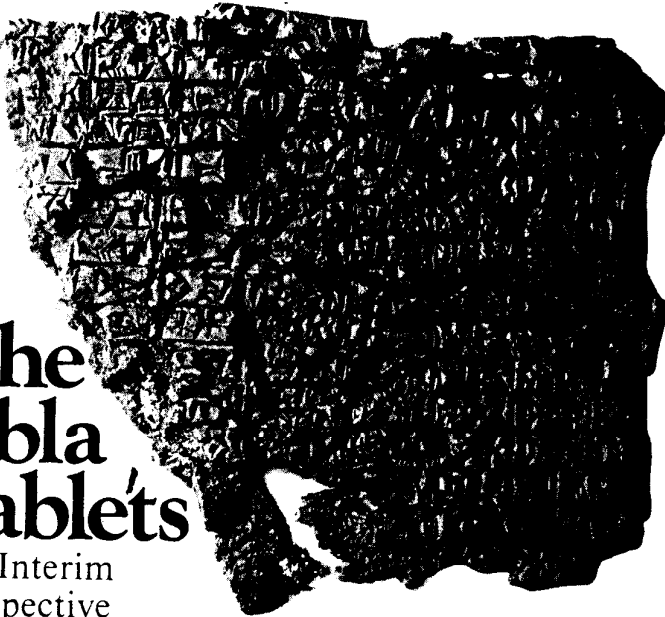


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The Ebla Tablets

An Interim Perspective



Robert Biggs

Almost five years have passed since the discovery of the royal archives at Tell Mardikh, and the intriguing questions which this remarkable find has raised still remain. A prominent cuneiformist takes a fresh but careful look at the issues, the controversies, the publications, and the implications of Ebla and its texts.

It happens every few decades that an archeological discovery attracts widespread publicity and popular attention. One can think of the sensational discovery a century ago of tablets which revealed a Babylonian flood story, the discovery of Ugarit on the coast of Syria with its new language written in an alphabetic cuneiform script and its unsuspectedly rich literature. There was Mari on the middle Euphrates in Syria with its palaces and thousands of cuneiform tablets. More recently, there was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were the archeological sensation of the 1950s. Most of the excitement about these particular finds can be attributed directly to a concern with the Bible and the claims that were made concerning their relevance for the Bible. Now Tell Mardikh-Ebla in Syria has been hailed as a discovery of even greater importance. Again, it is the supposed connections with the Bible that have caught a great deal of attention and have been reported extensively in the popular press and in religious publications, especially in the United States.

Because of the wide publicity given the Ebla finds, and exaggerations and distortions in some newspapers and other elements of the popular press, it may be useful for readers of this journal to consider the finds from a different perspective in the context of comment on a new book about Ebla (Bermant and Weitzman 1979).

A great deal has been written on the Ebla texts by persons unfamiliar

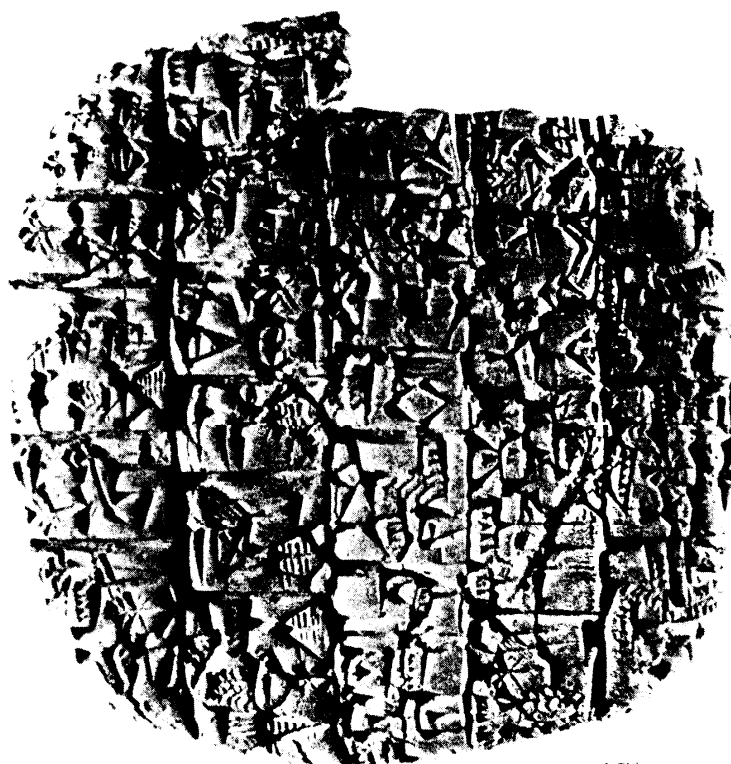
with cuneiform writing of the mid-3rd millennium and who have an inadequate appreciation of the difficulties and ambiguities involved. I have myself faced some of the same problems now being treated by the Ebla epigraphers. Since 1963 I have been working with the Sumerian tablets from Abū Šalābīkh, a site in Iraq which is close in date to the Ebla tablets. The closest parallels for the Ebla tablets are in fact from Abū Šalābīkh. More than 100 lexical texts which were already known from Fara and Abū Šalābīkh have been identified among the Ebla tablets (Pettinato 1977a: 237).

I comment, therefore, from the perspective of a scholar who has considerable experience in reading the script of the time of the Ebla tablets and who has long been familiar with some of the genres of texts found at Ebla. I wish to stress that I have no knowledge of the unpublished texts from Ebla and have not discussed them with any members of the Ebla team.

Reading 3rd-Millennium Cuneiform

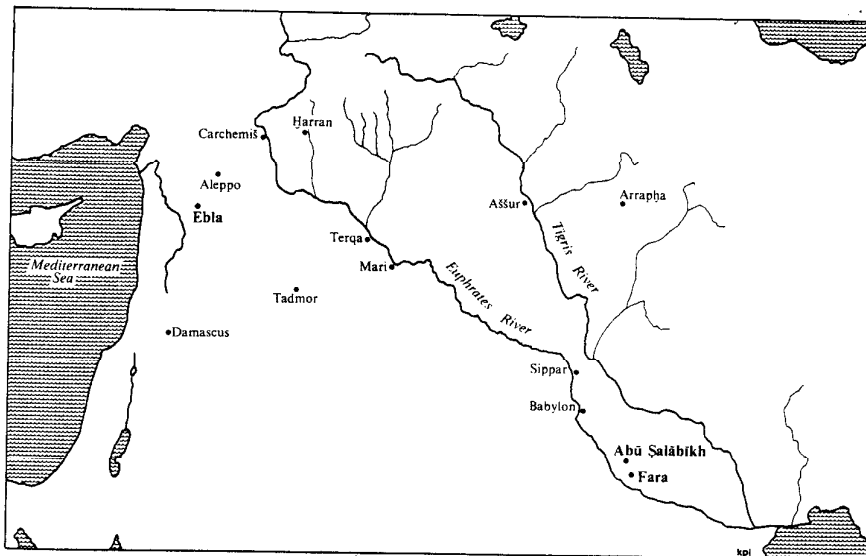
In previous discussions of the Ebla tablets too little emphasis has been put on the difficulty of reading and understanding cuneiform texts of the mid-3rd millennium and the complexities of the writing system. One must keep in mind the distinction between writing and language. Writing is a means for expressing language in a more or less permanent form. How well the writing system expresses the language it is being used for, and how much of that language can be

Opposite: A fragment of the list of geographical names from Abū Šalābīkh, now duplicated by a tablet from Ebla. **Above:** Tablet from Abū Šalābīkh. This Sumerian list of occupations has been found at a number of Near Eastern sites of the 3rd millennium B.C. Several of the cuneiform signs are survivors from early times and are known only in copies of this text. **Below:** Obverse of a school exercise tablet from Abū Šalābīkh with an otherwise unknown Sumerian myth concerning Lugalbanda and Nin-sun, parents of Gilgamesh. Several lines can be understood, but most of the text is obscure.



Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

Map by Kent P. Jackson.



The Near East, showing the relative locations of Ebla, Fara, Abū Šalābīkh, and other important ancient sites.

recovered solely through an examination of its written remains is very much a matter of the nature and limitations of the writing system. The writing system used for Sumerian was a logo-syllabic one. That is, it consisted of signs for words (logograms) and signs for sounds (syllabograms). In a logo-syllabic system, almost all nouns and verbs are written with logograms, while syllabograms are used for words like prepositions and conjunctions, for grammatical markers such as those for gender, number, case, tense, and mood, and for spelling out names and foreign words. By contrast, the adaptation of cuneiform writing to Akkadian was made in the form of a logogram-including syllabic system (much the same way that modern English writing is a logogram-including alphabetic system), where most words were spelled out syllabically and logograms were used mainly as abbreviations for common words. Indications are that the adaptation of cuneiform to the language of Ebla was also of this type, although a very large number of logograms were used in writing, a situation that also may have been true of the earliest Semitic texts from Mesopotamia. This extensive use of logograms means that the words intended in the texts are known to

us through their Sumerian equivalents, although the reading of the word in Eblaite may not be known. Grammatical elements that relate the words to one another in order to form sentences may not be present or, if present, are written syllabically in Eblaite. Thus their meaning can only be guessed at on the basis of comparisons with known words in other Semitic languages. It appears, in fact, that there are no texts written entirely in syllabic Eblaite; thus, in large measure the texts are understandable only to the extent that the Sumerian logograms can be interpreted.

The period before the time of Sargon of Akkad may be divided into three stages in the order of difficulty of understanding the texts. The first would be represented by the Sumerian texts from Fara, which probably date to around 2600 B.C. The next would be the Abū Šalābīkh texts, which date approximately from the same time or possibly a bit later. Then, probably a little later, would come the Ebla tablets. In the case of both Fara and Abū Šalābīkh, there are many signs that we do not yet know how to read; grammatical elements that correspond to our prepositions "to," "for," "in," etc. are usually not written; in Fara texts the signs quite often are not written in the sequence in which they should be read, though in Abū Šalābīkh texts there is somewhat more of a tendency to write the signs in the reading

order. In Ebla texts it appears that the signs are usually written in the correct reading-sequence, and it looks as though most rare and unusual signs have been dropped from the scribal repertory. There is, nevertheless, the fact that most cuneiform signs have more than one syllabic reading and often one or more logographic reading as well. In addition, there is no special mark or even blank space to separate one word from another. In view of all these difficulties, it is only natural that there will be improved readings, particularly in names, as scholars working with the Ebla tablets become more familiar with the Ebla syllabary. It should be recalled that although the number of readings for individual cuneiform signs seems overwhelming when viewed as a whole system, in actual practice the number of syllabic signs used in a particular area at a particular time tends to be somewhat restricted. When dealing with a new group of texts, it takes some time to get a feel for these scribal practices. One must first establish the syllabic readings of signs in known and recognizable words and only then can one be reasonably certain when reading unknown words or names. A case in point is the sequence of signs *A. EN. GA. DU. KI*, which with a slight rearrangement of the signs was read *A-ga-du EN^{ki}* and interpreted as "Akkad of the king" (*EN* is the logogram standing for the Eblaite word for "king"). It was later realized that *EN* has a syllabic reading *ru* in Ebla texts, and the signs are to be read *A ru-ga-du^{ki}*, the name of a town (Matthiae 1978c: 253), now transcribed by Pettinato as Arukatu (Pettinato 1979: 23). It is precisely this type of refinement in establishing the normative syllabary that has led to corrections in reading names in the Ebla texts, such as the supposed third and fourth cities of the "cities of the plain."

As for understanding the Ebla texts, one would think that economic and administrative documents should be relatively easy to understand. This is only partly so, for often, even if one understands every word in a text, one still does not know its real purpose. One is often reduced to saying "document concerning barley" and not being able to say whether the



The northwest entrance to Tell Mardikh. The outer mounds, visible in this picture, are actually earthen ramparts which surrounded the ancient city and were intersected by several depressions that mark the location of the city gates.

barley is being issued or received and for what purpose.

The word lists, or lexical texts, as they are usually called, are a special case. This genre goes back to the very earliest stages of writing in Mesopotamia, around 3000 B.C. Because of conservative tendencies among Sumerian scribes, these very old lists of words were kept in the written tradition long after many of the signs ceased to be used in ordinary documents. Perhaps the pronunciations and the meanings of these signs had been kept alive over the centuries among the most learned of scholars, but I suspect that it was strictly an oral tradition in Mesopotamian cities such as Abū Šalābīkh and Fara (ancient Shurup-pak). Some of these texts, I

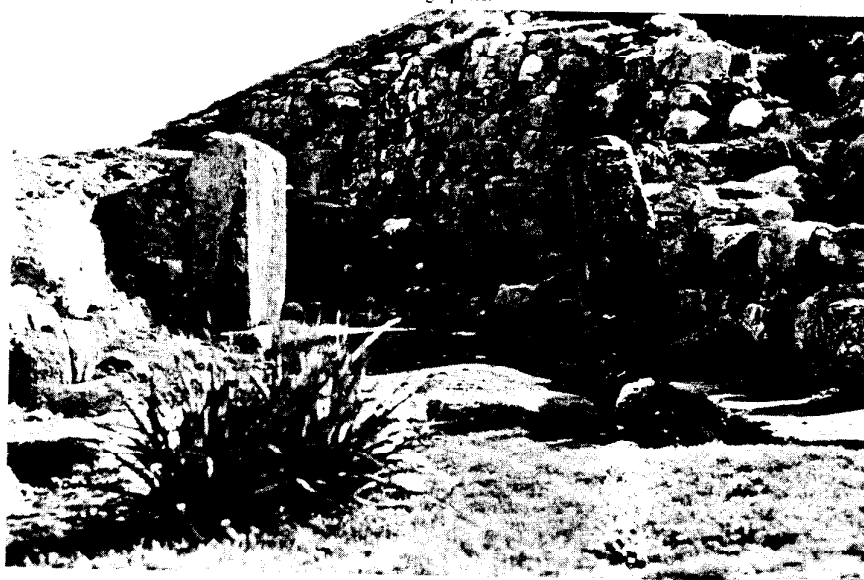
understand, are represented at Ebla with pronunciations written out syllabically. Of more direct relevance for Sumerian studies are other lexical lists that may have been composed nearer to the time of the Fara and Abū Šalābīkh texts, such as a list of birds long known from Fara and now from Ebla as well (Pettinato 1978b). The use of many syllabic signs in the Ebla version in a number of cases confirms Sumerologists' conjectures for reading certain signs and combinations of signs; in other instances, the Ebla text provides the proper reading for signs that have multiple possible readings in Sumerian. Clearly, this text, and many other lexical texts from Ebla utilizing a more explicit orthography, will eventually have a considerable impact on our ability to understand words in early Sumerian. In some cases, however, the Ebla texts give variants which we cannot at present reconcile with what we know of Sumerian writing, and we remain as perplexed as ever.

The problem is even more serious when it comes to literary texts, primarily poetic. It is often difficult to determine what such a text is about; in many cases, one has only the faintest glimmer of what a text *might* be about, with understandable words here and there furnishing the only clues. The only exception is a text recognized as a prototype of a later text written with a more explicit orthography. Without such a "modernized" (18th-century-B.C.) parallel, most literary texts from Fara and Abū Šalābīkh are extremely difficult to understand. It is rare to find two or three consecutive lines that can be translated with any confidence. (An attempt has been made [Bing 1977] to translate part of one of the more nearly comprehensible texts from Abū Šalābīkh, though in my opinion very little is certain except the names of the protagonists and that it is a dialogue.)

On the basis of what is published so far, little can be said about the literary texts from Ebla. Some 30



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Above: Survey of the citadel excavation, showing the grid system. Looking southeast from the photographer's tower.
Below: Stone orthostats, ca. 2 m high, at the outer entrance to the southwest gate.

have been recognized among the school texts alone (Pettinato 1975-76: 53), and it has been reported widely that there are both a flood story and a creation story. Pettinato has cited four lines from a collection of proverbs (1977a: 232) but refrained from attempting a translation, although Dahood (1978b: 93) has no hesitation. It is only fair to give warning that the

identification and interpretation of these tablets may well be just as tentative as are the identifications of the texts from Abū Salābīkh. I suspect that they will turn out to be only partially intelligible at best.

Recent Publications

For readers of *Biblical Archeologist* who may have obtained most of their information on Ebla from some of the more or less preliminary presentations in this journal, I wish to call attention to an important new book dealing with Ebla. Chaim Bermant and Michael Weitzman have teamed up to do a superb job of

presenting a balanced account of the extraordinary finds at Ebla (Bermant and Weitzman 1979). In preparing the book, the authors talked at length with both Paolo Matthiae and Giovanni Pettinato as well as to Syrian authorities. It is almost a timetable of the events of discovery, the first tentative announcements, the later refinements and corrections. Not only have they spoken with the principals involved, but they have consulted a number of other scholars who are experts in various fields of ancient Near Eastern studies. It is thoroughly up-to-date, for they have had access to manuscripts of several articles that were in press and that have appeared subsequently, mostly in Italian. Many of the topics I touch on here have been discussed in some detail by Bermant and Weitzman. They present a general overview of Mesopotamian history through the 3rd millennium and a very informative chapter on views of the historicity of the Bible and the theories on the origin of Old Testament narratives, as well as a chapter on the decipherment of cuneiform with comment on the present state of decipherment of some of the early Mesopotamian writing. All in all, they have presented an up-to-date and unbiased overview of the spectacular finds at Ebla. I recommend it highly for anyone who wishes to be *reliably* informed about Ebla.

Some of the questions I touch upon here are dealt with in some detail by Pettinato in the introduction to his catalog of the cuneiform texts from Ebla (Pettinato 1979b). This catalog gives a description of 6641 tablets to which he had access. He also provides more detailed information on the number of tablets found. He estimates that there are approximately 16,500 registry numbers but points out that only about 1800 are complete tablets, while 4700 are fragments, and about 10,000 are chips or tiny fragments with one or two cuneiform signs. He believes that the entire archive excavated in 1974-76 did not contain more than 4000 tablets at the most (Pettinato 1979b: xvii). The catalog has valuable indexes of names of deities, personal names, place names, and Sumerian

and Eblaite words cited. The catalog provides a wealth of new information, much of it useful only to cuneiform specialists at this point.

The principal overview of the Ebla tablets in English remains that of Pettinato in *BA* (May 1976: 44-52). In view of his explicit statement that "this report must necessarily be preliminary and the interpretation of the findings tentative," it may be useful to review some of the tentative findings in light of subsequent work, especially since much of it has appeared in Italian.

There remain some uncertainties about the dating of the finds. Recalling that Pettinato believed he had found mention of Sargon of Akkad in the tablets, he first espoused a date in the Akkad period (ca. 2400-2250 B.C.) for the royal archives and, at the same time, rejected my dating of the Abū Ṣalābīkh tablets to about 2600 B.C. (Pettinato 1975-76: 55, n. 35). His view of Ebla was that "we are looking at the greatest power in the ancient Near East during the 3rd millennium, a power that not only could stand up to the Mesopotamian empire of Akkad but at times could also reduce it to vassalage." He has since recognized that his reading of the name of Sargon of Akkad was erroneous and that there is therefore no evidence that Akkad was ever a vassal of Ebla (Matthiae 1977c: 253). Thus, the radical revisions in history and chronology of the 3rd millennium in the Near East that were first proposed are no longer advocated. Pettinato (1976: 48) now proposes a date of about 2500 B.C. for the archive, a date that I believe is likely to stand, though, quite naturally, since at least five generations of rulers are represented in the archive, some of the documents may well belong to the Akkadian period. In fact, there seems substantial reason to agree that the destruction of the palace was due to Naram-Sin, who boasted that never before since the creation of man had any king conquered Ebla. The discovery in 1977 of an Egyptian vase fragment in the Royal Palace G with an inscription of the Egyptian pharaoh Pepi I, whose reign is generally accepted as overlapping the reigns of both Sargon and his



grandson Naram-Sin, certainly supports the date long advocated by Matthiae on other archeological grounds (1978b: 26-27; 1978c: 542). Pettinato (1979a: 14, n. 66) disagrees that the destruction was due to Naram-Sin, but his reasons are to be given in a volume not yet published.

Pettinato's proposal (1976: 48) to read the signs *NI-a-UD-DU* as *Du-ud-là* and to equate this with Tūdija,

Stairs to the royal quarter of Palace G, leading from the courtyard.

one of the early kings of Assyria, has not won any substantial support among cuneiformists, as far as I am aware. The equation is accepted without question by Freedman (1978: 164) and Dahood (1978b: 97). A more normal reading would take *UD.DU* together as the Sumerian verb *è*, "to



Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

go out, to send out." As far as I know, Pettinato has not withdrawn his suggestion, but one should bear in mind that it must be considered tentative.

The Ebla Texts and the Bible

More controversial are some of the frequently repeated suggestions for rather explicit connections between the Ebla tablets and the Bible. While any new material from the ancient Near East can shed additional light in a general way upon the ancient world of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, Arabia, etc. and indeed is most welcome, such discoveries in the past usually have been vastly overrated in some quarters in regard to specific relevance to the Old Testament. A case in point is Nuzi, once much touted as providing valuable insights into the age of the patriarchs. It is now generally agreed that the Nuzi finds are of no direct relevance for the Old Testament (Thompson 1974: 196-297).

I do not believe that anyone should be accused of deliberately misusing or distorting the preliminary and tentative results based on an initial reading of the Ebla tablets to

support particular doctrinal views or particular historical interpretations. Nevertheless, I believe there has been a tendency to ignore the repeated cautionary remarks about the tentativeness of many suggestions and an insufficient appreciation of the very real difficulties in understanding the texts in the first place.

A case in point, and an important one, is the supposed mention of the five "cities of the plain," including Sodom and Gomorrah, in the biblical sequence on an Ebla tablet. It now turns out (Freedman 1978: 143, citing M. Dahood) that corrections in reading the names have eliminated the third and fourth in the sequence that was claimed to parallel Genesis 14, and that, moreover, they do not occur on the same tablet as the supposed Sodom and Gomorrah in any case. It should be stressed that there is no published evidence to support an identification of Ebla cuneiform *si-da-mu* with Hebrew *sēdōm* and *è-ma-ra* with Hebrew *āmōrā*. One would need a number of occurrences of words from Ebla written with the cuneiform sign *si* and a number of cognates in other Semitic languages to see

Reverse of an account from Abū Šalābil concerning barley and emmer. The middle column gives the summary and the name of an official.

whether *si* corresponds to Canaanite *samek*. The case of *è-ma-ra* is even more difficult. One would need to show that the Ebla writing convention utilizes the sign *è* to reflect etymological *ayin* or *gayin*. Until the proposed readings are better substantiated it would seem prudent to withhold drawing further similarities with no relevance whatever for either the existence or location of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It remains to be seen whether attempts to clarify obscure passages in the Old Testament on the basis of words in Eblaite (Dahood 1978a) will gain substantial acceptance by scholars. It should be pointed out that Dahood's methodology in utilizing Ugaritic to clarify biblical passages had been criticized widely (Pardee 1979: 146, citing James Barr) and it seems likely that similar reservations would apply to his use of Eblaite.

Pettinato's proposal to read *Ya(w)* in some personal names (1976: 48-49) has drawn wide attention. He was careful to say (48) that he considered the matter a crux and stated explicitly that "it could be rather understood as a hypocoristicon, i.e., a shortened form." Others have made explicit a proposal to see in *Ya(w)* a reference to Yahweh, one of the names of God in the Old Testament. What often has been overlooked in the discussions, and which only a cuneiformist would probably realize, is that the cuneiform sign being read *ià* or *jà* can also be read *i*, *li*, and *ni*. The *w* added to *Ya*, making it more closely resemble the Old Testament writing, is, apparently, based solely on the name *Šu-mi-a-ù*, where the elements *a-ù* are, to me, of dubious interpretation. There are at least three different possibilities in interpreting the names with *ià*: first, Pettinato proposes that it represents a divine name; second, Pettinato alternatively suggests that it is a hypocoristicon, i.e., an element in shortened or "pet" names, very common in Akkadian and Amorite

A royal podium in the EB courtyard, used for audiences with the king.



(that is, a name such as Ubar-Šamaš can be shortened to Ubar-ya); third, it is possible that *ni* rather than *iā* is to be read, thus producing, for example, a name "He-has-redeemed-me" rather than "Ya-has-redeemed." As far as typology of Semitic names is concerned, both are typical, that is, "The-god-X-has-redeemed-me" or "He-has-redeemed." Dahood, who apparently favors the idea of a god Ya, nevertheless observes, "the problem of the ambiguous ending -y would be neatly solved if some good examples of *yā* could be found in the initial position" (Dahood 1978b: 106). There is insufficient evidence published so far to decide the issue, but I would agree with Bermant and Weitzman when they say, "The evidence so far adduced for the worship at Ebla of a god Ya is quite unconvincing" (1979: 182).

Unwarranted conclusions have been drawn in some circles concerning similarities between personal names used at Ebla and names occurring in the Old Testament. Some are cited by Freedman (1977: 3), but most have not been published anywhere in the preliminary reports in transliteration and are therefore not verifiable at present. Names such as Ishmail (meaning "The-god-Il-has-heard") are very common in Old Akkadian (Gelb 1957: 274-75) and Amorite (Gelb forthcoming). A considerable number of names of this type also occur at Abū Šalābīkh (Biggs 1967: 61-66; 1974: 34-35) and elsewhere in 3rd-millennium Mesopotamia, so there seems to be little evidence for a unique relationship between names in the Old Testament and names in Ebla. As Pettinato put it, "Semitic names of the Fara period are typologically and linguistically identical to those in the Ebla texts so much so as to make one think that they have the same cultural and linguistic origin" (1975-76: 56, n. 36).

Another controversial matter in the Ebla tablets is the relationship of Eblaite (in which some 20% of the texts are reported to be written) to other Semitic languages. Pettinato

considers it to be clearly distinct from Old Akkadian, the language of the time of Sargon and his successors in the Akkad dynasty in Mesopotamia, and Amorite, a language used in the north and west of Mesopotamia. He considers it closer to the languages of Canaan in the 1st millennium B.C., especially Phoenician and Hebrew. Because it is so much earlier, he first proposed to call it "Paleo-Canaanite" or "Old Canaanite" (Pettinato 1975).

Defining relationships among languages is a notoriously difficult matter, all the more so when they are separated by a thousand years or more. One's conclusions will obviously be affected by the choice of features which one considers significant.

In 1977, I. J. Gelb of the Oriental Institute, Chicago, who is well known as an authority on Semitic languages, particularly Old Akkadian and Amorite, published a preliminary discussion of the Eblaite language based on published material and some additional information which Pettinato furnished him (Gelb 1977). Most of the analysis is based on personal names of the sentence type such as "He-has-redeemed-me," since in the administrative texts the verbs usually are hidden by their Sumerian equivalents. In fact, personal names probably will account for the greatest part of the Eblaite vocabulary and virtually all the grammar of Eblaite that can be recovered (Garbini 1978: 242).

Without repeating here the details of his comparison—on such matters as the form of verbal preformatives, how the passive and causative are formed, and other linguistic features—his conclusions can be summarized. He considers that the closest relatives of Eblaite are Old Akkadian and Amorite; Ugaritic is more distantly related, and Canaanite (that is, Hebrew) is still more distantly related. Yet, he agrees with Pettinato that Eblaite is clearly not a dialect of either Akkadian or Amorite. Gelb does not claim to have settled the question of the relationship of Eblaite to the other Semitic languages, but it seems quite clear that the initial proposal to associate it with Biblical Hebrew should not be accepted as an established fact. Dahood (1978b) defends the identification of Eblaite as Canaanite and cites a great many names from unpublished texts to illustrate language features which he believes he can identify. One can hardly argue the question when so little evidence is available, but I suspect that his vocative *l*, superlative, and double negative *ma-in* may well be challenged. In short, the problem is a difficult one, and it is surely too early to take up firm positions (Ullendorf 1978).

Ebla and the ancient Near East

There can be no doubt that there were substantial contacts between Ebla and some of the cities of



The Archives Room from the EB palace.

Mesopotamia. The numerous Sumerian lexical texts duplicating those previously known from Fara and Abū Šalābīkh found at Ebla are the most obvious evidence. There were also contacts with Mari, principally of a commercial and military nature (Pettinato 1977). Mari, Ebla, and Abū Šalābīkh are also linked by use of the same month names (not previously discovered in texts from Mesopotamia) and the same system of indicating regnal years (Gelb 1977: 8). A further link is the use of the Semitic words for "hundred" (*mi-at*) and "thousand" (*li-im*) in the same three cities (Biggs and Postgate 1978: 106). These words were not known from previously discovered texts in pre-Sargonic Sumer.

Wider implications have been drawn by Pettinato on other bases. To quote him, "Many are the significant data which show that Ebla was a creative center of notable

importance, that it not only received but gave something of itself to Mesopotamia" (1976: 52). The evidence he cites is a list of geographical names first known from Abū Šalābīkh which I published in 1974 (Biggs 1974, nos. 91-111, transliterated pp. 71-78). A duplicate, virtually intact, was discovered at Ebla. The better state of preservation and the more explicit spelling in the Ebla copy permitted Pettinato to recognize that it includes many Syrian place names (Pettinato 1978; the second part of the article will presumably include proposals for identification of cities in the list). He concluded, reasonably enough, that the text was therefore composed at Ebla and subsequently transmitted to Mesopotamia. This is an attractive proposal and may well be correct, though it is not necessarily the only explanation.

I would observe first that I consider it impossible to derive the Abū Šalābīkh version from the Ebla

version directly. The Abū Šalābīkh version is written in a less explicit orthography, using a number of rare or even otherwise unique cuneiform signs of unknown reading, whereas the Ebla version uses ordinary syllabic signs all of which can be read with no difficulty. Wherever the text may have been drawn up originally, it seems to me that both the Ebla and Abū Šalābīkh versions must derive from an older source which had all the ambiguities and rare signs of the Abū Šalābīkh version. The fact that this geographical list incorporates sections of lists known already in the Jemdet Nasr period (ca. 3000 B.C.) (personal communication from Margaret W. Green of Berlin) indicates use of some older Mesopotamian sources and in any case implies links between Abū Šalābīkh and Ebla earlier than the time of the Abū Šalābīkh tablets. I suspect that Kish may have had a more pivotal role in the relationships among Ebla, Mari,

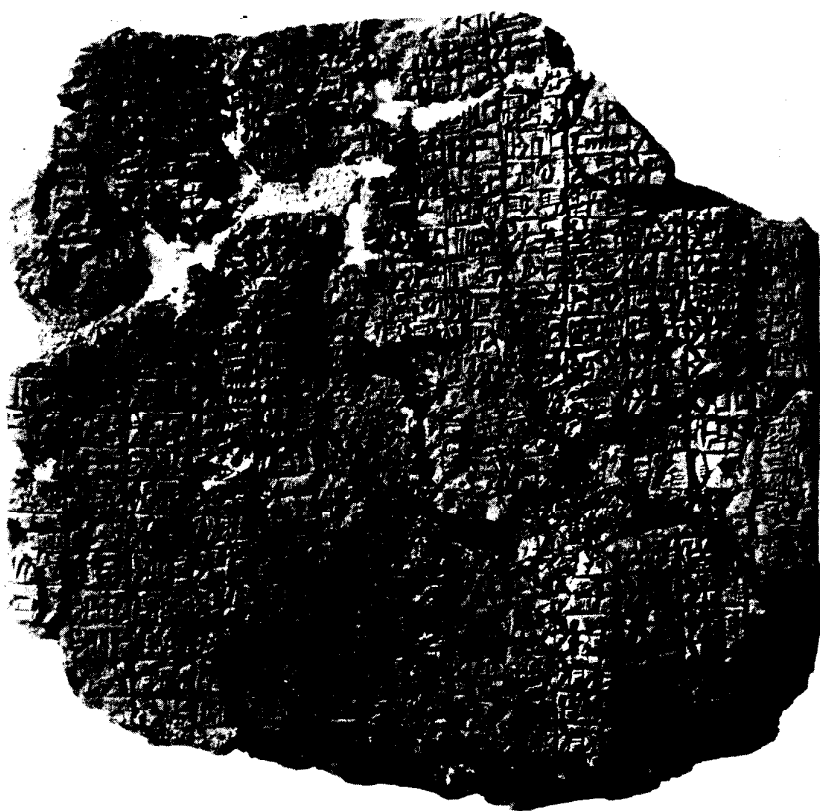
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Abū Šalābīkh, and other cities of central Sumer than can be shown from the sparse information available from Kish itself (Gelb 1977: 15), and that such a list might well have been composed at Kish.

The finds from Ebla (and I refer not only to the tablets but to the excavations as a whole) already have produced a great deal of information about Syria, especially in the 3rd millennium, in history, commerce, art, and architecture, and about the place of Syria within the ancient world. Some of the texts already published provide substantial help in reading and understanding Sumerian texts of the 3rd millennium. The excavators deserve thanks for making so much information available so promptly in their extensive preliminary reports and other publications. Much more can be expected from Ebla. In fact, recent excavations have revealed a rich cemetery of the early 2nd millennium (reported on by P. Matthiae at the *Rencontre assyriologique* in Copenhagen in July 1979 in a paper entitled "The Princely Tombs of Middle Bronze II at Ebla and the Contemporary Syro-Palestinian Cemeteries"). Ebla has indeed opened up whole new vistas. I would stress again, however, that in my opinion the Ebla tablets will have no *special* relevance for our understanding of the Old Testament.



Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.



Above: A Sumerian literary text from Abū Šalābīkh, ca. 2600 B.C. In spite of recent advances in understanding early Sumerian, it remains virtually unintelligible even to specialists. The last column on the right is the colophon, which includes a number of Semitic names.
Below: A Lustral Basin from the Ishtar Temple.

James E. Jennings. Copyright © 1978 Research Mediagraphics.



The village of **Mardikh** is a colorful reminder of a life-style which is millennia old. Houses with the beehive-shaped mudbrick domes are remarkably efficient in repelling cold winter rains as well as blistering summer heat.

This article is an updated and shortened version of a lecture given to the Chicago chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America in January 1978.

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