Cogan, Mordechai

The Raging Torrent: Historical Inscriptions from Assyria and Babylonia Relating to Ancient Israel


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For anyone interested in the history of the ancient Levant in general and biblical, preexilic Israel in particular, during the Iron Age, the Mesopotamian (Assyrian and Babylonian) inscriptions provide one of the most important, if not the primary, source for the reconstructing this historical framework of this period. In fact, according to some views (the so-called “minimalists”), to a large extent, the early history of Israel can only be reconstructed based on these sources, since according to these views the biblical text does not provide credible historical information regarding the Iron Age (First Temple period). For scholars who believe that there is credible historical information on the preexilic period, nevertheless, the Mesopotamian documents, on the one hand, provide important corroboration and/or expansion regarding certain events mentioned in the Bible, while shedding light on other aspects that are not broached in the biblical text. Thus, since the earliest decipherment of cuneiform, the inscriptions from Mesopotamia have served as a mainstay of all research on preexilic Israel.

The volume under review is an impressive attempt to gather into one accessible volume all the relevant Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions that relate to early Israel. Based on a handbook for students at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, subsequently published in a Hebrew edition (M. Cogan, Historical Texts...
from Assyrian and Babylonia: 9th–6th Centuries BCE [Hebrew] [Biblical Encyclopedia Library 19; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2003], this is an updated an expanded edition that offers students and scholars who do not read Hebrew a very valuable and handy tool for their study and research. This volume is published by Carta publishers in Jerusalem, in the series Carta Handbooks, in which recently another excellent volume has appeared, a collection of Hebrew and cognate inscriptions dating to the Iron Age (S. Ahituv, Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period [Biblical Encyclopedia Library 21; Jerusalem: Carta, 2008]).

Following a preface discussing the need and use of such a volume, the author, in his introduction, explains and defines the various types of sources that are included in the volume (such as Assyrian royal inscriptions and Babylonian chronicles), providing a succinct and important overview on this literature. Following the introduction, the volume is organized into chapters in the following order, providing translations and brief discussions of the inscriptions from the following kings and literary genres: (1) Shalmaneser III; (2) Adad-nerari III; (3) Shalmaneser V; (4) Tiglath-pileser III; (5) Sargon II; (6) Sennacherib; (7) Esarhaddon; (8) Ashurbanipal; (9) The Assyrian Eponym Chronicle; (10) Neo-Babylonian Chronicles; (11) Nebuchadnezzar II; (12) Cyrus II, King of Persia. In addition there is an appendix in which the Assyrian royal inscriptions from Israel are discussed, followed by a glossary, chronological tables, and indices.

The author’s expertise in the field of biblical history in general and Mesopotamian-Levantine contacts specifically gives him all the qualifications to produce an excellent volume. The translations are clear, accessible to people without prior knowledge of Assyriology, and include succinct discussions (save for minor gaps, with up-to-date bibliography) on the various issues that relate to the various inscriptions. The author’s proficiency in Assyriology gives him all the necessary tools for providing these translations and for assessing the viewpoints of various scholars on the issues at hand. While similar collections of inscriptions from the ancient Near East exist (such as Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament [edited by Pritchard; by now, many translations are outdated]) and The Context of Scripture [edited by Hallo and Younger, including a very wide collection of inscriptions in three large volumes), the combination of having just about all the relevant texts in one handy volume, along with a very focused discussion, turns this volume into such a handy tool for various levels of students and scholars dealing with the Iron Age Levant, biblical Israel, and other related topics.

Perhaps the only texts that I think should be added are the administrative texts (referred to briefly on 209) and letters from Mesopotamia that provide fascinating information on the Judean exiles in Babylon.

Despite these very minor comments, one cannot but praise this extremely handy volume, one that could definitely qualify as a book that should be in every library dealing with Bible, ancient Near East, and cognate studies. It is an extremely useful resource for teaching at different levels, particularly for students who do not have a sufficient control of Akkadian, to serve as a source book on various topics covered in courses from introductory through advanced studies. In addition, it is also of importance as a handy tool for scholars needing quick reference to the relevant Iron Age Mesopotamian texts—without having to handle large and cumbersome volumes of general collections of inscriptions. The author is to be commended for this excellent volume!