Arnold, Bill T.

*Who Were the Babylonians?*

Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies 10


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The scholarship of Bill Arnold is replete with both ancient Near Eastern and biblical titles. He took his Ph.D. at Hebrew Union College, writing a dissertation on the Kuyunjik Collection. His dissertation, entitled “Babylonian Letters from the Kuyunjik Collection: Seventh Century Uruk in Light of New Epistolary Evidence,” argues for a distinctive formula representative in letters to the Sargonid monarchs. Arnold has written articles in diverse journals on material multifarious as Ugaritic/Psalmody parallels to Jeremianic studies. Likewise, he has authored titles such as *Encountering the Book of Genesis,* and *1 and 2 Samuel: NIV Application Commentary.* He has co-authored works such as *Readings from the Ancient Near East* and the well written *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax.* Currently he is a professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Asbury Theological Seminary.

The genius of this work is that it fills a niche that has otherwise been unfilled. Currently there are a great many works that can be assigned to one’s students in order to provide an introduction to various people groups of the ancient Near East. However, an introduction on a particular people group that is short and easily digestible has not been available for some time. On an ancillary note, I hope that the Society of Biblical Literature will be bringing other “people groups” (e.g., Assyrians, Egyptians, Hittites) to this series [editor’s note: this is indeed the case]. This work has six well-illustrated chapters with an
unstintingly well-done annotated bibliography for further reading. Unfortunately, the book has endnotes, which may be a bit distracting at times (although footnotes are my personal preference, oftentimes an editor will specify a specific type of layout). Helpfully, the book has an index of biblical references, modern authorities, and subjects. I note that all subject material is presented in a space of no more than 110 pages. This length is manageable enough for the college-level student but substantial enough to give an in-depth introduction.

Presentation of material in this work consists of a brief introduction followed by an examination of Babylonia in subsequent time periods. Attentively, the author notes that the periodization used in identifying archaeological remains in Israel (e.g., Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, Iron Age) are often not helpful for Mesopotamia. Instead, Babylonia is presented to the reader along the lines of political developments focusing on dynasties rather than specific time periods. The reader is given a cursory overview of Babylonia’s geography and ethnicity. Arnold argues that ethnically the Babylonians at first were largely influenced by the Amorites. He argues, “In a sense, Babylonian civilization proper began in the early second millennium B.C.E., when the Amorite city-states of various sizes slowly supplanted the Sumero-Akkadian culture of the previous millennium” (7). Briefly, Arnold surveys Hammurapi’s rise and wane under the Amorites and Hittites, respectively. Further, Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II are given brief examinations, setting the stage for further investigation in the book.

Arnold argues quite convincingly that both historians and biblical studies scholars should give consideration to the Babylonians. The first consideration that Arnold cites is the literary relationship between biblical and Babylonian cosmogonies. He postulates that Enūma Eliš and Gen 1–2 provide a fertile ground for comparison. Likewise, he argues that Gen 6–9, the eleventh tablet of Gilgamesh, and Atrahasis are worthy of consideration. Second, it is argued that the history of Babylonia plays a significant role in both the biblical text and world history. A study of Babylonia would help introduce readers to international names such as Merodach-baladan, Nebuchadnezzar, and Nebuzaradan. While the biblical text does preserve some of these names, they are at best vague in their recollections. A study of Babylonian history provides the reader with a valuable interface to work from when approaching the biblical text. Ideological and theological grounds are the third reason that Arnold suggests for the study of Babylonia. Students of the Hebrew Bible are often given a negative picture of Babylonia due to the trenchant criticisms of the prophets. By the time of classical prophecy the Hebrew prophets had institutionalized “Babylon” as an enemy of Yahweh. This ingrained hatred became so great that the fall of the king of Babylon (Isa 14) was idealized as a time for rejoicing. Later, in John’s Apocalypse, Babylon is picture as the archenemy of God. While it has been argued that one cannot and should not synthesize a religion of Babylonia (cf. Oppenheim, Ancient
Mesopotamia, 172–83), others have done so very profitably (cf. Jacobsen, Treasures of Darkness, 20–21). For those interested in biblical studies, especially in the Hebrew Bible, to neglect the religious ideology of the Babylonians is perilous at best.

A historical survey always must have a good starting point, and Arnold’s investigation begins in the third millennium B.C.E. Like Kramer, Arnold commences historical investigation with the Sumerians due to their antecedent role with the Babylonians. More specifically, the author situates initial Babylonian cultural influences in the Late Uruk period with the advent of writing. A brief history is given concerning the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900–2350 B.C.E.). In this overview elements such as the Sumerian King List, early city-states, and political ideology are discussed. Arnold does an excellent job of situating lugal, ukkin, en, and ensi in the political sphere. The Epic of Gilgamesh is given a cursory exploration due to its historical implications.

The Old Akkadian period provides for Arnold the impetus for actually separating the Sumerians from the Semitic and Akkadian people groups. It is postulated that, while we cannot place Semitic people groups in regal positions in the north of Babylonia, we can nonetheless point to Semitic names of rulers. Arnold wisely contends that, although this does not prove “ethnic identification,” it does show evidence of Semitic speakers in both Sumeria and Babylonia. The principal player in the Old Akkadian period is Sargon I. This monarch became the typical idealized archmonarch reflecting a time of realized strength. Sargon, in essence, expanded the borders of his nation state to the point that he changed his name to LUGAL KIŠ “King of the Land/World.” The author systematically surveys the elements that helped solidify the Old Akkadian period. Language, religion, and military accomplishments are briefly surveyed. We are told of Naram-Sin’s downfall due to internal disruption, opposition from the Elamites, and the arrival of the Gutians from the Zagros. Consequently, the might that was the Sargonic Empire came to a close with his grandson Naram-Sin. Soon afterwards, we are told that Akkad lost all political importance after the collapse of the Old Akkadian Dynasty. Literarily, the highlight of the Old Akkadian period was the advent of royal inscriptions. It is through this medium that Sargonic kings propagated the royal ideology of conquest. Chapter 2 concludes with a survey of the Neo-Sumerian period and the subsequent renaissance that it brought forth. Particularly interesting is the literary fluorescence that took place under Shulgi. Arnold adroitly covers the institution of the Neo-Sumerian law code. A brief note concerning the city of Babylon concludes this chapter.

Textually, the highlight of the Babylonian Empire appears to have been the Old Babylonian period (2003–1595 B.C.E.). Arnold rightly argues that it is in this period in which we have the most diverse amount of epigraphic materials. It is from these materials (and archaeological remains) that we can construct the history of this time period. The
first five Babylonian rulers in this period were quite unimportant. The fifth ruler, Hammurapi, is surely one of the most notable names in antiquity. Arnold argues that early in his reign Hammurapi took control of several cities—albeit with the help of a larger coalition. Later in his reign Hammurapi is said to have established justice (mīšarum) in his land.

Arnold offers a detailed description of Hammurapi’s statutes, and he is to be commended for giving enough information to whet the reader’s curiosity yet not weigh one down in technicalities. A brief description of the tripartite structure of the code is given, and the three groups of litigants are adduced. Most interesting is Arnold’s question of “What precisely is the Code of Hammurapi?” While Arnold notes that many scholars use the word “Code” the document is not one precisely. Rather, the Code is more likely a type of royal ideology or propaganda. The author also notes that the Code could also be a type of anthology of specific royal pronouncements on individual cases. It is concluded that Hammurapi’s Code shares much in common with the Neo-Sumerian, Isin-Larsa, and biblical codes.

Nippur, we are told, has provided scholars with a multitude of mathematic and scientific texts. Arnold briefly covers the advances made by the Babylonians during this period, specifically the decimal and sexagesimal systems. Likewise, he mentions the Venus Tablets and their usefulness for dating Ammi-saduq’s accession year. The chapter is concluded with an excursus on the “religion” of Babylonia. Arnold explores the scholastic endeavors undertaken by Jacobsen as well as Oppenheim. The reader is also given a brief survey of the Babylonian pantheon.

The Middle Babylonian period (1595-1155 B.C.E.) is the subject of the fourth chapter. This period saw the fall of the Old Babylonian Dynasty and the rise of the Kassite Dynasty. Arnold sketches the prominent people groups of this period. Accordingly, we find brief informative narration on the Hittites, Sealand Dynasty, and Kassites. As would be expected, the bulk of informative material deals with the enigmatic rise and rule of the Kassites. The author rightly points out that the paucity of materials concerning the Kassites hampers us from reconstructing their political history. Despite the difficulties associated with reconstructing the Kassite Dynasty, Arnold does point out that for over four hundred years they brought political stability to southern Mesopotamia. The end of the Bronze Age in the ancient Near East saw the downfall not only of Kassites but also Hittites, Mycenaean Greece, and Cyprus. Egypt lost much of its holding in Syria-Palestine, all of which caused a massive population shift in the Levant.

The political stability of the Kassite Dynasty combined with a centralized administration led to both social stability as well as a blossoming age of internationalism. This
resplendent new age broke forth not just in Babylonia but all across the ancient Near East. A by-product of this stability was an age of international diplomacy and “literary fluorescence.” We are greatly privileged to have recovered the Amarna tablets, which elucidate the diplomatic correspondence between the nascent nation states.

The scribal culture that produced many of the Amarna tablets flourished at both Nippur and Ur. Arnold notes that “families” or guilds of scribes emerged during this time period. During the Kassite Dynasty, the literary impetus was preservation of reference works such as omens, magical literature, and both medical and astrological compendia. The author sagely notes, “As the scholars of the Old Babylonian period had preserved the Sumerian literary heritage, so now the Middle Babylonian scholars preserved Akkadian or traditional Babylonian literature in a process that may be compared to canonization” (69). Original compositions of the Kassite Dynasty, we are told, included diverse elements such as philosophical contemplations of theodicy. It was at this time that ludlul bēl nēmeqi was penned. Likewise, the advent of the kudurru “boundary stone” literary text was new to the Kassite period. Arnold has provided an excellent photograph (courtesy of the British Museum) of a boundary stone presumably from this period.

The Neo-Babylonian period is divided into two brief chapters, “Early Neo-Babylonian Period” and “The Neo-Babylonian Period.” Arnold so labels these chapters simply because it is difficult to point to a single people group (like the previous Kassites) that was predominant during this period. Second, the author uses the term “Early Neo-Babylonian” in the context of language and culture. He states, “the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian took a distinct turn toward the beginning of the first millennium, and although the country was not long unified or self-governed during these many centuries, a certain cultural uniformity is apparent, which is itself more akin to the first millennium than to the second” (75). Consequently, for Arnold the “Early Neo-Babylonian” period is that time frame from the fall of the Kassites (ca. 1155 B.C.E.) until the advent of the Chaldeans (ca. 800 B.C.E.).

Arnold narrates a brief history of the collapse of the Bronze Age culture in the Levant. He includes the major ideas of modern scholarship, including Maspero’s understanding of the “Sea Peoples” based upon the Völkerwanderungstheorie. Arnold quickly surveys and rejects Maspero’s theory. Instead of the Sea Peoples, he postulates a number of other viable alternatives (e.g., earthquakes, drought, and famine) for the collapse of Bronze Age civilizations. I believe that Arnold rightly takes into account the advent of the Sea Peoples as a contributory factor (combined with other elements) for the demise of Bronze Age civilization. A series of Assyrian kings seized upon Babylonia’s weakness during this period. Monarchs such as Ashur-uballit I, Shalmaneser I, and the querulous Tukulti-Ninurta I all made incursions into Babylonia. Significantly, we are told that these
incursions were the beginning of an intensive “love-hate” relationship between Assyria and Babylonia.

Native Babylonian rulers (e.g., “not recently migrated to Mesopotamia”) such as Nebuchadnezzar I, Nabu-apla-iddina, Markuk-zakir-shumi I, Merodach-Baladan II, and Ashur-nadin-shumi are briefly surveyed. While Nebuchadnezzar I avenged the Elamite sack on Babylon, it was the literary canonization that Arnold selects as the highlight. The author argues that one of the greatest accomplishments of this period was the Epic of Creation known by the Akkadian title, *Enūma Eliš*. A minor point of contention with Arnold is over his labeling the *Enūma Eliš* as a “theomachy.” Grant that the *Enūma Eliš* has at its core combat among the deities, it seems to me that a close reading of the epic reveals the presence of a cosmogony (cf. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, 82–93). Nevertheless, Arnold does a splendid job of detailing the plot and theology behind this epic masterpiece. The chapter is concluded with an examination of how the *Enūma Eliš* played a role in the *akītu* festival.

A profusion of people groups and events makes up Arnold’s last chapter, “Neo-Babylonian Period.” The author is to be commended for placing this chapter in his text. We are given a brief overview of the role of both the Chaldeans and Arameans in the emergence of the new Babylonia. Emphasis is placed upon the rise of the Chaldeans in establishing the revived Babylon. Consequently, monarchs such as Eriba-Marduk, Nabonassar, Mukin-zeri, and Merodach-baladan II all are examined for the contributions they brought to the state. However, as would be expected, the major emphasis is given to Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar.

The rise of Nabopolassar, we are told, is not one where he sought martial conflict but rather focused on evading and driving out the Assyrian army from Babylonia. Arnold notes that Nabopolassar was able to hold power for only “brief interludes until 614 B.C.E.” The treaty with Cyaxares is covered as well as the installment of Nebuchadnezzar. The reign of Nebuchadnezzar is to be likened to that of Hammurapi’s in both size and strength. This boon for the Babylonian monarch was to be credited to his inheritance of the former Assyrian Empire. While the Medes consolidated their power northward, Nebuchadnezzar turned his attention westward and southward. Arnold postulates that Zedekiah, among others in Syria-Palestine, based their rebellion on the continued belief that Nebuchadnezzar’s hold over the westward territory was tenuous at best. The author narrates well the further rebellion of Syria-Palestine via Psammetichus’s instigation and the subsequent fall in 19 July 586 B.C.E. Archaeological materials relating to Jerusalem’s destruction as well as Nebuchadnezzar’s legendary pride are briefly examined.
A majority of Nebuchadnezzar’s successors, Amēl-Markuk, Neriglissar, and Labashi-Marduk, all proved ineffective at ruling Babylonia. Furthering Babylonian hegemony would take a change of dynastic lines by Nabonidus, a usurper. It appears from Arnold’s writing that Nabonidus was somewhat of an outsider within the Babylonian aristocracy. Never content with the future, Nabonidus appears to have been concerned with the past and, according to Arnold, became somewhat of an “archaeologist himself.” The downfall of Nabonidus seems to have been his mantic devotion to Sin at the expense of Marduk. This defacement of Marduk, after a ten-year embracement, appears to have at the least disenfranchised the leading members of the aristocracy. Second, Arnold argues that Nabonidus altered Babylonian imperial ideology by aligning himself with the old Sargonid kings and thus distancing himself from both Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II. The embracement of this type of ideology once again revived the old notions of Assyrian imperialism at the expense of the Babylonians.

The beauty of this compact work is that the contents lend themselves to both upper-level college students as well as the nonspecialist in the field. I am very pleased at the amount of material covered in such a short space of pages. No page is wasted, and all the material covered is absolutely a necessity for the study of the Babylonians. I would not hesitate to use this book as a complementary text for an introduction to an ancient Near Eastern history course. Furthermore, the amount and breadth of material in the endnotes and supplementary bibliography provide the student copious resources for extended study.