over Western Asia since the Third Millennium. Even the recovery of his law stela in 1901, Hammurabi of Babylon had become paradigmatic for all subsequent empire builders. His Amorite name readily morphed into Amraphel of Genesis 14, and his legal formulations centuries seemed destined to deeply influence Hebraic legislation centuries later. Because Hammurabi was placed then in the late third millennium, the puzzle was how to make him confront Abram of Genesis 14 when the patriarchs were set centuries later. I mention this dilemma now as a foretaste for one of the many miracles delivered by the Mari tablets.

## Assimilation

Sensational literary discoveries quickened the other prong, none more dramatic than George Smith's December 1872 presentation in London on a Mesopotamian Flood narrative<sup>6</sup>. The revelation cast a disquieting light on the uniqueness of Hebraic lore, if not also on divine inspiration. A treasure house of retrieved ancient Near Eastern documents stimulated a comparative classification of episodes, themes, and motifs, ostensibly as a chapter

5. Oesterley and Robinson 1930: 43-58; see also 167-181. See below and n. 52 for further remarks.

6. For the story, see now Part 1 of Cregan-Reid 2013. Brief overview at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10321147/The-tragic-tale-of-George-Smith-and-Gilgamesh.html>

in the history of religions<sup>7</sup>. The Bible, in effect, was seen as a hoarder of the ancient world's finest traditions, some reaching Israel through conquering armies, but most through oral diffusion. Nonetheless—as the arguments had it—Hebrews did manage to embed within these acquired lore historical tidbits drawn from their own authentic experiences.

Ostensibly, this second enterprise was neutral on the issue of the historicity of Hebraic narratives. Yet, it was hardly without an intended impact for, by slyly advancing the cause of orality, it gave traditions a launch that predated their commitment to writing. In fact, it would not take long for scholarship to reshape Wellhausenian creed forcefully by retrojecting some elements of Hebraic traditions into diverse moments of the second millennium. In Britain, a formidable orientalist, Archibald Sayce, took up the cudgel, using newly edited documents to shore up Biblical verities<sup>8</sup>. In 1912 Germany, Hugo Gressmann peeled Hebrew traditions stratum by stratum. In a memorable moment, he likened his method to an archeological excavation of a tell<sup>9</sup>. In 1916, the Norwegian Sigmund Mowinckel proposed that prophetic literature circulated orally long before it was attached to historical figures<sup>10</sup>. In contributions sometimes more—but often less—sensitive to critical scholarship, the reaction threaded through a good part of the Twentieth Century: In the 1920s, in the works of Adolphe Lods (1923), Johannes Pedersen (1926), and Albrecht Alt (1929); a decade later in those of Gerhard von Rad (especially 1934) and Martin Noth (already in 1938).

With contemporaneous textual (and soon also archaeological) records entering the fray, brackets were set on either side of a methodological confrontation, between those who would trust Scripture to contain all needed clues for confirming Israel's own version of history versus those who would seek extra-biblical sources so as to provide reasonable control over Israel's historical memory. What is interesting is how this last process frequently carried over to Near East documents, with myths and tales from *Enuma Elish* to *Sinuhe* sifted for their historical contents. Circularly, their historicized contents were then used to affirm the reliability of Scriptural lore<sup>11</sup>.

7. "Form Criticism," best associated with Hermann Gunkel and most clearly detailed in diverse editions of his Genesis commentary. See now the English edition (1997).

8. Nice overview in Elliott 2003; Fuller assessment of Sayce in Belton 2007.

9. Knight 2006: 68-69 n. 8.

10. Knight 2006: 169-70 n. 2.

11. As one example, Albright (1968 [1942]: 60) wrote, "Without taking every statement of the Sinuhe story too literally we are... justified in regarding it as substantially true account of life in its *milieu*."

## The Great Archaeological Discoveries

The next phase of the tussle, one that will allow me to feature the archives from my beloved Mari, dawned mid-way between the two wars. Objectives will shift slightly; but the arguments for historicity will take a sharper tone once they cross the Atlantic. Especially in the United States, investing in the veracity of Biblical pronouncements came naturally. As cast since the early Republic, the crafting of American history replayed the chosen people saga: Immigrants (read: Protestants) leave their homelands for a New Zion, conquer Canaanites (read: Indians), battle Philistines (read: the British), acquire an eternal charter (read: Constitution) and risk splitting their nation North and South (Read: Israel and Judah) by disregarding it. With a biblical plot to drive their own secular history, Americans did not find Scriptural realism wanting and therefore had little use for the Old World's fancy manipulation of Israel's past<sup>12</sup>.

### Nuzi and Ugarit

The series of spectacular discoveries began during the British Mandate period, in the mid-1920s, at Yorgha Tepe, ancient Nuzi, east of the Tigris River. Its documents were from the Fourteenth Century. and they gave detailed information on the social lives of a largely Hurrian community. Soon enough, their verisimilitude to moments in the lives of the patriarchs allowed Sidney Smith in Britain, but most prominently Ephraim Speiser and Cyrus Gordon in the US, to set the patriarchal narratives in the Late Bronze age<sup>13</sup>.

Then, in 1929, began the excavations at Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast under French Mandate, uncovering cosmopolitan Ugarit, as close to a Canaanite city-state as we had hoped to find<sup>14</sup>. Until this discovery, Canaanites were profiled largely from Scripture as people who were fickle for their many gods, depraved for their orgies, and brutal for their human sacrifice. Ugarit's Late Bronze age archives proved to be a useful corrective. From the homes of merchant-princes and learned priests came poetic myths and epics in alphabetic cuneiform. Comparisons and notices of similarities between Ugaritic and Hebrew poetics quickly mushroomed, encouraging the shrinkage of the

12. See Sasson 1981 for this theme.

13. Smith relied on a Kirkuk table (#51) to suggest a parallel for Rachel's theft of the teraphim; see Gadd 1926. Selman (1983) gives a good overview.

14. Whether Ugarit belongs to Canaan is debated. Fortunately, the issue needs no elaboration here.

time-lapse between their respective productions. Such works as the *Song at the Sea* (Exod 15) and the *Ode of Deborah* (Judg 5) were declared Canaanite in rhetoric. This proximity in language and style encouraged speculation that their production was nearly contemporaneous with the incidents that inspired them, thus enhancing their reliability as sources for historical reconstruction<sup>15</sup>. The discovery and resurrection of Mari came next.

## Mari

*Phase 1.* Located about 13,000 kms from Rosario, Argentina—but just a caravan jaunt from the Aram Naharayim that Scripture assigned the ancestors of Abraham—Tell Hariri came to the attention of French excavators in the summer of 1932, when Bedouins reported finding a statue on the tell. That statue (“Cabane” = Frayne 1990: 615) gave us the name of Yasmaḥ-Addu, son of Samsi-Addu, ruling a city, its name missing in a break. By January of 1934, however, the identification came to be secure<sup>16</sup>. The only credible scholar to have suggested the linkage previously was a young American scholar named William F. Albright. He was soon to take a proprietary interest in Mari’s archives<sup>17</sup>.

With recovery of the Old Assyrian archives from Kaneš (Kültepe) not placed on a firm footing until the mid-1940s, the importance of Tell Hariri for us is that it delivered records from the Middle Bronze age, then widely regarded as a backdrop for the Hebrew patriarchs<sup>18</sup>. An astronomical number of tablets reportedly was found; but before World War II only one collection of Mari documents was published (Jean 1941), and in autographic copies only; so hardly the stuff on which biblical scholars pounce. Rather, in a series of articles, the great François Thureau-Dangin, assisted by Georges Dossin and Charles F. Jean, offered some sample tablets, but mostly in extracts. What we learned was momentous. In 1936, Thureau-Dangin showed that Samsi-

15. The bibliography on this subject is hirsute and featured in most reference sets on the Bible. See Smith 2001. A brief bibliography is posted online at <http://www.houseofdauid.ca/ugarit.htm>.

16. An inscription on the statue of Išgi [Lamgi]-Mari, found on the 23 of January 1934, affirmed the identification; see Margueron 2008: 29. At first, Gelb (1935) denied the identification for a couple more years.

17. Albright had visited the site in 1925; but he did not make the equation until a few years later (1931-32: 166).

18. Old Assyrian tablets circulated before Bedřich Hrozný recovered a great number of them in 1925. B. Landsberger offered a preliminary overview in the same year; see Veenhof 1995 for an accessible overview.



Addu was a senior contemporary of Hammurabi of Babylon while Zimri-Lim of Mari was his victim. In one fell swoop, Hammurabi dropped a few centuries from his then chronological perch to become a citizen of the second millennium, the breakthrough offering a major opportunity for biblicalists<sup>19</sup>. Soon after, Dossin (1937: 17-18) quoted a snippet from a Mari letter that showed Hammurabi to be a lesser star than was Yarim-Lim of Yamḥad. As the latter was ruling from Aleppo and not Babylon, the notion that Hammurabi hegemonically controlled Canaan was no longer tenable<sup>20</sup>. In fact, Western Syria proved crammed with urban centers, among them Carchemish, Ebla, Emar, Qatna, Ugarit, Hazor, and Byblos, the last a threshold for Caphtor, Crete. The region also teemed with tribes and subtribes, many of Amorite stock, among them Sutus, Yaminites, and Sim'alites (see Durand 1992).

In 1939, Dossin (1939a) gave a full copy of a text in which the king of Carchemish asked Zimri-Lim of Mari to subject prisoners to a River ordeal in Hit, south of Mari<sup>21</sup>. This tidbit proved cultural affinity across a wide space.

19. Thureau-Dangin cited (1936: 136) a year-name by the then obscure Zimri-Lim in which Hammurabi received military aid from Mari. Because his law "code" was deemed the earliest legal collection in the world and because he was imagined a great empire builder, Hammurabi was then the patron saint of Assyriology. Nonetheless, many had turned to Genesis 14 to place him in conflict with the Hebrew patriarch.

20. The letter (A.482) remains unpublished, but this extract is widely cited in the literature: "No king is truly powerful just on his own: ten to fifteen kings follow Hammurabi of Babylon, as many follow Rim-Sin of Larsa, as many follow Ibal-pi-El of Ešnunna, and as many follow Amut-pi-El of Qatna; but twenty kings follow Yarim-Lim of Yamḥad" (see Sasson 2017: 82-83). The sender was Itur-asdu, then a governor in Naḥur, writing to Zimri-Lim, who was then probably in his sixth year of reign. Zimri-Lim, who himself was a vassal to Yarim-Lim, is not mentioned in this roster likely because the writer took it for granted that he was on a par with Hammurabi and the others. It is worth noting that less than eight years after the penning of these words, this pecking order might include only rulers in Babylon (Hammurabi), Qatna (Amut-pi-El), and Yamḥad/Aleppo (another Hammurabi), the kings of Ešnunna and Larsa—and Zimri-Lim as well—having exited the stage.

21. Dossin 1939. The text is republished most recently as ARM 28 20 (Kupper 1998: 27-28). Yatar-Ami, recently rising to the throne of Carchemish (and soon the victim of a fratricide), writes to Zimri-Lim about two men accused of treason (Sasson 2017: 291-92), "Before you now are the two men I have dispatched with Napsuna-Addu. About this matter being reported regarding the city of Irrid, these men were cited in this way, 'They have talked with Mebisa, a servant of Bunuma-Addu and, therefore, are aware of the affair.' Now therefore, I have had these men taken to the god River; but their accuser is being kept in jail under guard. Together with Napsuna-Addu, one of your trustworthy servants ought to lead these men to the god River. If these men survive the ordeal, I shall burn their accuser; but if these men die, right here I shall give their house(hold) and

In the same year, Dossin consecrated a study (1939b) to a single tribal group. Although he acknowledged difficulty in how to read its name, he called his article “Benjaminites dans les textes de Mari,” hinting at their migration south and their evolution into the Hebraic tribal system<sup>22</sup>. Undoubtedly, Dossin knew what effect this news would have on readers. A notice in it about the immolation of donkeys at covenant ceremonies was enough to invoke the Bene-ḥamor of Shechem (Gen 34), allegedly a confederacy named after Ḥamor, “Donkey”<sup>23</sup>. Yet, no detail likely proved more crucial to our story than Dossin’s 1937 citation of a brief note relaying the wish of a ruler from Ugarit to visit the cavernous Mari palace<sup>24</sup>. This notice concretely bridged Canaan and Mesopotamia. For those convinced that poetic traditions floated orally long before their writing, the link stimulated the insight that biblical narratives may likewise share a Middle Bronze age inspiration<sup>25</sup>.

All this testimony from Mari was music to the ears of biblical scholars of the historical persuasion. Earlier (1926, also 1923-24), Albright had sought affirmation of patriarchal lore through the (in)famous Spartoli tablets (also: ‘Chedorlaomer texts’) to give Genesis 14 plausibility, but setting its events during the Hyksos period<sup>26</sup>. With Mari testimony shifting Hammurabi down a few centuries, the Hyksos linkage no longer beckoned. If anything, an Old

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their servants to their accuser”. Ordeal procedures commonly unfolded whenever issues could not be easily resolved. The Mari archives have records or allusions to a fair number of them, be they for treason, witchcraft, slander, adultery (see Numbers 5), and theft of sacred property (see Joshua 7). The setting was most often at a town called Hit, involving plunging people in river waters deemed divine. The dossier is in Durand 1988: 509-28, but English translations of a broad sample (with bibliography) is in Sasson 2017: 289-93. Ordeals could also include reliance on the weapons of the gods or the presence of divine statues, likely equivalent to the Hebrew *teraphims*; on this, see Sasson 2001.

22. Development of speculation in Astour 1959.

23. Albright 1968: 113. See also Noth 1955. The linkage was commonly made throughout the second half of the Twentieth Century.

24. Hammurabi of Aleppo sent A.186 (Dossin 1937: 19) to his brother-in-law Zimri-Lim, “The ruler of Ugarit has written me this, ‘Show me the house of Zimri-Lim so I can meet him.’ I am now sending you his servant.” English translation is from Sasson 2017: 160-61.

25. Albright 1972 (writing in 1931): 145. That Canaan had not delivered myths akin to those in Mesopotamia and Israel was seen as a sign that the Amorites had leapfrogged their beliefs, landing them in one center but not another.

26. The account of Gen 14 of Abra(ha)m’s defeat of four Eastern kings that had conquered Canaanite towns as well as Sodom and Gomorrah mesmerized scholars who sought to find historical roots in cuneiform documents, among them fragments from the Parthian period, full of cryptic names of rulers who sequentially harmed Babylon. Their impact on Gen 14 is rehearsed often; see Emerton 1971 for an accounting but also (not surprisingly) for an inconclusive resolution.

Babylonian tablet from Larsa Scheil published in 1915 had mentioned Habirus and it simply fueled speculation that these mercenaries included Amorites, that is Aramaeans, as well as Hebrews<sup>27</sup>. I can cite a number of notices on how Albright's views evolved with publications of Mari notices; but let me address them from Albright's major opus of 1940, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*<sup>28</sup>. For him, Mari was an ancient Amorite capital on the Middle Euphrates (p. 10), a highly evolved city-state with a strong administration. Defenses were elaborate against pressure of still unsettled nomadic groups of Amorite, Aramaean, or Hebrew origin (112). Albright cites references to the slaughter of donkeys (213), the absence of camels (120-21), and smoke as war signals (112). Albright gives much importance to onomastic and linguistic connections between Amorite and Hebrew. The tablets corroborate Hebrew tradition of a trek to Palestine by mentioning Harran and Nahur, both ruled by Amorite princes (179-80). While he acknowledges that Nuzi has provided us with fine correspondences for the social realities of the patriarchal ages, Albright has hopes that the economic tablets of Mari would prove even more affirming for his construct (180-81). Additionally, because the Biblical primeval narratives are absent from Canaanite literature, Albright found it logical that Israel acquired them from an Amorite world during the Middle Bronze age (181). All in all, a sober assessment, especially given its time.

*Phase 2.* Immediately after World War II, the pattern of publishing extracts from Mari texts continued. 1950, however, proved magical and it opened Phase 2 of the Mari-Bible assessment. The first three volumes of a series that featured transcriptions and translations of Mari documents appeared then, proving that aside from Amorite, Akkadian and a smattering of Hurrian, the citizens of Mari had excellent French. The full texts fleshed out many subjects of Biblical interest that had appeared only as fragments in earlier overviews. Whetting the appetite were letters with remarkable details on all aspects of life in an urban setting, with tidbits about tribal configurations, census taking, war-mongering, breaking taboos, interdynastic marriages, dowries, and pronouncements by ecstasies<sup>29</sup>. Teasers were letters

27. Burney 1970: lxxx. Burney's book (originally published in 1918) offers an extensive (lv-cxviii) review of what was then known of ANE history as it impacted on the Hebrew Bible.

28. Albright 1940. Several notices in the 1930's and early 1940's were penned by Albright in BASOR (#67, 69, 77, 78, 81). There is a good overview by Mendenhall in 1948. Albright's bibliography is in Davis 2004: 157-70.

29. Among them was ARM 3 40 (reedited ARM 26 221) translated here from Sasson 2017: 341. Kibri-Dagan, governor of Terqa and its province, writes King Zimri-Lim, "The gods Dagan and Ikrub-El (Yakrub-El) are well; Terqa, city and district, is in good order.

sent by an “Arriwaz,” deemed then a ruler of prestige, and they re-ignited debates on the historicity of Genesis 14<sup>30</sup>. In that same year (1950), Dossin also published a letter (A.1121) in which a Zimri-Lim diplomat relayed a prophecy from Addu of Aleppo<sup>31</sup>. Just earlier (1948), he had published a gorgeous text (A.15, now ARM 26 233) communicating a dream with a vivid dialogue between a dreamer and Dagan, his god<sup>32</sup>. The conjunction of dreams and prophetic vision stimulated an enormous literature that is only recently abating.

When in 1954 Hazor made its first of its many subsequent Mari archives appearances (ARM 6 23), it was not deemed odd that a damaged spot in the same table would be (falsely) read as mentioning Megiddo, Lakish, Laish, or even Jerusalem (see below). West Semitic names tumbled out by the buckets, and they allowed folks on either side of the Atlantic to pronounce them proto-Hebraic or proto-Aramaic, depending on where they stood on the patriarchal historicity divide.

In the next decade, a dozen more volumes in the *Archives royales de Mari* were published, eliciting many specialized studies, such as Kupper’s seminal 1957 volume on Mesopotamian nomads, a book that gave impetus to comparative research on Second Millennium nomadism. In the quarter of century since the renewal of Mari publications, Assyriologists as well as biblical scholars jumped into the fray. Among the latter were Biblical scholars with Akkadian expertise, for example Martin Noth (1953) and Herbert

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Another matter: On the day I sent this letter of mine to my lord, an ecstatic (*muhhûm*) of Dagan came here to tell me the following: ‘God has sent me. Write promptly to the king so that commemorative offerings (*kispum*) are made to the ghost (*iĕmmum*) of Yaḥdun-Lim.’ This is what this ecstatic told me and I am writing it to my lord. My lord should do as he pleases.” Yaḥdun-Lim was a previous ruler of Mari that Zimri-Lim considered his father. The *kispum* was a recurring (monthly or more) meals for the shades of dead ancestors; see Sasson 2017: 340-41 for sample letters of its occurrence in letters.

30. ARM 2 63 and 64, reissued and with additional letters by Kupper (1998: 221-28). Jean had read the name Arriwaz, but Böhl (1943) corrected it to Arriwuk, likely with “Arioch of Ellasar” of Genesis 14 in mind. Durand (2005) reviewed the entire dossier of this relatively minor ruler, setting his rule at Kalḫu by Assyria. By further adjusting his name to read “Arriyuk,” Durand explored his potential role as a member of the eastern coalition as reported in Gen 14.

31. Lafont 1984 and Durand 2002: 137-40 give a more complete version of this letter. For English translations and bibliography, see Nissinen 2003: 17–21; Sasson 2017: 280-81. The documents from Mari that communicate the will of the gods include dreams, divination, prophecy, visions and ordeals. Durand’s 1988 volume is crucial for its edition of the sources. Nissinen (2003) gives a good accounting in English.

32. English translations in Nissinen 2003: 62–65; Sasson 2017: 287-88.

Huffmon (1965), who assessed its rich lexical storehouse of personal names, as well as George Mendenhall (1954) and Moshe Held (1970), who discussed covenant rituals featuring the immolation of animals. Setting Abraham in Mari of the Middle Bronze age rather than Nuzi of the Late Bronze age to affirm patriarchal culture, allowed Albright (from 1961) to skirt a discrepancy on the domestication of camels despite their mention in Genesis. Abraham Malamat, who became a major contributor to the study of the genre, examined prophecies, dreams and visions (1955). Beginning in 1962 (also in 1989, 1998), he was particularly fruitful in the study of tribal organizations, bringing the patriarchal sagas into consideration. In 1958, Ephraim Speiser investigated the language and practice of census-taking. He concluded with these remarks (1958: 25), “The Mari material [on census taking] has opened up many new vistas. Not a few of the disclosures have an important bearing on the Bible; and the Bible, in turn, may be in a position to reciprocate”<sup>33</sup>. Such a sentiment is exceptional only in the clarity of its objectives and it invites comments on two aspects of the comparative research, to which “Mari and the Bible” belongs.

1. “Biblicizing” Comparative linkages such as those mentioned above were encouraged by the then absence of a firm chronological sequence for the Mari eponyms and year-names. Without such a backbone, details and elements remained atomistic with the wobbliest of moorings. Often, they also lacked causation, precedence, or afterlife, each and all being major elements in historical evaluation. It is not surprising, therefore, that especially in the North American continent<sup>34</sup>, the lure to *biblicize* was most developed at this particular period of comparative research. To “biblicize” is to attach Bible-derived explanations to details drawn from freshly excavated Near Eastern documents and artefacts. The resulting speculations then become evidence by which to clarify Biblical contexts and passages. The logic is circular; it was also frequently innocent, aiming to draw reciprocal benefits for Biblical

33. He added, “When such a comparative treatment is justified, one has the opportunity of dealing, beyond mere words or texts, with the very roots of an integral civilization.” The occasion is called *tēbibtum*, commonly rendered “census taking”; but it might be better understood as “enrollment” or “conscription.” It permitted the administration to remove from its list the dead and the escaped, thus to recalibrate the dispensing of rations assigned to those serving and, when appropriate, to reallocate land. During Yasmah-Addu’s rule, major conscriptions took place following brutal military campaigns and devastating epidemics.

34. A handy launch to these matters is at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burden\\_of\\_proof\\_\(law\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burden_of_proof_(law)).

and Near Eastern lore by highlighting proximal parallels. Normally, this urge to biblicize and the resultant excesses are confined to the decade that immediately follows on a major discovery, as occurred most recently on the recovery of the Ebla archives. In our case, however, the process persisted as long as Mari's internal chronology remained vaguely charted, so leaving most documentary evidence discombobulated, as well as lacking the context and consequence of their Biblical "parallels." Because the absence of direct linkage between them was always recognized, scholars based their arguments on the "preponderance of evidence" and to the "balance of probability." The language was drawn from US law where in civil cases it stood for a standard of proof just short of the strictest benchmark<sup>35</sup>. By appeal to these phrases, the contention was that the absence of direct synchronism could be remedied by the accumulation of proximate correspondences, mostly from Nuzi, Ugarit, and Mari. With it, the burden of denial was then left to the other party to bear. This observation takes me to the second comment.

2. "Nihilism" The American reaction to German scholarship prompted another phenomenon. Sharpened by the raw feelings generated by two destructive wars within a single generation, a debate flared on the historical worth of Hebraic lore. It quickly became caustic, with the hurling of charges that those who resisted a reliance on comparative lore to authenticate scriptural reliability were unduly skeptical, negative, subjective, even nihilist. Then as now, the labels "maximalist" and "minimalist" zoomed across the Atlantic with delight and abandon. While the target was broadly any scholar who discounted the historicity of early Hebrew traditions, Martin Noth became a special focus. Noth was a worthy opponent to Albright, for he had control of archaeology, knew the land of Israel intimately, excelled as Hebraist, and accomplished in Semitic philology. It did not hurt the quarrel that Noth was no wallflower, and he occasionally rose to the bait, as when he caustically argued not so much against the use of external evidence to authenticate biblical verities, but about their very existence<sup>36</sup>.

I need not rehearse the exchanges—often caricatures of positions—that circulated then; yet, it must be acknowledged that by the time Noth and Al-

35. See Thompson 1975: 6; Knight 2006: 148-51.

36. M. Noth 1960: 269-70. Reprinted in Noth 1971: 34-51.

bright died, respectively in 1968 (30 May) and 1971 (Sept 19), Noth was willing to concede that “the beginnings of Israel are rooted in historical pre-suppositions which are proved by archaeological discoveries to be located in the middle of the second millennium BC”<sup>37</sup>. The impulse to yield some ground was natural, given the zeal, coordination, and persistence of the diatribe from the North American continent. Today, those who would fathom how such patently fragile constructs could trip otherwise sober scholars, might simply replace the objects of their fierce debates with issues raised in the present-day version of the maximalist-minimalist conflicts.

*Phase 3* of my Mari story will not open until 1978; but I need to report first that upon the deaths of Noth, Albright, as well as de Vaux (September 10, 1971), a paradigmatic shift was already in full swing among biblicists, with many abandoning reliance on historical methodologies. The reasons were many and complex, but they had partly to do with frustration in the wake of nationalistically driven research that emboldened bloody conflicts: Two World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. Biblicists in drove shifted to other tools, relying on literary, sociological, and anthropological approaches, among many others. But first came the sarcasm: Writing in 1968, Morton Smith conjured up the image of a caravaneering Abraham loading his donkeys with cuneiform tablets from which to teach Sumerian wisdom to Isaac<sup>38</sup>. When Thomas Thompson (1974) and John Van Seters (1975) published their explosive books on the misuse of Near Eastern evidence to affirm the patriarchal age, they validated what others had not managed to fully demonstrate. In so doing, they quickened the trend against historicizing biblical narratives in all but conservative circles. A few Biblical scholars continued to mine Mari documents; but they shifted the accent to comparative phenomena, such as the study of prophecy or tribal structures, rather than to explore historical correspondence<sup>39</sup>.

To pick up on what happened in 1978. In that year, Maurice Birot pu-

37. Fine overview of shift in paradigms is in Davis 2004. Davis, however, is not one to probe for social or cultural reasons for the shift, but argues instead purely on the bases of archaeological and philological revisions.

38. Smith 1969: 26. The lecture was delivered in October 1968.

39. For examples, see Abraham Malamat (1989, based on the 1984 Schweich lectures, and 1998, a collection of papers). In the 1980’s Malamat devised a novel way to link them to the Biblical patriarchal age. He proposed that Hebrew theosophists reconfigured patriarchal lore that originally spanned centuries into a three-generation scheme: “The literary end-product of this artifice,” he wrote, “resembles, by way of metaphor, an accordion which had been closed: in order to recover the full historical span, one must open it out to the proper dimension” (1989: 30; see also Malamat 1998: 4).

blished his seminal article in which Zimri-Lim administrative documents acquired their proper sequence<sup>40</sup>. This sequencing allowed the linking of many letters. Suddenly, rather than dealing with chronologically discombobulated Mari factoids, we now had a slice of Old Babylonian history, with before and after, cause and effect, and rise and fall. At about the same time, archives from contemporaneous sites—among them Chagar Bazar, Shemshara, Tell al-Rimah, and Tell Leilan—were plugging the edges of the story<sup>41</sup>.

Shortly afterwards, in 1981, an incredibly energetic new Mari team under Jean-Marie Durand took over the publication of the archives and began to release floodgates of new documents. What once seemed to us sensational—the prophecies, the donkey killings, the census-taking, and the like—found their place in a feverishly unsettled Old Babylonian world. With sharper insight into Mari’s language and scripts, collations yielded major corrections of crucial words, functions, and names. For example, hopes were dashed for finding Megiddo, Lakish, or Jerusalem in the break of one document (ARM 2 23; see above), when a better reading proved the town to be Carchemish. By then, too, the repertoire of Mari-Bible correspondences had shrunk dramatically, with prophecy among the few subjects to still command attention. A handful of symposia with focus on Mari (1983, 1993, 1997), tried to revive interest in the linkage, but with mixed result<sup>42</sup>. As far as historical linkage, most of it has disappeared in all but the expected circles, exceptions being a recent flare-up about the historicity of Genesis 14 and a renewed attention to the steadfastness of Hebraic cultural memory, a phrase in current fashion<sup>43</sup>. For

40. It would take years more to do the same for Yasmaḥ-Addu while the sequence of Yaḥdun-Lim’s years remains hazy. On all these matters see the major reconstruction of Mari’s political history in Charpin and Ziegler 2003, in particular their treatment of the year-names of Yaḥdun-Lim (pp. 57-69) and the eponyms during Yasmaḥ-Addu rule (pp. 155-68).

41. Chagar Bazar, ancient Ašnakkum (Talon 1997, Tunca and Baghdo 2008, Lacambre 2010); Rimah, ancient Karana/Qaṭṭara (Dalley, 1976; Langlois 2017), Shemshara, ancient Šušarra (from 1957; see now Eidem 1992; Eidem and Læssøe 2001), and Leilan, ancient Šeḫna/Šubat-Enlil (now Eidem 2011).

42. Only the last colloquium organized by the Mari team made an effort beyond reassessing issues dealing with prophecy. See my comments in Sasson 2003: 193-98. The 1997 effort was published in several issues of the *Revue d’Assyriologie*. The contributions included: Charpin (1998) on Mari troops in the Lebanon region; Otto (1998) on legal terms with similar implications across time and space; S. Lafont (1998) on the status of the foreigner in Mari and the Bible; Ziegler (1999) on the harems of defeated kings; Guichard (1999), on military spoils devoted to the gods (*ḥērem* in Israel); Lemaire (1999; see already 1985, 1996) on prophecy, East and West, and B. Lafont (1999) on sacrifice in both worlds.

43. Fleming 1998, Charpin 2003. Durand 2005; See my comments in Sasson 2006a:



Biblical scholars at the turn of the millennium, Mari and its archives had retreated to the Moon<sup>44</sup>.

Personally, I lament this contraction of attention from biblicists; for Mari remains a treasure trove, certainly not for use to authenticate or even to calibrate the Hebrew past, but to illustrate practices and conventions that were perpetuated across centuries, even when many of the intermediaries remain lost to us. In fact, this point is the moral of this paper. In the remaining pages, I touch on what is being missed.

## What we have learned

The epigraphic wealth of Mari is manifold, with a cornucopia of datable administrative documents that permits reconstructing life in a palace for at least a quarter of a century. As it concerns the rule of King Zimri-Lim, we can follow his moves in and out of Mari, to conduct war, visit shrines, influence vassals, appease allies, and, in one spectacular case, to visit Ugarit. Gifts, bribes, and payments of all sorts—humans, animals, grains, liquids, metals, and stones—came and left his storehouses, giving us an inkling of the source of royal wealth<sup>45</sup>. We now know that, like Yahweh, the king had first claim on conquered land, for it was his to manage, lease or give away<sup>46</sup>. We have list of dowries to secure the marriages of elite

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194-98.

44. The reasons for this occultation are complex; but among them must surely be the recent trends, in Biblical studies no less than in Assyriology, toward focus on the relatively late First Millennium periods. For reasons that cannot be founded on the wealth (or lack) of contemporaneous sources, a good amount of Biblical scholarship on history has gravitated toward the Achaemenid period or later. Similarly, Assyriology (but not Sumerology) has of late not invested as much in the Old Babylonian period (to which the Mari age belongs) as it used to do just a couple of generations ago. The effect is that neither Biblical nor cuneiform research has had the taste of yore for paralleling the two documentations. Whereas until the mid-1980s professional societies in America (such as the AOS, SBL, and ASOR) would never fail to schedule multiple sessions on comparative studies, they do so only minimally now. As a result, the urge to rely on Bronze Age documents, from Ebla, Kaneš, Ugarit, Ḫattuša, Nuzi, and Emar (no less than those from the Mari era) has sadly lost its drive. The consequences have been drastic to academic hiring, hence also a throttle on the development and growth of balanced Assyriology.

45. For an overview of what constitutes the wealth of Mari kings, see Sasson 2017: 18-68.

46. Tribal chiefs paid the *sugāgūtum*, a fee in return for settling on and benefiting from on royal land. See Marti 2003. The fee kings collected for allowing settlement of conquered territory come close to the notion of *naḥāla*, land disbursed to diverse Hebrew tribes for

as well as reports on the matrimonial missions Zimri-Lim assigned to his *shadchans* (matchmakers)<sup>47</sup>. One of these dossiers has proven invaluable in clarifying the complicated negotiations resulting in the union of Rebekah to Isaac (Sasson 2006b). Zimri-Lim also commissioned votive offerings for local and distant gods, and we can track their manufacture through diverse shops<sup>48</sup>. One long text cinematically rehearses a ritual he attended, with moves that including music, processions, and acrobatics, potentially illustrative the worship of the Golden Calf (Exod 32)<sup>49</sup>. We now have the earliest royal epic in literary records, likely sponsored (if not drafted) by a major figure in Zimri-Lim's conquest of the throne soon after the event. Its contents refute the conviction that poetry preserves accurate memory of historical events, a contention still rife in biblical scholarship<sup>50</sup>. Also in the archives are long lists, among them of disbursements in oil and meat to wives and daughters; of foodstuff—distributed, prepared, or partaken; of messengers, diplomats, and vassals—coming, staying or going; of war captives—kept, dispersed, or ransomed; of harem singers, cooks, artisans, and slaves. There are many protocols for oaths imposed on diviners and high functionaries,

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which they owed allegiance to God. When Zimri-Lim disputed control of land with a (defeated) Yaminite chieftain, the latter admitted (ARM 2 55:5-13; Sasson 2017: 56), “My lord wrote to me this about the (earth) levee at Zurmahḥum, ‘You have contended with me about the levee at Zurmahḥum. I am (in control).’ My lord sent me this message. Towns, earth and heaven are indeed my lord’s. When my lord released these towns to me, many were those who slandered me, making me lose my lord’s favor....”

47. Durand 2000: 165-84; 426-74; see also Sasson 2017: 103-18.

48. Partial documentation in Joannès 1984: 153-91. See also Durand 1997: 223-42; Sasson 2017: 250-60. On the sacralization of divine objects in the Bible and in Mari, see my comments in Sasson 2002.

49. This is a ritual for Ishtar (A. 3165), the best preserved of a several programs for enacting diverse rituals re-edited or newly published in Durand and Guichard 1997. The most recent analysis is Ziegler 2007: 55-64. An English translation is in Sasson 2017: 243-45. The staging was at Der (near Mari), before the king, visiting dignitaries, priests and choristers. After sacred meals, there was chanting of diverse laments, punctuated by briskly staged activities, including acrobatic displays. On its relevance in assessing the worship of the Golden Calf, see Sasson 1973.

50. The “epic” (better: poem) is now handsomely published by Guichard (2014); partial English translation in Sasson 2017: 32-35, good comments in Wasserman 2015. Obvious are the facts that panegyrics can be composed within the lifetime of the protagonist, that their contents hardly need to match historical reality, and that time and chronology are irrelevant to the goals of the poet. Plays on words abound, promoting correspondence between royal and divine acts. Focus is episodic and perspectives or subjects shift readily as they feature the deeds of gods, kings, advisers, soldiers, and enemies. Heavily invoked is the name “Zimri-Lim,” constructing a hagiography for a leader who had scarcely warmed to his throne. Courtiers can be brazenly sycophants.

men and women, their language framed hypothetically so as to cover many exigencies<sup>51</sup>. The details are infinite and if we hope to recreate life in the fortified cities of Israel and Judah, such a documentation might play at least as big a role as conjectures based on archaeology, sociology, or anthropology.

## Mari Letters

For me, however, the joy of texts is in the harvest of letters. Since the 1980s, several collections arranged by dossiers have seen the light of day. It seems that practically all Mari elite had access to clay, and they dictated notes to their scribes ceaselessly and endlessly, on every imaginable topic. They wrote to convey political news—not always true, by the way. They asked for favors, reported on missions, displayed their loyalty or competence, grumbled about their conditions, and slandered others, the last a hazard of courtly life. A long report about the siege of Razama brims with juicy taunts and stratagems, matching what we read about Abimelech at Shechem (Judg 9:27; also 8:6) or the Rav Shaqeh by Jerusalem (Isa 36); see Sasson 2015. Especially lively is the bickering that engulfed competing court musicians, one of them charged with quickening “the death of music in Mari” (Sasson 2012). Some of these letters could be fairly long, incredibly garrulous, heavily anecdotal, and spiritedly partisans. They could display fine structuring, exquisite timing, and sure trajectory. In fact, given the dearth of narrative prose from the ancient world, the Mari letters come closest to the style and virtuosity of biblical story telling. No less than Biblical accounts, however, Mari letters too cannot be read “flat,” but must be tested for their conventions and their knowledge gaps. Had I more courage, I would suggest that rhetoric is the best heritage the Amorites bequeathed Israel.

*Administrating a kingdom.* Because of these letters, we now know more about how towns and provinces are governed and about the division of labor among bureaucrats, giving us insight into Solomon’s control of his kingdom. Especially for Zimri-Lim’s reign, we can choreograph his control of the kingdom through an inner circle of notables (*wedûtum*) that included a private secretary, a favorite diviner, a wardrobe keeper, and a couple of *Kapellmeisters* (samples in Sasson 2017: 165-80). His sister Inib-šina (a priestess), Šiptu (his latest queen), and Addu-duri (likely his aunt) were never shy to offer opinions. An officious controller (*šandabakkum*) and a harried

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51. Scribes recorded the pledges as officials choreographed as well as witnessed the events. The major study on them is Durand 1991; but see also Charpin 2010a. Extracts are in Durand 1997: 168-80 and Sasson 1997: 29-31.

stock keeper (*šatammum*) ran the palace, increasingly a home for women. Provincial management included a district governor (*šāpīṭum*) and a chief of staff (*abu bītim*) at each of the king's local palaces. Officers at large included several chiefs of tribal armies (*merḥums*) with connection to local sheiks (*sugāgums*), several heavy-handed agents at vassal towns (*ḥazannums*), as well as dozens of peripatetic diplomats and messengers. Each of these officers seems to have had access to scribes, themselves nicely supplied with the requisite clay. Rarely hesitating to dictate news and post reports, they leave us with a remarkably full portrait of a state at a constant *qui vive*<sup>52</sup>. Neither they nor their accounts were always harmonious with each other; but they wrote to tell about their missions, to gloat on successes, even occasionally also to admit failures. They wrote of quarrying and setting up cultic pillars (*maššebôt*), of solving crimes by using sacralized figurines (*terāfīm*) and other divine paraphernalia. They kept accounts of ordeals that tested for treason, adultery, witchcraft, or theft of consecrated spoils. If we search for the type of violence that peppers Biblical narratives, there are juicy reports about taking vengeance in the most harrowing details<sup>53</sup>.

*Prophecies.* We also have a fuller repertoire and contexts for prophetic manifestations, complicating our sense of their creation and reception and problematizing earlier comparisons with biblical homologues. To begin with, the rounded portraits we can achieve for some Mari *barû*-diviners would allow for better comparisons with the Hebrew prophets rather than with the Mari varieties, especially as they concern the finality of their decisions and their roles as trusted advisers. What is a Mari prophecy could itself be the object of inquiry. A Mari queen, eager to display her mettle as a political prognosticator, seems to invent an original vehicle by which to channel the gods (ARM 26 207; see Nissinen 2003: 39–41). A Mari bureaucrat seeking to enhance his role as intermediary of a foreign god fabricates an entirely new prophecy by splicing fragments from two others (Sasson 2017: 280–81). Individuals who convey reports of prophecies, visions, or dreams normally avoid exposing their own interpretations, especially when they are career bureaucrats, who serve whatever ruler is in power. Occasionally, however,

52. Samples of letters in English are in Sasson 2017: 119–49. A few of these letters have clarified Biblical episodes, but not always the same ones. A governor's report on two strangers entering a town square at night (ARM 27 116) has prompted a linkage with Hebrew spies in Jericho (Josh 2; Durand 1998:11–14) and angels at Sodom and Gomorrah (Sasson 2010). See also S. Lafont 1998: 171–81.

53. Sasson 2017 offers a good selection of letters in an English translation, with comments and bibliography, on all these subjects, allocated to six chapters on "Kingship," "Administration," "Warfare," "Society," "Religion," and "Culture."

they might betray their reactions through comments, subtle, or otherwise, aiming to influence the king, Not surprisingly, family members who have the most at stake in the success or failure of their king—a wife, a sister, an aunt (or mother)—are most likely to influence to interpretation of divine messages. We must therefore recognize that despite the brief interval separating their reception from their posting, Mari prophecies are hardly less “redacted” than those in the Bible. Still, we cannot but be thrilled by the report on a courageous prophet excoriating the great Hammurabi, in downtown Babylon and in full hearing of its population, for permitting foreign access to Marduk’s treasure. It anticipates somewhat similar charges Isaiah levelled against Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:12-19), but with more personal danger to the prophet from Babylon<sup>54</sup>.

*Diplomacy.* The world of diplomacy and statecraft is another area of surging knowledge thanks to the Mari archives. Zimri-Lim kept a squad of diplomats at his beck, many holding double-duty roles as merchants, *Kapellmeister*, diviners, and military leaders. There is a notice that when he campaigned towards the Mediterranean, Zimri-Lim took along 100 messengers and 64 runners, and undoubtedly used every one of them to keep track of affairs back home and among fractious vassals (M.5696; see Charpin 2007: 407). The harvest of knowledge from this category of letters is enormous, more so now that we can thread dozens of details to reveal fuller stories. Hammurabi of Babylon is one ruler whose vibrant personality shines through the many encounters reported about him. Another is Yarim-Lim of Yamḥad who once introspectively lamented the sudden death of a father who challenged a great god (Addu of Aleppo)—and obviously lost!<sup>55</sup>

From the letters of diplomats, we can reconstruct the intricate steps taken when covenants and treaties are taking shape, including the drafting of separate tablets at diverse moments of the negotiation, the placing of one’s life in jeopardy when committing to an agreement, and the taking of oaths in the presence of gods conveyed for the occasion. That was how urban folks pledged allegiance to each other. Nomads, however, turned to other means, including the slaughter of donkeys, goats, and puppy dogs<sup>56</sup>. The organiza-

54. See above, note 34 and Sasson 1994 and 1995.

55. “When Sumu-epuḫ, my father, feared God, he achieved [his goal]. No other king matched him. When he coveted that which [Addu] gave Samsi-Addu, my father Sumu-epuḫ did not enjoy old age” Because he attacked the land of [. . .] that [Addu] gave Samsi-Addu, Addu had him killed. . .” (FM 7: 8; Durand 2002: 15–29; English translation in Sasson 2017: 89-9)..

56. Excellent overview of these particulars are in Charpin 2019. See also Lafont 2002. The sacrifice of puppies is also evoked in Isaiah 66; see Sasson 1976.

tion of tribes and the census-taking now have different profiles from those what we imagined in the biblicalizing past. With better understanding of contexts and terminology, we now recognize how incongruous were the earlier results when relying on comparative lexicography decided function (Sasson 1998: 103-108)<sup>57</sup>. Unexpected was a dossier about Mari and Qatna troops battling foes in Canaan, “between *saren u labnan*,” that is between Mt Hermon and the Lebanon range (Charpin 2010b). Another collection is about Zimri-Lim purchase of faraway Alalatum, likely Alalah, by the Mediterranean coast. This one has comic overtones, as King Hammurabi of Yamhad threatens to give the town to Zimri-Lim, when the last knew that to keep it, he better pay for it. The entire scene is reminiscent of Hiram’s reaction to Solomon’s gift of land in the Galilee (1 Kings 9:11-14)<sup>58</sup>.

*Illustrations.* I have exploited this rich harvest of diplomatic letters in my commentary to *Judges* (2014) and I cite here only a few of its applications. There, I reviewed whether application of the Biblical *ḥērem* (devoting all martial spoils to God) is reflected in both archives (Guichard 1999). I considered whether the concept of capturing/dispossessing of land (*yāraš*, Qal and Hiphil) was a feature of conquests in the Mari era. I discussed the linkage (if any) between the Amorites in the Mari archives and those in the Bible (Sasson 2014: 153-63). A nice dossier on the royal daughters allowed me to interpret a brief anecdote featuring the marriage of Achsah to Othniel (Judg 1:8-15). It is true that I do not solve the problem of whether or not Achsah farted from off her donkey, as some translations would have it; but I did find interesting linkage in the correspondence of Mari daughters given as trophies to vassals. Some of these women threaten to jump off the roof; but others, like Achsah, found a way to enhance their own prestige by extracting the most from their fathers<sup>59</sup>. Too, when examining the issue of kinship as it surfaces in the Gideon and Abimelech episodes, I called on Mari’s nuanced range of perceptions about the institution. Whether or not they involved ruling a walled town was one distinction; the right to punish offenders, to execute other kings, to control and distribute military spoils, and, most critically, to shelter gods, were others<sup>60</sup>. Most striking is the profitable

57. While such terms are non-Akkadian, so likely Amorite, they do not behave in the same way as Hebrew words sharing their roots.

58. The dossier is fully explored in Durand 2002; the Biblical connection is discussed in Sasson 2009.

59. Sasson 2014: 137-52. See also the writings and editing of Daniel Bodi (2005, 2013) who makes several connections between the Mari and Biblical details.

60. See especially the comments in Sasson 2014: 368-72.

comparison we can make between Jephthah's declaration of war against the king of the Ammonites (Judg 11) and a remarkable example from the Mari archives (Sasson 2014: 433-35). With regards Jephthah and Abimelech, the urge heretofore has been to seek analogues for their rise (and fall) in the Amarna correspondence. Idrimi of Alalakh and Lab'aya of Shechem respectively came to be prime specimens not just for their rule, but also for reliance on Habirus<sup>61</sup>. A prime impetus for establishing correspondence between the two corpora was a desire to place the biblical characters as close as possible to the ends of Second Millennium. Truth to tell, the grasping careers of such personalities are not unique to any specific age, but multiply in the absence of strong regional control. The Mari age, a chaotic world full of predators and their preys, bulges with examples of grasping *condottieri*, best reconstructed from the dossiers of Samsi-Erah of Yapturum and Ibal-Addu of Ašlakka. They too relied on Habiru sidekicks and left a trail of havoc and destruction in their wakes. They too found defeat by the same forces that once championed them. Ibal-Addu's sorry story of inconstancy is worthy of an HBO special, as it also featured Inib-šarri, a widowed Mari princess who could not garner the affection and attention of her new husband<sup>62</sup>.

## Parting shots

Let me end on this sad note before completely getting lost in minutiae. I would not want anyone reading this contribution to think that I am resurrecting a Bronze age setting for the historicity of the early Hebraic experience. To be frank, while I can categorically place the Mari Archives in the Eighteenth Century BCE, I remain largely clueless about when or where most Hebrew traditions were redacted, let alone composed. Despite the heroics of archaeological and textual scholarship, I remain skeptical

61. Block 1999: 308-09. Abimelech is cast as a period chieftain (Reviv 1966), and the earliest strands of his story are set in that age (de Castelbajac 2001). The subject is broadly covered in the literature, in Biblical lexicons and individual volumes. Exhaustive is Loretz 1984. For a mirror image of such a soldiers of fortune in the Middle Bronze Age, see Guichard 2011. For *habirus* and other mercenaries (*ḥabbātums*) during the Mari age, see collection of letters in Sasson 2017: 194-97. There, the ethnonym seems based on the verb *ḥabārum*, "to move out" from one's home (more or less permanently), while *ḥabbātum*, seems to label renegades.

62. Guichard 2013; Sasson 2013. Forthcoming in my Judges 13-21 commentary (also AYB) are Mari observations on Philistine burning, blinding and ritually tormenting individuals. Also discussed are the founding of shrines by priests and the cutting up of human victims into twelve parts to advance a moral.

that useful answers regarding Hebraic history (early or late) can be coaxed (internally or externally) from the Bible. Let me, rather, end on a conceit, admittedly simplistic, by conjuring up three levels of observations. With the first, we might contrast the crafting of information or traditions in Mari and in the Bible. The Mari scribes rely on stylistic rhetorical conventions to reconfigure details from dictated communications into statements meant either for royalties or for other bureaucrats living in their own time. Hebrew narrators, rather, do the opposite when crafting their narratives. For them, theosophical principles undergirded a series of interlocking biographies of ancestors, full of vignettes as if drawn from daily life. The presence of God as a controlling character effectively bound the whole, giving it a shape that can be impervious to human reality or frailty. The result is a docudrama that could satisfy whether read as history, theology, verisimilitude, or pure entertainment. I imagine that even ancient readers found truth in it without believing it to be always true.

The second level is about us. As Mariologists—rather than just as Semitists or lexicographers—we subject excavated Mari documents to specialized and comparative studies in the hopes of eventually achieving a multi-layered portrait of one Old Babylonian town. Many Biblicists interested in assessing Hebrew historiography share the opinion that short of recovering hordes of living documents from distinct moments of Israel and Judah, let alone any patriarchal age, assessing their historicity can be a frustrating or a conflicted enterprise. If a more narrow (but admittedly less exciting) pursuit might be to assess the credibility no less than the versatility of Hebraic storytellers, then let me urge that we cannot do much better than to mine the Mari rich archives for comparative illustrations.

As to the third level: It has to do with how future generations evaluate any progress on the issues I am raising. I opened by recalling developments during this past century. We are now celebrating Mari on its 85th (more or less) birthday. I end this review by welcoming a future reassessment when *Revista Claroescuro* revisits this subject on Mari's 150th anniversary. I am likely to miss it; but one never knows!

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