SCRIPTURE ANALYSIS · BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Ancient Stones, Part 3

Archives & Everyday Documents

Translations, images and commentary for the artifacts on the Ancient Stones page

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About this study

This part covers the seven archives and documentary finds on the Ancient Stones page: the Ebla tablets, the Mari archive, the Nuzi tablets, the Amarna Letters, the Ugaritic tablets, the Murašû archive, the Elephantine temple petition, and the Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn tablet. Unlike royal monuments, these are working documents: letters, contracts, ration lists, myths copied for temple use, and petitions. Their value for biblical studies lies in what they show of daily life, law, religion and language in the world of the Hebrew Bible.

About the translations. Most of these archives run to thousands of tablets, so each entry gives a summary and, where a representative public-domain translation exists, a key document in full. Translations quoted at length are from G. A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* (1916), and A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (1923), both in the public domain. Passages marked "translation by the author of this study" are fresh renderings from the published text.

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27. The Ebla Tablets



Cast of an administrative tablet from the royal archive of Ebla (Museo d'Arte Orientale, Rome). Ebla scribes wrote in neat ruled columns of cases.

Image: Davide Mauro. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Royal archive of c. 17,000 tablets and fragments (about 2,000 largely complete tablets)
Museum	National Museum of Idlib and National Museum of Aleppo, Syria (condition since the civil war uncertain)
Date	c. 2400–2300 BC (Early Bronze IVA); the palace was destroyed c. 2300 BC
Provenance	Tell Mardikh, Syria, Royal Palace G; excavated by the Italian mission of the University of Rome "La Sapienza" under Paolo Matthiae; archive found 1974–1976
Language / script	Eblaite (an early East Semitic language) and Sumerian, cuneiform
Principal editions	*Archivi Reali di Ebla, Testi* (ARET, 1985–); Matthiae, *Ebla: An Empire Rediscovered* (1980); Archi, *Ebla and Its Archives* (2015)

What it is

Technical summary. The Ebla archive is the oldest large archive from Syria and the first evidence that third-millennium Syria had a literate urban culture comparable to Sumer. About 80 per cent of the texts are administrative, recording textiles, metals, livestock and agricultural produce. The rest include royal letters, the treaty between Ebla and Abarsal (one of the oldest known treaties), incantations and literary texts, and lexical lists. Among the lists are the bilingual Sumerian–Eblaite vocabularies, the earliest known bilingual dictionaries. The tablets were stored on wooden shelves in a palace archive room and were baked when the palace burned.

In plain terms. Ebla was a powerful Syrian kingdom around 2400 BC. When its palace was burned, its whole filing room of clay tablets was baked hard and preserved: accounts, letters, a treaty, and the world's first two-language dictionary.

The Ebla–Bible controversy

When the archive was first announced (1975–1976), the epigrapher Giovanni Pettinato reported readings that seemed to bear on Genesis. They included the names of the five Cities of the Plain (Gen 14), including Sodom and Gomorrah, in the same order; a divine element "Ya" in personal names, compared with YHWH; and names such as Ebrium, compared with Eber (Gen 10:21–25). These claims attracted wide publicity. Later study, especially by Alfonso Archi and the Italian team, showed that the cities of the plain do not appear, that "-ya" in names is a hypocoristic ending rather than a divine name, and that the king Ibrium has no connection with Eber. Pettinato himself withdrew several readings.

The lasting significance of Ebla for biblical studies is more general. It reveals an early West-Semitic-speaking world in Syria with a tradition of treaties, prophetic and cultic personnel, and personal-name patterns that anticipate later Amorite and Israelite onomastics.

Further reading

- Archi, Alfonso. *Ebla and Its Archives: Texts, History, and Society*. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 7. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.
- Matthiae, Paolo. *Ebla: An Empire Rediscovered*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980.
- Pettinato, Giovanni. *The Archives of Ebla: An Empire Inscribed in Clay*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1981.
- Biggs, Robert D. "The Ebla Tablets: An Interim Perspective." *Biblical Archaeologist* 43 (1980): 76–87.

28. Tablet from Mari



A tablet of Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, concerning the building of an ice-house at Terqa (Louvre AO 20161), c. 1780 BC.
Image: Unknown photographer. Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Palace archive of c. 20,000 clay tablets (letters, administrative and legal texts, ritual and prophetic texts)
Museum	Louvre, Paris; National Museum of Deir ez-Zor and Damascus; others
Date	c. 1810–1761 BC (reigns of Yasmaḫ-Addu and Zimri-Lim)
Provenance	Tell Hariri (ancient Mari), on the Middle Euphrates, Syria; excavated by André Parrot from 1933
Language / script	Akkadian (Old Babylonian with Amorite influence), cuneiform
Principal editions	*Archives Royales de Mari* (ARM, 1950–); Durand, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* (ARM 26/1, 1988); Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (2nd ed., 2019)

What it is

Technical summary. The archive of Zimri-Lim's palace is the richest documentation of the Amorite world of the early second millennium BC. It contains the correspondence of the king with his officials, provincial governors, vassals and fellow kings, including Hammurabi of Babylon, who destroyed Mari in 1761 BC. It describes tribal pastoral groups such as the Yaminites ("sons of the right hand/south") and Sim'alites, and their encampments and migrations. The archive also contains some fifty letters reporting oracles from prophets, the largest body of prophetic texts from the ancient Near East outside the Bible. These include the *āpilum* ("answerer"), the *muḫḫûm* ("ecstatic") and lay men and women who received dreams.

In plain terms. Mari's palace correspondence shows how an Amorite king ran his kingdom: tribes moving with their flocks, treaties sealed by killing a donkey, and prophets who brought the king messages from the gods and expected them passed on.

A representative document (summary)

The prophetic letters are known chiefly from modern copyrighted translations, so one is summarized here. In a typical letter (ARM 26 199), the official Sammetar reports to Zimri-Lim that an ecstatic of the god Dagan came to him with a message about the king's dealings with Ešnunna: the god warned against a treaty and promised to deliver the enemy into the king's hand. In letters of this kind, officials often send a lock of the prophet's hair and the hem of his garment with the report, so that the king's diviners can test whether the message is genuine.

Points of contact with the Hebrew Bible

- **Prophecy.** The Mari letters show that intermediaries delivered unsolicited divine messages to kings, often warnings or promises about war, and that their words were tested. The biblical parallels include Nathan and Gad at David's court, Elijah and Micaiah before Ahab, and the test of a prophet in Deut 18:21–22. The differences are as important: Mari oracles concern the king's interests and the god's temple, while the classical prophets of Israel indict king and people for injustice.
- **Covenant ritual.** At Mari, alliances were sealed by "killing a donkey foal" (*ḫayāram qaṭālum*). Compare the covenant "cut" with slaughtered animals in Gen 15:9–18 and Jer 34:18–20.
- **Tribal life.** The Yaminites (*DUMU.MEŠ-yamina*) and their pastoral migrations offer comparative data for patriarchal and tribal Israel. Their name is the linguistic equivalent of "Benjamin." Scholars agree there is no direct historical link.

Further reading

- Nissinen, Martti. *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*. 2nd ed. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019.
- Fleming, Daniel E. *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors: Mari and Early Collective Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Malamat, Abraham. *Mari and the Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1998.

29. The Nuzi Tablets



A Nuzi tablet recording a lawsuit over a field and the dimtu tower that stood on it.
Image: Daderot. Licence: CC0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Family and palace archives of several thousand tablets (c. 5,000 or more)
Museum	Semitic Museum, Harvard University; Oriental Institute (ISAC), Chicago; Iraq Museum, Baghdad
Date	c. 1450–1350 BC (Kingdom of Mittani)
Provenance	Yorgan Tepe (ancient Nuzi), near Kirkuk, Iraq; excavated 1925–1931 by the American Schools of Oriental Research, Harvard and the Iraq Museum (E. Chiera, R. H. Pfeiffer, R. F. S. Starr)
Language / script	Akkadian (Nuzi dialect, with Hurrian vocabulary), cuneiform
Principal editions	*Harvard Semitic Series* and *Excavations at Nuzi* volumes; Gadd, "Tablets from Kirkuk" (1926); *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians* (SCCNH, 1981–)

What it is

Technical summary. The Nuzi tablets document the private and public life of a provincial Hurrian town over about five generations. The best-known archive is that of the family of Teḫip-tilla. The tablets record unusual legal devices. In "sale-adoption" (*ṭuppi mārūti*), land was transferred by adopting the buyer as a son. In "sistership" adoption, a woman was adopted as a sister. There are marriage contracts in which a childless wife must supply a slave-woman to her husband, and wills in which possession of the household gods (*ilānū*) accompanies the principal inheritance.

In plain terms. Nuzi was an ordinary town whose families kept their contracts, wills, marriage agreements and court records. Some of these customs seemed to scholars to match stories in Genesis very closely.

The patriarchal-customs debate

From the 1930s to the 1960s, scholars such as C. H. Gordon and E. A. Speiser argued that Nuzi customs explained puzzling episodes in Genesis. Rachel's theft of Laban's household gods (Gen 31:19, 30–35) was explained as a claim to inheritance. The wife–sister episodes (Gen 12; 20; 26) were explained by Hurrian "sistership" status. Sarah's giving of Hagar (Gen 16:1–4) was compared with marriage contracts requiring a barren wife to provide a slave-woman. Eliezer as Abraham's heir (Gen 15:2–3) was linked to adoption of a servant. The parallels were taken as evidence that the patriarchal narratives preserve authentic second-millennium custom.

Critical reassessments by T. L. Thompson (*The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 1974), J. Van Seters (*Abraham in History and Tradition*, 1975) and M. J. Selman (1980) showed that many of the alleged parallels rested on misreadings. Sistership adoption, for example, has nothing to do with wife–sister deception. Other parallels proved to be widespread in time and place rather than distinctive of Nuzi. A few close parallels remain widely accepted, notably the provision of a slave-wife by a childless wife and the legal weight of household gods. Their value for dating the patriarchs is now generally regarded as limited.

Further reading

- Morrison, M. A., and D. I. Owen, eds. *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981–.
- Selman, Martin J. "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age." In *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman, 93–138. Leicester: InterVarsity, 1980.
- Thompson, Thomas L. *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*. BZAW 133. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974.
- Speiser, E. A. *Genesis*. Anchor Bible 1. Garden City: Doubleday, 1964.

30. The Amarna Letters



A letter from Abdi-Ḫeba, ruler of Jerusalem, to the Egyptian king, from the Amarna archive (Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin).

Image: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg). Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Archive of 382 clay tablets (about 350 letters, plus school texts and myths)
Museum	Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin; British Museum; Egyptian Museum, Cairo; Louvre; others
Date	c. 1360–1332 BC (reigns of Amenhotep III, Akhenaten and briefly Tutankhamun)
Provenance	Tell el-Amarna (ancient Akhetaten), Egypt; found by local villagers in 1887
Language / script	Akkadian (the diplomatic lingua franca), often with Canaanite grammar and glosses; cuneiform
Principal editions	Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln* (1915); Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (1992); Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence* (2015)

What it is

Technical summary. The Amarna tablets are the foreign-office correspondence of the pharaohs. One group consists of letters between Egypt and the great powers (Babylon, Assyria, Mittani, Ḫatti, Alašiya), the "brother" kings. The larger group consists of letters from Egypt's vassal rulers in Canaan and Syria. These include Rib-Hadda of Byblos, Lab'ayu of Shechem, the kings of Gezer, Lachish, Ashkelon and Hazor, and six letters (EA 285–290) from Abdi-Ḫeba of Jerusalem. The vassals complain of one another and of the *ʿapiru* (Akkadian *ḫabiru*), uprooted groups outside the social order who served as mercenaries or raiders.

In plain terms. These are the pharaoh's letters from his "mayors" in Canaan about 1350 BC. The king of Jerusalem writes again and again that the land is being lost to raiders and begs Egypt to send troops.

The text: a letter of Abdi-Ḫeba of Jerusalem (EA 286, complete as preserved)

Translation of G. A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* (1916), pp. 345–346, public domain. Barton spells the name "Ebed-Hepa."

> To the king, my lord, speak, saying, Ebed-Hepa, thy servant — at the feet of my lord, the king, seven times and seven times I prostrate myself. What have I done to the king, my lord? They slander and misrepresent me before the king, my lord, [saying]: Ebed-Hepa is disloyal to the king, his lord. Behold I — neither my father nor my mother set me in this place; the arm of the mighty king caused me to enter into the house of my father. Why should I commit rebellion against the king, my lord? As long as the king, my lord, lives I will say unto the governor of the king, my lord: "Why dost thou love the Habiri and hate the prefects?" But thus he misrepresents me before the king, my lord. Now I say, "Lost are the lands of the king, my lord." So he misrepresents me to the king, my lord. But let the king, my lord, know (that) after the king, my lord, set guards, Ienhamu took them all … Egypt of the king, my lord; [there are no] guards there. Then may the king care for his land! May the king care for his land! Separated are all the lands from the king. Ilimilku has destroyed all the country of the king; so may the king, my lord, care for his land! I say: "I will enter the presence of the king, my lord, and I will behold the eye of the king, my lord," but the enemy is more mighty than I, and I am not able to enter into the presence of the king, my lord. So may it seem right to the king … may he send guards, and I will enter in and will behold the eyes of the king, my lord! And so long as the king, my lord, lives, so long as the governors are withdrawn, I will say: "Perished are the lands of the king." Thou dost not hearken to me! All the prefects have perished; there is left no prefect to the king, my lord! May the king turn his face toward mercenaries, so that there may come forth mercenaries of the king, my lord. There are no lands left to the king, my lord. The Habiri plunder all the countries of the king. If there are mercenaries in this year, then there will be left countries of the king, my lord. If there are no mercenaries, the countries of the king will be lost.
>
> Unto the scribe of the king, my lord, saying: "Ebed-Hepa, thy servant. Take beautiful words to the king, my lord! Lost are all the lands of the king, my lord."

Notes on modern readings

- **Abdi-Ḫeba**, not Ebed-Hepa, is the standard modern reading. The name means "servant of Ḫebat," a Hurrian goddess.
- Barton's **"prefects"** are the local rulers (*ḫazannu*, "mayors"). His **"governor"** is the Egyptian commissioner (*rābiṣu*). His **"mercenaries"** are the Egyptian archer troops (*ṣābē piṭāti*).
- **"Neither my father nor my mother set me in this place"** is a formula of loyalty: Abdi-Ḫeba holds his throne by the pharaoh's appointment, not by inheritance.

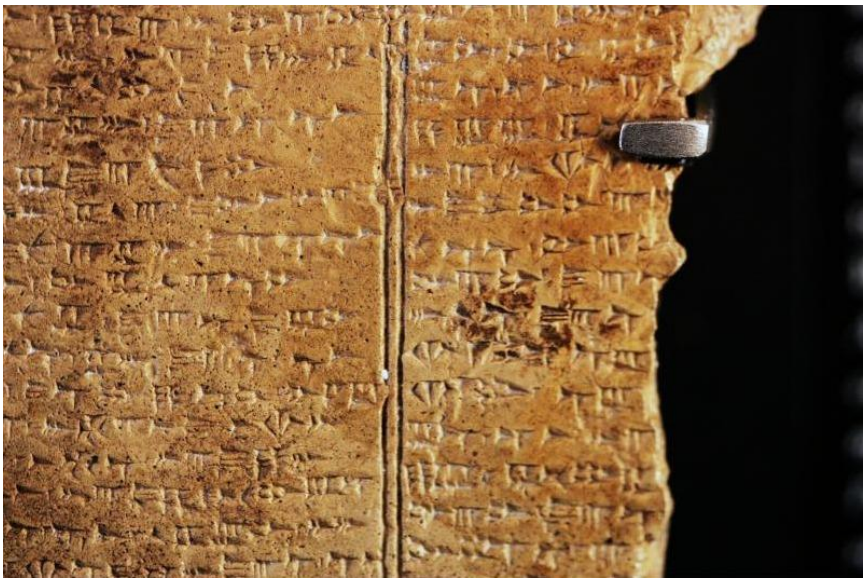
Points of contact with the Hebrew Bible

- **Jerusalem before David.** The letters prove that Jerusalem (*Urusalim*) was a fortified city-state ruled by a king in the 14th century BC, long before David's capture of the Jebusite city (2 Sam 5:6–9).
- **ʿApiru and Hebrews.** The *ḫabiru/ʿapiru* have been compared with the "Hebrews" (*ʿibrîm*) since the 1880s. Most scholars now regard *ʿapiru* as a social designation for displaced people found across the Near East from the 19th to the 12th century BC, not an ethnic name. Some biblical uses of "Hebrew" (e.g., 1 Sam 13:3, 19; 14:21) may preserve a similar social sense.
- **The world of Judges.** The fragmented city-states, their feuds, and Egyptian overlordship give the background against which Israel emerged in Canaan.

Further reading

- Moran, William L. *The Amarna Letters*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Rainey, Anson F. *The El-Amarna Correspondence*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2015.
- Na'aman, Nadav. "The Contribution of the Amarna Letters to the Debate on Jerusalem's Political Position in the Tenth Century B.C.E." *BASOR* 304 (1996): 17–27.

31. The Ugaritic Tablets



Detail of a Ugaritic tablet of the Baal Cycle (the death of Baal), alphabetic cuneiform; Louvre AO 16641 + AO 16642.
Image: Rama. Licence: CC BY-SA 2.0 FR. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Several thousand tablets in Ugaritic, Akkadian, Hurrian, Hittite and other languages, including the Baal Cycle, Aqhat and Kirta epics
Museum	National Museum of Damascus and Aleppo; Louvre, Paris
Date	c. 1400–1185 BC (most texts 13th century BC; the city was destroyed c. 1185 BC)
Provenance	Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) and Ras Ibn Hani, Syria; discovered 1928, excavated by Claude F.-A. Schaeffer from 1929
Language / script	Ugaritic (Northwest Semitic), in a 30-sign alphabetic cuneiform script; also Akkadian syllabic cuneiform
Principal editions	Dietrich, Loretz & Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit* (KTU³, 2013); Smith & Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle* (1994, 2009)

What it is

Technical summary. The Ugaritic texts are the most important discovery for the study of Canaanite religion and of biblical Hebrew poetry. The Baal Cycle (KTU 1.1–1.6) narrates the storm-god Baal's battle with Yamm (Sea), the building of his palace, and his death at the hands of Mot (Death) and return to life. The epics of Kirta and Aqhat deal with kingship, heirs and justice for the widow and orphan. The pantheon includes El, the aged father of the gods, Athirat (Asherah), Baal, Anat and Astarte, who appear in the Hebrew Bible as names or as subjects of polemic.

In plain terms. Ugarit's scribes wrote down the myths of the Canaanite gods that the Bible's prophets argued against. They wrote them in a language very close to Hebrew and in a poetic style that sounds remarkably like the Psalms.

Key excerpt: the defeat of Litan (KTU 1.5 i 1–3)

Translation by the author of this study from the Ugaritic text, with the biblical parallel set beside it.

> When you struck Līt̄ānu, the fleeing serpent,
> finished off the twisting serpent,
> the tyrant with seven heads …

Compare Isa 27:1, where the LORD will punish Leviathan, called in Hebrew "the fleeing serpent" and "the twisting serpent" (literal glosses). The Hebrew phrases (*nāḥāš bāriaḥ*, *nāḥāš ʿăqallātôn*) correspond word for word to the Ugaritic (*bṯn brḥ*, *bṯn ʿqltn*).

Points of contact with the Hebrew Bible

- **Language and poetry.** Ugaritic has transformed the understanding of Hebrew vocabulary, grammar and poetic parallelism. M. Dahood's Anchor Bible *Psalms* (1966–1970) applied it maximally; later scholarship is more cautious.
- **Divine titles.** Baal is called *rkb ʿrpt*, "rider of the clouds," the title given to the LORD in Ps 68:4 (*rōḵēḇ bāʿărāḇôt*; cf. Deut 33:26; Ps 104:3; Isa 19:1). El is "father of years" and presides over a divine council of "the sons of El" (compare Ps 82:1, 6; Deut 32:8 in 4QDeut^{j} and the LXX).
- **Sea and dragon.** Baal's victory over Yamm and the seven-headed serpent stands behind biblical images of the LORD subduing the sea and its monsters (Ps 74:13–14; 89:9–10; Job 26:12–13). Ps 74:14 speaks of the "heads" of Leviathan.
- **Psalm 29** has often been described, since H. L. Ginsberg (1935), as an adapted Canaanite hymn to the storm-god. The "voice" of the LORD over the waters echoes Baal's thunder.

Further reading

- Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Smith, Mark S., and Wayne T. Pitard. *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994, 2009.
- Day, John. *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*. JSOTSup 265. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.
- Pardee, Dennis. *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*. Atlanta: SBL, 2002.

32. The Murašû Archive



An Achaemenid-period Babylonian business tablet of the same type as the Murašû documents (Metropolitan Museum of Art; not from the Murašû archive itself).

Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Licence: CC0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Business archive of c. 730 clay tablets of a Nippur family firm
Museum	Penn Museum, Philadelphia; Istanbul Archaeology Museums
Date	454–404 BC (reigns of Artaxerxes I and Darius II)
Provenance	Nippur, Iraq; excavated by the University of Pennsylvania expedition (J. H. Haynes) in 1893
Language / script	Akkadian (Late Babylonian), cuneiform, with Aramaic dockets
Principal editions	Hilprecht & Clay, *Business Documents of Murashû Sons of Nippur* (BE 9, 1898; BE 10, 1904); Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire* (1985)

What it is

Technical summary. The archive documents three generations of the Murašû family, agents who managed land held under the Persian *ḫaṭru* system. In that system crown land was allotted to soldiers and dependants in return for military service and taxes. The Murašûs leased and sub-leased these allotments, advanced silver and seed, collected rents and taxes, and handled irrigation rights. The tablets name more than two thousand individuals, of many ethnic backgrounds.

In plain terms. It is the filing cabinet of a family business in Persian-era Babylonia that rented out farmland and collected taxes. Among its clients were Jews descended from the exiles.

Points of contact with the Hebrew Bible

- **The Judean diaspora.** Several dozen individuals in the archive bear Yahwistic names, such as Ya-a-ḫu-ú-na-ta-nu (Jonathan), Ḫa-na-ni-ia-a-ma (Hananiah) and Ga-da-lia-a-ma (Gedaliah) (Coogan 1976). They appear as contracting parties, witnesses and officials on equal terms with Babylonians. The archive shows that by the 5th century many Judeans in Babylonia were settled, economically integrated landholders, which helps explain why many did not return under Cyrus (Ezra 1–2; Jer 29:4–7).
- **The canal Chebar.** The *nār Kabari*, "Kabaru canal," near Nippur appears in the archive. It is generally identified with the river Chebar beside which Ezekiel and the exiles lived (Ezek 1:1, 3; 3:15).
- The archive has since been complemented by the **Al-Yāḫūdu tablets** ("Judah-town"), published in 2014, which document a village of Judean exiles from 572 to 477 BC.

Further reading

- Stolper, Matthew W. *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašû Archive, the Murašû Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*. Leiden: NINO, 1985.
- Coogan, Michael D. *West Semitic Personal Names in the Murašû Documents*. HSM 7. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976.
- Pearce, Laurie E., and Cornelia Wunsch. *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. CUSAS 28. Bethesda: CDL Press, 2014.
- Hilprecht, H. V., and A. T. Clay. *Business Documents of Murashû Sons of Nippur*. Philadelphia, 1898. Internet Archive

33. The Elephantine Temple Petition



The petition of Yedaniah and the priests of Elephantine to Bagavahya, governor of Judah, 407 BC (Aramaic papyrus, Berlin).

Image: Photographer unknown. Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Papyrus letter, two drafts (TAD A4.7 and A4.8 = Cowley nos. 30 and 31)
Museum	Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin (A4.7 is P. 13495)
Date	20 Marḥešwan, year 17 of Darius II (late November 407 BC)
Provenance	Elephantine Island (ancient Yeb), Aswan, Egypt; excavated by the German expedition of O. Rubensohn, 1906–1908
Language / script	Imperial Aramaic, Aramaic square script
Principal editions	Sachau (1907, 1911); Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (1923), no. 30; Porten & Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (TAD), vol. 1 (1986), A4.7

What it is

Technical summary. Elephantine was the home of a Jewish military colony in the service of Persia. It had its own temple of YHW (*Yahô*), founded before Cambyses' conquest of Egypt (525 BC). In 410 BC, during the absence of the satrap Arshama, priests of the ram-god Khnum, with the local commander Vidranga, had the temple destroyed. Three years later the community's leaders petitioned the Persian governor of Judah, Bagavahya (Bigvai), for authorization to rebuild. A memorandum from Bagavahya and Delaiah, son of Sanballat (Cowley 32), approved the rebuilding with meal-offerings and incense, pointedly omitting animal sacrifice.

In plain terms. A Jewish garrison in southern Egypt had its own temple to the God of Israel. When local Egyptian priests had it destroyed, the community wrote to the Persian governor in Jerusalem asking permission to rebuild. This is their letter.

The text (complete)

Translation of A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), no. 30, pp. 113–114, public domain. Cowley's line numbers are given in parentheses.

(1) To our lord Bigvai, governor of Judaea, your servants Yedoniah and his colleagues, the priests who are in Yeb the fortress. The health (2) of your lordship may the God of Heaven seek after exceedingly at all times, and give you favour before Darius the king (3) and the princes of the palace more than now a thousand times, and may he grant you long life, and may you be happy and prosperous at all times.

(4) Now your servant Yedoniah and his colleagues depose as follows: In the month of Tammuz in the 14th year of Darius the king, when Arsames (5) departed and went to the king, the priests of the god Khnub, who is in the fortress of Yeb, (were) in league with Waidrang who was governor here, (6) saying: The temple of Ya'u the God, which is in the fortress of Yeb let them remove from there. Then that Waidrang, (7) the reprobate, sent a letter to his son Nephayan who was commander of the garrison in the fortress of Syene saying: The temple which is in Yeb (8) the fortress let them destroy. Then Nephayan led out the Egyptians with the other forces. They came to the fortress of Yeb with their weapons, (9) they entered that temple, they destroyed it to the ground, and the pillars of stone which were there they broke. Also it happened, 5 gate-ways (10) of stone, built with hewn blocks of stone, which were in that temple they destroyed, and their doors they lifted off (?), and the hinges (11) of those doors were bronze, and the roof of cedar wood, all of it with the rest of the furniture and other things which were there, (12) all of it they burnt with fire, and the basons of gold and silver and everything that was in that temple, all of it, they took (13) and made their own.

Already in the days of the kings of Egypt our fathers had built that temple in the fortress of Yeb, and when Cambyses came into Egypt (14) he found that temple built, and the temples of the gods of Egypt all of them they overthrew, but no one did any harm to that temple. (15) When this was done, we with our wives and our children put on sack-cloth and fasted and prayed to Ya'u the Lord of Heaven, (16) who let us see (our desire) upon that Waidrang. The dogs tore off the anklet from his legs, and all the riches he had gained were destroyed, and all the men (17) who had sought to do evil to that temple, all of them, were killed and we saw (our desire) upon them.

Also before this, at the time when this evil (18) was done to us, we sent a letter to your lordship and to Johanan the high priest and his colleagues the priests who are in Jerusalem, and to Ostanes the brother (19) of 'Anani, and the nobles of the Jews. They have not sent any letter to us. Also since the month of Tammuz in the 14th year of Darius the king (20) till this day we wear sack-cloth and fast. Our wives are made widow-like, we do not anoint ourselves with oil (21) and we drink no wine. Also from that (time) till (the present) day in the 17th year of Darius the king, neither meal-offering, incense, nor sacrifice (22) do they offer in that temple.

Now your servants Yedoniah and his colleagues and the Jews, all of them inhabitants of Yeb, say as follows: (23) If it seem good to your lordship, take thought for that temple to build (it), since they do not allow us to build it. Look upon your (24) well-wishers and friends who are here in Egypt, (and) let a letter be sent from you to them concerning the temple of the God Ya'u (25) to build it in the fortress of Yeb as it was built before, and they shall offer the meal-offering and incense and sacrifice (26) on the altar of the God Ya'u on your behalf, and we will pray for you at all times, we, our wives, our children, and the Jews, (27) all who are here, if they do so that that temple be re-built, and it shall be a merit to you before Ya'u the God of (28) Heaven more than a man who offers to him sacrifice and burnt-offerings worth as much as the sum of a thousand talents. As to gold, about this (29) we have sent (and) given instructions. Also the whole matter we have set forth in a letter in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah the sons of Sanballat governor of Samaria. (30) Also of

all this which was done to us Arsames knew nothing. On the 20th of Marheshwan the 17th year of Darius the king.

Notes on modern readings

- **Names.** Modern editions (Porten & Yardeni) give **Bagavahya** (Cowley's Bigvai), **Yedaniah** (Yedoniah), **Vidranga** (Waidrang), **Naphaina** (Nephayan), **Arshama** (Arsames) and **YHW** (Ya'u). The god of Elephantine is **Khnum** (Cowley's Khnub).
- **Line 16.** "The dogs tore off the anklet from his legs" is understood as a description of Vidranga's humiliation or death, though the precise sense is debated.
- **Dates.** Tammuz, year 14 of Darius II is July 410 BC. 20 Marḥešwan, year 17 is 25 November 407 BC.

Points of contact with the Hebrew Bible

- **Persons named in Nehemiah.** Johanan the high priest (Neh 12:22–23) and Sanballat, governor of Samaria (Neh 2:10, 19; 4:1–2), are mentioned. The letter therefore fixes Nehemiah's activity under Artaxerxes I, a generation before 407 BC.
- **Centralization of worship.** A Jewish temple with animal sacrifice outside Jerusalem stands in tension with Deuteronomy 12. The Jerusalem priests' silence, and the approval only of meal-offerings and incense in the reply (Cowley 32), may reflect that tension.
- **Religion of the colony.** Other Elephantine papyri show the community swearing by Anat-Yahu and Ḥerem-Bethel alongside YHW. They are invaluable evidence for Judaism outside Judah. The so-called Passover Letter (Cowley 21, 419 BC) shows Persian authority regulating the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Further reading

- Porten, Bezalel, and Ada Yardeni. *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986.
- Porten, Bezalel. *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.
- Cowley, A. *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1923. Internet Archive
- Rohrmoser, Angela. *Götter, Tempel und Kult der Judäo-Aramäer von Elephantine*. AOAT 396. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014.

34. The Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn Tablet (“Nebo-Sarsekim”)



Administrative tablet recording a gold delivery by Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn, chief eunuch of Nebuchadnezzar II (British Museum BM 114789).

Image: Zunkir. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons, file page.

Object	Small clay administrative tablet (receipt)
Museum	British Museum, BM 114789
Date	Year 10 of Nebuchadnezzar II (595 BC)
Provenance	Probably Sippar (British Museum Sippar collection)
Language / script	Akkadian (Neo-Babylonian), cuneiform
Principal editions	Jursa, “Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn, *rab ša-rēši*, und ‘Nebusarsekim’ (Jer. 39:3),” *NABU* 2008/5

What it is

Technical summary. The tablet is a temple receipt for gold sent to the Esagil temple by Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn, who held the office of *rab ša-rēši*, “chief eunuch,” at Nebuchadnezzar’s court. In 2007 Michael Jursa identified the name and title with “Nebo-sarsekim the Rab-saris” among the Babylonian officers who sat in the Middle Gate of Jerusalem after its capture in 586 BC (Jer 39:3).

In plain terms. A routine receipt from a Babylonian temple names a court official who appears in the book of Jeremiah: one of the Babylonian officers present when Jerusalem fell.

The text (complete)

Translation by the author of this study, following Jursa’s edition.

> (Regarding) 1½ minas of gold, the property of Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn, the chief eunuch, which he sent by the hand of Arad-Bānītu the eunuch to Esagil: Arad-Bānītu has delivered it to Esagil. In the

presence of Bēl-usāti, son of Alpāya, the royal bodyguard, (and) Nādin, son of Marduk-zēru-ibni. Month of Šabāṭu, day 18, year 10 of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

Points of contact with the Hebrew Bible

- **Jeremiah 39:3.** The Hebrew lists Nergal-sharezer, Samgar-nebu, Sarsechim the Rab-saris, Nergal-sharezer the Rab-mag, and others. If the words are divided as "Samgar, Nebo-sarsekim the Rab-saris," the name and title match the tablet exactly (*Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn rab ša-rēši*). The tablet dates eleven years before the fall of Jerusalem, so the same man could easily have been in office in 586 BC.
- **Text-critical note.** The MT divides the words as *smgr-nbw śr-skym rb-srys* ("Samgar-nebo, Sarsechim the Rab-saris"). The LXX (Jer 46:3 in LXX numbering) transmits the names in garbled and divergent forms. The tablet supports reading *nbw-śr-skym* as a single name, a reading already proposed on philological grounds before 2007.

Further reading

- Jursa, Michael. "Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn, rab ša-rēši, und 'Nebusarsekim' (Jer. 39:3)." *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 2008/5.
- Mykytiuk, Lawrence J. "Archaeology Confirms 50 Real People in the Bible." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 40.2 (2014). Bible History Daily list