

Biblical Archaeology—Silencing the Critics, Part 3

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Ebla and Politics

Now even cities as ancient as Sodom and Gomorrah, routinely ridiculed by critics as myths, have been found mentioned in extrabiblical literature. The recent finds of the Eblaite Kingdom that existed more than 4,300 years ago in Syria revealed the following: “Sodom and Gomorrah, thought by many to have been more legendary than real, were mentioned in a commercial text, and thus were given firm historical status for the first time in an extrabiblical source.”¹ Further, “The tables refer to various sites, including *unisalima* (Jerusalem), Hazor, Lachish, Megiddo, Gaza, Sinai, Joppa, and Haran. The five cities of the plain (Genesis 14:2), including Sodom and Gomorrah, are referred to, and so also is Salim, apparently the city of Melchizedek, who is also referred to in Genesis 14.”²

This Semitic Eblaite kingdom lasted for about 800 years and at one point was populated by an estimated 260,000 people. The amount of material that has already been uncovered and is expected to be uncovered is massive. “There can be no doubt that this material is some of the most important ever discovered as far as OT studies are concerned.”³

Unfortunately, political and religious opposition by the principals involved (predominantly Syrians and Muslims) may have caused some very monumental findings to be falsely interpreted or even suppressed because of their religious, cultural, and historical implications for Christians and Jews.

To illustrate, it was first reported that one Eblaite document implied the teaching that the universe was created out of nothing. What theological liberals had held was the “mythical” teaching of a first millennium B.C. *oral* tradition is now found in a third-millennium B.C. *written* text! Our good friend Dr. Clifford Wilson, who was personally present when a team of archaeologists and linguists met informally (over a lunch hosted by Professor David Noel Freedman at Ann Arbor) with the discoverer (Matthiae) and translator (Pettinato) of the Ebla tablets, told us, “A creation tablet indicated that one great Being had brought creation into being—especially the heavens, the earth, the moon, and the stars. Once again this written record from Ebla was dramatically earlier than critics had deemed possible for Genesis, which was again proven a greatly superior record.”⁴ Another source writes, “One cosmological tablet recorded that the heavens, earth, sun, and moon were created in that order, which corresponds exactly to the sequence in Genesis.”⁵

The creation tablet discovered at Ebla declares, “Lord of heaven and earth: the earth was not, you created it, the light of day was not, you created it, the morning light you had not [yet] made exist.”⁶ Significantly, creation is attributed to only one God, and the order is identical to that in Genesis 1:1-5. There is also the inference that creation is *ex-nihilo*, not remanufacturing something from an eternal primitive substance.

This obviously “confirms” the Genesis account and, to some degree, the religious beliefs and claims of Jews and Christians—and clearly not all Syrians or Muslims are happy about that. In his second printing of *Ebla Tablets: Secrets of a Forgotten City*, Clifford Wilson includes informa-

tion from Syrian authorities as to the restrictions to be observed in the release of materials from Ebla. The Syrians do not want to be identified as “cousins” of Jews, or to have the Old Testament preferred to the Qur’an. To them, to confirm the Old Testament record is to confirm the Abrahamic covenant in which Jews, not Arabs, were promised the Holy land.⁷

James D. Muhly is Professor of Ancient Near East History and chairman of the Ancient History Program at the University of Pennsylvania, in addition to being director of excavations at Tel Michal and Tel Gerisa on Israel’s Mediterranean coast. He writes in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, “It should be added, however, that archaeological work at Ebla is inevitably political, in the sense that all archaeological research in the Middle East is political. One is working in a highly charged atmosphere, and everything that takes place is in some way connected with politics. Every archaeologist must also be a skilled diplomat or he will not survive.”⁸ Consider the following account:

Unfortunately, Pettinato who announced the connection between Genesis 14 and the Ebla texts in a public meeting in 1976 (which this author attended), later disclaimed his own conclusions. In a travesty of modern scholarship he has backed away from his original and very dogmatic assertion that Ebla mentioned the cities of the plain. The reason, tragically, is not that the linguistic evidence compels a shift in his thinking but the realities of modern Middle Eastern politics have been brought to bear. The Syrian government, under whose auspices the site of Tell Mardikh [Ebla] has been excavated, has become alarmed at the obvious relationship between Genesis and the Ebla texts. They feel that these materials lend some kind of support to the antiquity of the Hebrew people and possibly to the claims of Israel on certain parts of the Arab world. They therefore threatened to prevent further work at the site and publishing of the inscriptions unless these damaging Ebla-Genesis connections were disavowed. Because Pettinato wished to continue on the project he apparently acceded to these pressures and relinquished his previously held convictions. Ironically Pettinato has been removed as head epigrapher (decipherer) anyway and has been replaced by Alfonso Archi. But even in a later publication (1981) Pettinato conceded that *si-da-mu* (Sodom) and *sa-ba-i-im* (Zeboiim) might be mentioned in the Ebla inscriptions.⁹

Though the question of five cities of the plain may now be uncertain because of the acrimonious climate surrounding the publication of the tablets, there is persistent support for the attestation of at least Sodom and Zeboiim.... [Regardless] A parallel line of evidence in support of the historicity of the cities of the plain and therefore of the patriarchal stories associated with them has been the exploration and excavation of sites near the Lisan, the peninsula in the southeast part of the Dead Sea.¹⁰

Further, Muhly points out that the seeming confusion and uncertainty over the tablets at Ebla is nothing new:

What has happened with the Ebla tablets is, unfortunately, exactly what happened with several other major textual discoveries of this century, such as the Ugaritic texts, the Dead Sea scrolls and the Linear B tablets in Mycenaean Greek.... Scholars share the vanities and insecurities common to all humanity. When asked for their opinion by a reporter from the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine or *BAR*, few can resist the fact that they know nothing about the subject has never hindered most scholars from contributing to the general confusion. With Ebla, I hope we are now past this trial by fire.... Scholars will refuse to go beyond the precise letter of the text. To allay suspicions that changes in interpretation of the finds reflect a refusal to have anything to do with ancient Israel or the world of the Bible, those tablets that supposedly formed the basis for the unfounded claims should be published.¹¹

The latest information on Ebla is that, due to the politicization of archaeology in Syria, in most cases we are still uncertain whether the Ebla tablets help confirm the early chapters of Genesis. Only time will tell. Regardless, when all the facts are known, history repeatedly tells us that archaeological discovery will side with what the Bible already declares: “If even 10 percent of

the alleged comparisons should prove to be valid, Ebla will have established itself as a major resource against which all future Old Testament study must be done. It is beyond question that traditional and conservative views of biblical history, especially of the patriarchal period, will continue to be favored by whatever results accrue from ongoing Ebla research.”¹²

Notes:

- ¹ E. M. Blaiklock, *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archeology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library/Zondervan, 1983), p. 441.
- ² Clifford Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Richardson, TX: Probe, 1977), p. 32.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 442.
- ⁴ Personal letter, 1996; see also Clifford Wilson, *Ebla: Secrets of a Forgotten City* (San Diego: Master Books, 1980).
- ⁵ *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archeology*, p. 441.
- ⁶ Eugene H. Merrill, “Ebla and Biblical Historical Inerrancy,” in Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Vital Apologetic Issues: Examining Reasons and Revelation in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), p. 189.
- ⁷ The situation was discussed in some detail in *The Biblical Archaeological Review*. See James D. Muhly, “Ur and Jerusalem Not Mentioned in Ebla Tablets, Say Ebla Expedition Scholars,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov./Dec. 1983, p. 75 for a listing of articles.
- ⁸ Muhly, p. 75.
- ⁹ Merrill in Zuck, ed., p 185.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ¹¹ Muhly, p. 75.
- ¹² Merrill in Zuck, ed., p 192.