Mari and the Holy Grail

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The news from Mari, as all of you know, has never failed to be less than interesting, ever since the French dug at Tell Hariri in the early 1930s and resurrected Mari. Especially in the past two decades, however, the news from Mari has become positively spectacular. In fact, with practically no exception, Mari documentation—not to say also the archaeology of Mari—is now the most densely published in cuneiform scholarship. So, with information on Mari readily available, why would someone like me pontificate before specialists like you on Mari and what it might mean for our studies?

Inquiring into this question, in fact, lies at the heart of my presentation. Keeping in mind the old adage that history—political, cultural, religious, or the like—is seldom written or read in a vacuum, I want to describe to you what Mari meant to the generations immediately after its discovery and tell you what it has come to mean in recent times. Naturally enough, given our Society of Biblical Literature hospices, I will focus on the reciprocal stimulation between Mari and the Bible. In the process, I will share with you some details about recent discussions, in the hopes of steering you towards archives that are a mother-lode for research. So let me tackle the story.

1. *Resurrecting Mari*

The French had earned the right to excavate Mari because just after World War I, they had quickly snuffed out a native push for independence, keeping Syria under mandate until 1945. A year after the Second World War, the French left Syria but continued control over the archaeology and epigraphy of Mari. Despite regional conflicts, their stewardship has proven productive and, within reason, fair.

Excavations began exactly 70 years ago in December 1933, with almost instantaneous discoveries. The first campaigns were not particularly scientific: tablets were removed with scarcely any inventory taken at the field; tablets were baked at the grounds, some of them fracturing into pieces; no epigrapher stood by until the 5th campaign. The harvest was rich and in 1935 and 1936 Thureau-Dangin and his team offered samples that created a fuss. An inscription found *in situ* delivered the ancient name of the city, but scholarship being

also an exercise in tenacity, the dispute about the location of Mari continued. Some were sure that Mari should be in the Upper Euphrates or near Elam. I.J. Gelb was dismissive, writing in 1935, 'In my opinion the identification of Mari with Tell el-Hariri, or any other single site, is of the same value as the identification of ancient Latium with modern Tivoli or Frascati.'[1]

In 1937, Thureau-Dangin cited textual evidence for making Hammurabi a younger contemporary of Samsi-Addu I. At once the lawmaker dropped about three centuries from his previous chronological perch, and with enormous consequences.[2] Albright quickly placed Hammurabi around 1800 BCE and Sidney Smith gave him the familiar but hardly plausible middle chronology slot of 1792–1750 BCE.[3] Also in 1937, Georges Dossin excerpted a now famous passage (from A.482) that detailed the power balance of the time:

> There is no king who, just by himself, is truly powerful. From ten to fifteen kings follow Hammurabi of Babylon, as many do Rīm-Sîn of Larsa, as many Ibāl-pî-El of Ešnunna, as many Amūd-pî-El of Qaṭna; twenty kings follow Yarim-Lim of Yamḫad [Aleppo].[4]

Dossin also cited (A.186) in which a prince from Ugarit asks to visit Mari, effectively bridging two cultures in Canaan and Mesopotamia that heretofore had not been deemed a unity.[5] In those days, folks differentiated between Amorites, individuals styled MAR.TU in Ur III texts, and East Canaanites, individuals recorded in Old Babylonian tablets without the label MAR.TU. The last were themselves distinguished from the Canaanites we know and love from the Bible. Mari onomastics cast powerful doubt on the distinctions, but they did not completely die until in 1968 when Gelb published an Old Babylonian text from Tell Asmar (Ešnunna) with oodles of West Semites labeled MAR.TU.[6]

1. I.J. Gelb, 'Mari', *AJSLL* 52 (1935), pp. 43-44 (43).

2. F. Thureau-Dangin, 'Iasmaḫ-Adad', *RA* 34 (1937), pp. 135-39.

3. Overview in O. Neugebauer, 'The Chronology of the Hammurabi Age', *JAOS* 61 (1941), pp. 58-61.

4. Georges Dossin, 'Les archives épistolaires du palais de Mari', *Syria* 19 (1938), pp. 105-25 (117) [= *Recueil Georges Dossin: Mélanges d'assyriologie, 1934–1959* (Akkadica. Supplementum, 1; Leuven: Peeters, 1983), p. 102-32 (114)]. See the comments of Bertrand Lafont, 'Relations internationales, alliances et diplomatie au temps des royaumes amorrites: Essai de synthèse', in *Mari, Ebla, et les Hourrites: Dix ans de travaux, deuxième partie: Actes du colloque international (Paris, mai 1993)* (ed. Jean-Marie Durand and Dominique Charpin; Amurru, 2; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 2001), pp. 213-328 (222-24).

5. G. Dossin, 'La correspondance de Zimrilim, dernier roi de Mari (vers 2000 avant J.-C.)', in *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, année 1937* (Paris: Auguste Picard, 1937), pp. 12-20.

6. I.J. Gelb, 'An Old Babylonian List of Amorites', *JAOS* 88 (1968), pp. 39-46. See also William L. Moran, 'The Hebrew Language in its Northwest Semitic Background', in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (ed. G. Ernest Wright; New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 59-84.

2. *Mari and the Bible*

To get back to our story: On the eve of World War II, Mari and its archives were making waves, but the discussion remained largely within the confine of Assyriology even if many of its practitioners were more savvy about the Hebrew Bible than most of us. One reason was that despite the rich serving of appetizers, few Mari documents were published in any density. Another reason is that there was an overload of resources, from Ugarit, Alalakh, and Nuzi, that kept the attention of the biblicists fixed elsewhere.

In Europe, the Mari tablets inspired Assyriologists toward a richer tableau of Akkadian culture. But in America, where James Henry Breasted was finding internationalism in the 'Fertile Crescent' of the Amarna Age, such scholars as Ephraim A. Speiser and Cyrus H. Gordon busily drew on social practices displayed in the Nuzi tablets to authenticate a Late Bronze setting for the patriarchs. But the regional dominance of the Amorites that Mari was describing encouraged a few scholars to embed Abraham within their bosom. Albrightianism, by which I mean the drive to privilege historical research in authenticating biblical events, predated Albright of course, especially among Protestants for whom Genesis 14 had become the link with true history. Albright himself readily jettisoned his old reliance on the Hyksos as guide to dating the patriarchs. Increasingly, he favored the age of Hammurabi as a setting. But in his long career he proved restless in making equations between historical personalities and the names of Eastern kings 'recorded' in Genesis 14. As with others (for example Böhl)[7] Albright identified Arioch of Ellasar with a vassal of Zimri-Lim named Ariyyuk, and was willing to find an Elamite equivalent to Chedorlaomer.[8] Interestingly enough, in his last years, when he had donkey caravaneering on his mind, Albright eschewed a facile correspondence between Amraphel of Shinar and Hammurabi of Babylon, or even with Amūd-pî-El of Qaṭna, both within linguistic contortion. Rather, he connected with Emudbal, allegedy Yamud-pala, the latter not a king but a region frequently mentioned in Mari and other Old Babylonian texts.[9]

7. F.M.Th. Böhl, *King Hammurabi of Babylon in the Setting of his Time (about 1700 B.C.)* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche uitgevers maatschappij, 1946), p. 17; see W.F. Albright's review in *BO* 5 (1948), pp. 125-27.

8. Parenthetically, now that we have this vassal's dossier (see ARM, XXVIII, textes 153-57), he has proven to be a minor scrambler who sold his allegiance to the lowest bidder, not at all what we consider a major player. Still, Dominique Charpin and Nele Ziegler have this to say, 'Il ne me semble pas exclu qu'Ariyôk soit à identifier à Arriyuk, un lieutenant des Élamites qui finit par devenir roi au nord-est du Sindjar et…se rallia finalement à Zimri-Lim'; *Mari et le Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite: Essai d'histoire politique* (Florilegium marianum, 5; Mémoires de N.A.B.U., 6; Paris: SEPOA, 2003), p. 226.

9. W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1990 [1968]), pp. 68-69 n. 37; see his 'Abram the

After the war, the publication of Mari documents began in earnest. Because they were in autograph copies, widespread knowledge of the contents of the letters did not come until they were transliterated and translated. For the purpose of our story, however, the stunner came in 1948 when Dossin published the first of a stream of letters from dreamers and prophets, in which the will of the gods was communicated to Zimri-Lim.[10] While Mari was by no means the first to give evidence of such manifestations, the wealth as well as the antiquity of the material from Mari simply gave proof of the special connection between Mari and the Bible, intensifying inspection of the archives for more evidence of the same.

So during the 1950s and 1960s occurred the greatest conjunctions between Mari and the Bible, with many fine scholars participating in the proposed equations. Mari documents streamed forth, albeit at a sane pace, with good commentaries by Maurice Birot, Jean Bottéro, Georges Boyer, and Madeleine Lurton Burke, and their works helped unlock many mysteries behind the social, economic, and palatial systems at work. Administrative texts gave backbones to the testimony of letters, confirming the broad network of political connections that included such Mediterranean towns as Hazor, Ugarit, Ṭūba, and Qaṭna. Still, because in those years we had but the grossest chronologies internal to the reigns of Mari kings, choreographing the great events mentioned in the texts was an adventure of the greatest imagination. Elsewhere, I have written how in those year we crafted a life for Zimri-Lim that made of him a *juste souffrant*, a portrait that was so sentimentally verisimilar that we have a hard time parting from it ever since.[11]

Some remarkable works helped ease the linkage between Mari and the Bible. Unsung is the great achievement of Bottéro and André Finet who in 1954 jointly produced ARM, XV, full of indexes and rich in lexicographic and grammatical details that permitted access to Mari's vast rich resources.[12] In the same year Bottéro edited a *Rencontre assyriologique internationale* volume on the *Ḫabiru*s.[13] He cited Mari material that forced their connection with the Hebrew back into the Middle Bronze Age. Most influential was Jean-Robert Kupper's 1957 book on the nomads in the Mari age.[14] Though occasionally

Hebrew: A New Archaeological Interpretation', *BASOR* 163 (1961), pp. 36-54, especially pp. 49-50.

10. G. Dossin, 'Une révélation du dieu Dagan à Terqa', *RA* 42 (1948), pp. 125-34 [= *Recueil Georges Dossin*, pp. 169-79].

11. J.M. Sasson, 'The King and I: A Mari King in Changing Perceptions', *JAOS* 118 (1998), pp. 453-70.

12. Jean-Marie Bottéro and André Finet, *Répertoire analytique des tomes I à V* (ARM, XV; Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1954).

13. J.-M. Bottéro, *Le problème des Ḫabiru à la IV^e Rencontre assyriologique internationale* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1954).

14. Jean-Robert Kupper, *Les nomades en Mésopotamie au temps des rois de Mari* (Biblio-

misread and its subtleties commonly missed, Kupper's book gave impetus to a wide discussion on second millennium nomadism. So many tribes roaming in and around the river valleys, including the Balīḫ's, where Israel had set the origins of its ancestry simply invited biblical comparison. Parrot could imagine tribal descendents of Terah and Abraham halting by Mari on their way from Ur and Ḫarrān and Albright could muse about Israel's ancestors founding Hammurabi's dynasty.[15] Quickly the range of comparisons became established: linguistic studies of West Semitic names; analysis of Upper Mesopotamian place names; variety of nomadic experience; vocabulary for ethnic and kinship identity; the office of judges; the types of sacrifice, especially of donkeys; bans on spoils and (alleged) sins on census-taking; fixing of patrimony, and, never least, prophetism and its impact on affairs of state and of faith. Yahweh and his origins were issues that also periodically surfaced.[16] In all this, none but the most Scripture-committed ever drew direct historical inferences; but the implications of the exercises were never lost. So, as we entered the 1970s, Mari had become a backdrop for buttressing the legitimacy, even the validity, of Hebrew traditions; not through direct historical synchronism mind you, but in the same way as Ugarit helped to chart the rise of monotheism or Nuzi helped to explain such social oddities as husbands and wives who could label themselves 'brothers and sisters.'

3. *The Historicity of the Patriarchs*

1971 was calamitous for our field, for among the great scholars who died then were William Foxwell Albright and Roland de Vaux. Their deaths robbed scholarship of broad knowledge, dominant convictions, and sustained lobbying for comparative research. Within a few years the historical constructs they worked for (or against) faced multiple challenges. Books by John Van Seters and Thomas L. Thompson in the mid-1970s are generally credited with compromising Albrightianism; but in fact paradigmatic shifts were weakening reliance on historical research. In the wake of global wars, history came to be mistrusted as an instrument for political, social, class, and gender abuse. History was no longer charted linearly and progressively, but fractured into a kaleidoscope of visions and perspectives. The consequences were more rapid and drastic for Israel than for allied fields, probably because solid evidence for the

thèque de la faculté de philosophie et lettres de l'Université de Liège, 142; Paris: Société d'Edition «Les Belles Lettres», 1957).

15. André Parrot, 'La vie d'un chef d'état au II[e] millénaire', in *Institut de France: Séance publique annuelle mardi 25 octobre 1966* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et C[ie], 1966), pp. 3-11 (8); Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, p. 81.

16. See, most forcefully, A. Finet, 'Yahvé au royaume de Mari', in *Circulation des monnaies, des marchandises et des biens* (ed. Rika Gyselen; Res orientales, 5; Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du moyen-orient, 1993), pp. 15-22.

historicity of its traditions was never quite there, tools had been imported from other disciplines, methodologies were in dispute, and, above all, motivations remained suspect. As a result in the final quarter of the twentieth century people in droves abandoned researching biblical history in favor of biblical historiography. Despite the tom-tom beats of the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, the discussion since then on where Hebrew traditions and controllable history meet has continued to slip and the skirmishes for a demarcation line are now joining deep into the Monarchic period.

4. *Mari without Patriarchs*

Interestingly enough, during the same two decades, knowledge of Mari became more historically reliable and intricate. In 1978, Birot established a sequence for the year-date formulas of Zimri-Lim and so allowed us to reconstruct a more trustworthy formulation of events, each with its background and aftermath.[17] When Jean-Marie Durand took over care-taking the archives in 1981, he brought into being a team of incredibly dedicated and hard-working French scholars. Mari research became better focused, better published, and better integrated with the information that was spilling forth from contemporaneous archives, such as those form Tell Šimšāra (Šušarrā), Rimah (Qaṭṭara), Tell Leilān (Šubat-Enlil), Chagar Bazar, Tell al-ʿAšāra (Terqa), and Tell Biʿa (Tuttul). True enough, the change was so sudden and the material so dense that until recently few outside the team have kept a sustained familiarly with it. The textual results have appeared in a rich assortment of journals, contributions to *Festschriften* and specialized studies; but if you are seeking a single source to give you a broad perspective on what Mari is now about, you cannot do better than Durand's three volumes in the series *Littérature du Proche-Orient*, with translations of almost 2000 collated letters and with generous if also idiosyncratic comments and overviews: a masterpiece of the genre.[18]

So what have we learned about Mari in the recent decades? The range of textual material has not expanded much, in that it remains overwhelmingly administrative and epistolary, with pockets of cultic and juridical texts. True, we do have now the earliest examples of treaties and can follow in detail the intricate processes by which they were formulated and put into effect.[19] Still unpublished but cited in fragments is also the earliest attested royal epic, this one honoring Zimri-Lim, written seconds after he took over the throne, and so proving that sycophants could also have a taste for literature.[20] We have not found yet the

17. M. Birot, 'Données nouvelles sur la chronologie du règne de Zimri-Lim', *Syria* 55 (1978), pp. 333-43.

18. J.-M. Durand, *Les documents épistolaires du palais de Mari* (3 vols.; LAPO, 16-18; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997–2000).

19. See Lafont, 'Relations internationales', pp. 213-328.

20. The epic is as yet unpublished; but some of its lines have been cited in diverse publica-

libraries of learned scribes and so miss having the practical compilations that explain how to read the omens, understand words, make beer, prepare perfume, heal the sick, cure animals, or succeed in love—the last genre most missed.[21]

In all other ways, however, our knowledge of the Mari age has deepened. We now know better how the palace functioned and have recovered intimate details about the world of women within it. We have a pretty good handle on the major moments in the reigns of successive kings, even in we cannot always grasp the motivations behind their political maneuverings.[22] We have learned much about the operation of kingship, at least during the Zimri-Lim period, and can reconstruct his activities for good chunks of his reign.[23] We now know how he came to power (by first conquering Tuttul) and how he maintained it, via alliances, diplomatic marriages, wars, bribery, consultation with the gods, travel to such distant places as Ugarit, and a generous table where loyalty was forged and maintained.[24] Although we lack introspective comments from Zimri-Lim, Samsi-Addu, Yasmaḫ-Addu and Išme-Dagan, or any other ruler of the time, each nevertheless acquires personality through the countless messages they received and penned and we can now deliver psychological profiles about their hopes and fears. The great lawgiver himself, Hammurabi of Babylon, is now an individual for the many personal quirks he displays and Yarim-Lim of Yamḫad reveals the profound insight into providence and destiny that is so well exposed in the Bible.[25]

Among the more enriching recoveries from recent publications from Mari is the world of statecraft and diplomacy as reflected in the archives. Old Babylonian diplomacy was a major tool of expansion and confirmation of power, obeying a Byzantine etiquette for acceptable behavior.[26] How Zimri-Lim's

tions. A helpful compilation is now available in Nathan Wasserman, *Style and Form in Old-Babylonian Literary Texts* (Cuneiform Monographs, 27; Leiden: Brill and STYX, 2003), p. 189.

21. My opinion is that divination as practiced in Mari was learned practically and did not depend on learned texts; see Sasson, 'About "Mari and the Bible" ', *RA* 92 (1998), pp. 91-123 (118-19).

22. See now Charpin and Ziegler, *Mari et le Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite*.

23. Aside from the study of Charpin and Ziegler, cited above, see Sasson, 'The King and I', pp. 453-70.

24. On this last topic see J.M. Sasson, 'The King's Table: Food and Fealty in Old Babylonian Mari', in *Food and Identity in the Ancient World* (ed. Cristiano Grottanelli and Lucio Milano; History of the Ancient Near East. Studies, 9; Padua: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice e Libreria, 2004), pp. 179-215.

25. On Hammurabi, see now D. Charpin, *Hammu-rabi de Babylone* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003) and Marc van de Mieroop, *King Hammurabi of Babylon: A Biography* (Blackwell Ancient Lives; London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004). On Yarim-Līm, see Robert M. Whiting, 'Amorite Tribes and Nations of Second-Millennium Western Asia', in *CANE*, II, pp. 1231-42 (1237).

26. Bertrand Lafont, 'International Relations in the Ancient Near East: The Birth of a Complete Diplomatic System', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 12 (2001), pp. 39-60.

diplomats almost botched the purchase of land near Alalakh in Northwest Syria is one of the most wonderful of the dossiers recently published.[27] Mari vassals and ambassadors, we have discovered, can be exceptionally garrulous, their prose matching well with what we find in biblical narratives, both sharing lively phrasing, vivid pacing, and fine sense of structure. I truly believe that in this shared feeling for words we bring Mari and the Bible to some of their closest proximities. We cannot but be impressed by the literary instinct (whether the speaker's or the scribe's) that is displayed in such evocative passages as when a vassal reminds Zimri-Lim of the conversations they had long ago in the gardens of Carchemish.[28] Or when: a diplomat (Buqāqum) feeds Zimri-Lim salacious tidbits about the wife of another leader (ARM, XXVI, 488); a majordomo gingerly reports on a Qaṭna princess dancing herself sick under a brutal mid-day sun (ARM, XXVI, 318) advisers brutally remind a neglectful king that rivers cannot reverse death that comes from thirst (ARM, XXVI, 171.14-15); a chieftain gives three different accounts on the death of an enemy just to drive home a lesson on theodicy.[29] I could go on, but let me come back to the main thread of this presentation.

We have seen how for the past couple of decades 'Mari and the Bible' have missed making the best conjunctions. True, such veteran scholars as Abraham Malamat or Moshe Anbar never lost their keen interest in finding parallels between the two corpora on in reporting on Mari's connection with Western Asia. Truth to tell, however, while the majority of biblical scholars have simply not kept up with the dramatic reshaping of our knowledge about Mari, members of the Mari team have trained as historians rather than as biblical scholars or as semiticists; until very recently for the most part, they have shown little interest in biblical research. Still, something has happened in the past decade and I devote my final remarks to it.

5. *Renewed Connections*

In 1983, the new Mari *équipe* held a colloquium on the occasion of Mari's fiftieth resurrection.[30] The program was hard-core Mariology, with only one paper, by André Lemaire, reviewing what could be said about Mari and the Bible. (At

27. J.-M. Durand, *Le culte d'Addu d'Alep et l'affaire d'Alahtum* (Florilegium marianum, 7; Mémoires de N.A.B.U., 8; Paris: SEPOA, 2002).

28. J.-R. Kupper, 'Dans les jardins de Carkémish...', in *Recueil d'études à la mémoire d'André Parrot* (ed. D. Charpin and J.-M. Durand; Florilegium marianum, 6; Mémoires de N.A.B.U., 7; Paris: SEPOA, 2002), pp. 195-200.

29. J.M. Sasson, 'On Reading the Diplomatic Letters in the Mari Archives', in *Mari, Ébla, et les Hourrites* (Amurru, 2), pp. 329-38.

30. Proceedings published as Actes du colloque internationale du C.N.R.S. 620, 'A propos d'un cinquantenaire: Mari, bilan et perspectives' (Strasbourg, 29, 30 juin, 1er juillet 1983), J.-M. Durand and J.-Cl. Margueron (edn), in *MARI* 4 (1985).

that stage, not an enormous amount that was new, except for Lemaire's linkage to the Hebrew phenomenon via the Arameans of the Late Bronze Age.[31]) Ten years later, in 1993, another colloquium was mounted by the team, accentuating correspondences in trans-Euphratene Syria and upper Mesopotamia.[32] Again, Lemaire was alone with a biblical topic, not surprisingly, on prophecy.[33] Within four years, however, in 1997, the *équipe* held a 'table ronde' on 'Amorite traditions and the Bible', the papers for which were published a couple of years later in several issues of the *Revue d'Assyriologie*.[34] Participants were again members of the Mari team, but there were also a few strays, including Daniel Fleming, Eckart Otto, and myself. Dominique Charpin gave an exciting tour of the Beqaʿ valley in which troops from Mari and Qaṭna held a joint military campaign.[35] Most of the other papers, however, made more or less congruous connections between Mari and the Bible on such issues as sacrifice, war, palace life, kingship, and legal formulae, the goal being to expand our grasp of practices or institutions without committing to definite channels of transmission or chronology. The Mari material was dealt with much subtlety but, as is not uncommon in these enterprises, the biblical texts brought into comparison were generally read flat. There was the obligatory review of the prophetic material (by Lemaire) as well as the requisite warning about misuse of Mari documentation (my own essay). All very bracing and rewarding. Two papers, however, went beyond thematic analogies: Durand's 'Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques', and Daniel Fleming's 'Mari and the Possibility of Biblical Memory.'[36] They deserve a few more words.

6. *Amorites and their Memory*

Ever since he took the helm of the Mari *équipe*, Durand and his team have made remarkable progress in reconstructing the culture of Mari, with special attention on reign of Zimri-Lim, where our evidence is very full. Early in 1992, Durand

31. A. Lemaire, 'Mari, la Bible et le monde nord-ouest sémitique', *MARI* 4 (1985), pp. 549-58 (553-54).

32. Proceedings published in *Mari, Ébla, et les Hourrites: Dix ans de travaux, première partie: Actes du colloque international (Paris, mai 1993)* (ed. J.-M. Durand; Amurru, 1; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1996), and Durand and Charpin (eds.), *Mari, Ébla, et les Hourrites* (Amurru, 2).

33. A. Lemaire, 'Les textes prophétiques de Mari dans leurs relations avec l'Ouest', in *Mari, Ébla, et les Hourrites* (Amurru, 1), pp. 427-38.

34. *RA* 92/1-2 (1998) and 93/1 (1999).

35. D. Charpin, 'Toponymie amorrite et toponymie biblique: la ville de Ṣîbat/Ṣobah', *RA* 92 (1998), pp. 79-92; see Charpin and Ziegler, *Mari et le Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite*, pp. 101-102.

36. J.-M. Durand, 'Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques', *RA* 92 (1998), pp. 3-39, and Daniel E. Fleming, 'Mari and the Possibility of Biblical Memory', *RA* 92 (1998), pp. 41-78.

wrote the most forceful reassessment of nomadism in the Mari texts since Kupper's 1957 study.[37] The famous Ḫana, once regarded as a major tribal coalition of the time disappears, its name shown to be generic for such tribal confederations as the Yaminites ('Southerners') and the Simalites ('Northerners'), themselves just two of many Amorite tribes in the region. Durand is confident that diverse forms of governance and associations could be detected for each of these two major groups, the Yaminites and the Simalites, and, not without success, he has detailed a technical vocabulary for each of them. For Durand, the Lim dynasty, to which Zimri-Lim belonged, was Simalite although his own mother was Yaminite, a fact that did not stop Zimri-Lim from waging war against them. Politics remained fluid and tribes easily floated between settled and non-settled status. Remarkably, however, individuals can shift allegiance from one tribe to another after the requisite donkey sacrifices. Yet, as we learned more about tribes, the terminology of linkage between Amorites and Israel has proved slippery, they seem to share etymology but not application: for example Amorite *ga'um/gâyum* ('clan') seems closest *not* to Hebrew *gôy* but to *mišpaḥâ*, whereas Hebrew *gôy* parallels Amorite *ummatum* and not *ga'um*.[38]

Daniel Fleming has depended heavily on Durand's reformulation of tribal context in the Mari age, using it to test the quality of biblical memory. That Zimri-Lim was a Simalite ruling at an urban center allows Fleming to make phenomenological equivalence with what obtained as David was forging a kingdom. However, there is a problem in conception. Leaving aside the biblical material, there is a slighting of a fundamental insight drawn long ago from the Mari records: namely that no matter who ruled at Mari there was always continuity among administrators and bureaucrats. It is difficult, therefore, to claim that Zimri-Lim governed differently from his predecessors, Simalites or otherwise. This is not to say that political situations remained stagnant, that rulers shared the same governing style, or that events did not require changes of tactics; rather, it is possible to argue that the organs of government did not shift appreciably enough for us to imagine a radically different rule for Zimri-Lim. I can also cast doubt about Fleming's reading of the Simalite material. (He presumes correspondents meant Simalites when they mentioned Ḫana.) In fact, Zimri-Lim has been shown to own a double allegiance to tribe and city ever since Kupper published ARM, VI, 76 fifty years ago, with a message urging the king to please both his urban and tribal constituencies.

Fleming next resurrects an old discussion about the value of place names that seem shared in the Bible and in Mari. His insight here is that Mari's Yami-

37. J.-M. Durand, 'Unité et diversités au Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite', in *La circulation des biens, des personnes et des idées dans le Proche-Orient ancien* (ed. D. Charpin and F. Joannès; Actes de la XXXVIII[ème] Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Paris, 8-10 juillet 1991; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1992), pp. 97-128.

38. On these points see Sasson, 'About "Mari and the Bible" ', pp. 104-105.

nite tribes occupied such North Mesopotamian places as Ḫarrān and Nāḥôr, and this is reflected in the Biblical preoccupation with the tribal origins of Benjamin and with its setting of the patriarchs in the Balīḥ region. He connects one Amorite tribal term, *ḫibrum*, with Hebrew *ʿibrî*. Whether or not Fleming succeeds in saying anything useful on this matter is not at issue here; more relevant to me is that Fleming's willingness to lean on such evocative mosaics may itself be a harbinger for a new drive to historicize Hebrew traditions. If so, 'Why now?' would be an interesting issue to explore. It could be because the combats between so-called minimalists and maximalists demand reaction by historians, in biblical studies always the arbiters of Hebraic veracity. But there is also in Fleming an interest in other themes that are also patently American in their exploration, not least among them is the notion that nomadic ideals included a primitive form of democracy that just begs ferreting out. That such ideals were shared among Israel's ancestors continues to be an attractive notion for some scholars.[39]

7. *Nimrod, Chedorlaomer, and Amraphel*

The other article to similarly reopen older issues is Durand's 'Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques.' For him, the blossoming of Amorite political power was relatively short lived, being practically coeval with the Mari age.[40] But the Amorites have proven themselves homologous precursors of the Hebrews, for

39. Fleming has a book on the subject: Daniel E. Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors: Mari and Early Collective Governance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The classic argument is in Thorkild Jacobsen's 'Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia', *JNES* 2 (1943), pp. 159-72, reprinted in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture* (ed. W.L. Moran; HSS, 21; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 157-70. The argument was quickly followed by C. Umhau Wolf, 'Traces of Primitive Democracy in Ancient Israel', *JNES* 6 (1947), pp. 98-108. See also Robert Gordis, 'Democratic Origins in Ancient Israel: The Biblical *ʿēdāh*', in *Alexander Marx: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), pp. 369-88; G.E. Mendenhall, 'Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law', *BA* 17 (1954), pp. 26-46; Norman K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth: Israelite Prophecy and International Relations in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

The argument for Israel as a source for democratic ideals has had a long history in America; see J.M. Sasson, 'On Choosing Models for Recreating Israelite Pre-Monarchic History', *JSOT* 21 (1981), pp. 3-24. The notion continues to be developed; see Daniel J. Elazar, 'Kinship and Consent in the Jewish Community: Patterns of Continuity in Jewish Communal Life', *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 14/4 (Fall 1974), pp. 63-79; *idem*, 'Covenant as the Basis of the Jewish Political Tradition', in *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and its Contemporary Uses* (ed. D.J. Elazar; Ramat Gan: Turtledove, 1981), pp. 21-56, and D.J. Elazar and Stuart A. Cohen, *The Jewish Polity: Jewish Political Organizations from Biblical Times to the Present* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

40. Durand, 'Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques', pp. 7-8.

the memory of their culture and institutions is well reflected in biblical lore. For Durand, Mari letters and biblical narratives shared the same sensibilities, including outrage at the abuse of hospitality, a morbid concern with blood vengeance, and interest in consecrating *betyls* as a covenantal act. But Durand goes two steps further. He proposes that behind the Nimrod of Genesis 10 may well the great Samsi-Addu, with his capitals Ekallātum and Šubat-Enlil recalled in the mysterious Rĕḥōbōṯ-ʿÎr and Resen. This particular issue is frankly not worth debating. Durand's other proposal, however, rises from a different matrix and may be more significant and, because it is now adopted by Charpin in a recent article in German (hence likely more accessible to biblical scholars) as well as by Charpin and Ziegler in their masterly book on the history of Mari; we may need to linger a bit on it.[41]

For reasons that cannot be pursued at this forum, the Mari team has created a veritable morality tale out of events that ended Mari's life.[42] History (as Jimmy Durante sang in 'The Day I Read a Book') has plot. At the fall of Samsi-Addu's empire, Zimri-Lim made ready alliances with other Amorite leaders, principally Hammurabi of Babylon. Their first enemy was Ešnunna, a power that regarded itself heir to Agade. A first war ended in a cold peace. But soon, another war broke out, this time instigated by Ešnunna's old nemesis, Elam. Elam, in the opinion of the *équipe*, was the *éminence grise* of the time. Its people were not Semites, its mores were distinctive and its leaders were arrogant and aggressive. The Amorite coalition foolishly participated in the humbling of Ešnunna, whetting Elam's appetite. Its ruler turned against Babylon and, seeking influence far to the West, plotted with Qaṭna, thus threatening Yarim-Lim of Aleppo. Elam's march was reversed, its defeat resulting from a 'holy war' mounted against her.[43] For some members of the Mari team, the memory of the trauma lasted and was recalled in Genesis: Chedorlaomer of Elam is Kudušuluš (Šulši-kudur) of Susa, Amraphel is Amud-pî-El of Qaṭna (never mind Shinar), and Ariyôk is Arriyuk, a minor player in the drama, yet a supporter of Elam.[44]

41. D. Charpin, '"Ein umherziehende Aramäer war mein Vater": Abraham im Lichte der Quellen aus Mari', in '*Abraham, unser Vater': Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln von Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (ed. Reinhard Gregor Kratz and Tilman Nagel; Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), pp. 40-52; Charpin and Ziegler, *Mari et le Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite*, pp. 226-27.

42. This is sharply drawn in D. Charpin and J.-M. Durand, 'La suzeraineté de l'empéreur (*sukkalmah*) d'Elam sur la Mésopotamie et le "nationalisme" amorrite', in *Mésopotamie et Elam: Actes de la XXXVI^ème^ Rencontre assyriologique internationale*, Gand, 10-14 juillet 1989 (ed. L. De Meyer and H. Gasche; Mesopotamian History and Environment, Occasional Publications, [IV]/I; Ghent: The University, 1991), pp. 59-66.

43. See Michaël Guichard, 'Les aspects religieux de la guerre à Mari', *RA* 93 (1999), pp. 27-48.

44. Durand, 'Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques', pp. 16-20. See also Charpin and Ziegler, *Mari et le Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite*, p. 226.

All of this is rather surprising, especially since it comes from eminent Assyriologists with remarkable flair for historical reconstruction, albeit without the necessary heavy investment in biblical research. I can object to a proposal that does not explore the role Genesis 14 plays within the saga of the patriarchs. I can lament the crafting of such an ambitious proposal out of fragments of history. I can puzzle over the conceit that the documentation we master as scholars is the key to solving other mysteries. But above all I worry lest such pronouncements, themselves delivered cautiously as opinions within vastly more consequential contributions, might nevertheless encourage resumption of the historicizing effort that so distorted the study of the Bible until a generation ago.

8. *Why now? Why again?*

You might still ask, 'Why now? Why again?' It's possible, of course, that Charpin, Durand, Fleming, and others have accurately gauged the memory of events behind Genesis 14 and have given us keys to understand early episodes in Israel's history. I leave it to you to judge. But it is also possible, as we have learned fifty years ago, that any reconstruction of Amorite culture will always bring with it a powerful urge to make linkage, not just with history as extracted from Mari letters buried in their own time, but also with biblical memories that continue to haunt us centuries into their formation. Still, if we are once more readying to chase that most elusive of Grails, the quest for the historical Abraham, for one I am glad that Mari is there to deliver the necessary clues.