“Beyond Babylon”: Closing Remarks

I am the last speaker to address you and I am asked to offer a few remarks as our symposium is closing. I cannot presume that you have heard all the presentations of colleagues brought from far and wide, so rather than commenting on material that you may have missed—which at any rate includes many topics beyond my depth—I am electing to interpret my commission as the other side of keynoting. That is, instead of rehearsing or decorating the subjects that you have heard, I will offer two parting shots. Because introspection in matters that interest us intellectually can be good for the soul, I will first situate this splendid occasion within a tradition of discussions about the past. To do so, I conjure up a fictitious adventure of mine that could have taken place a century or so ago at the Metropolitan Museum. It was a symposium on the second millennium B.C. and its editor, alone.

A Century Ago

It is stunning what one century does to a field of study, in terms of discoveries and knowledge, but even more stunning is what a century does to the vision that gives coherence to what is discovered. By 1908, however, we had known how to read Egyptian and Akkadian for decades. From the monuments and documents recovered in Egypt, including the Amarna tablets, we could be fairly certain about the empire Egypt built in its Dynasty 18. Hugo Winckler had recovered archives at Bogazköy (today’s Boğazkale) in 1906, so we knew where to locate the home of the Hittites, Egypt’s formidable foe, even if it would take another decade to read the texts with any comprehension.

Ubiquitous Hebrews

Lots of attention was also paid to the Canaanites, as much because their home was to be the Promised Land as because they bridged the space between the Hittites and the Egyptians. Ironically, there was then much conviction about them and their culture, apart from a few political letters they sent the pharaohs; we had almost nothing of their writings. This gave us license to define them from the pages of the Hebrew Bible, where they were painted luridly as foes of decency and of the one true faith.

If the Hebrews are entirely missing from today’s exhibition, they would have been heavily featured in 1908, and their story linked to the mention of Hapiru in the Amarna correspondence. In fact, in those days, there was also general agreement with Josephus that the Hittos, domination a century earlier gave the Hebrews a second millennium B.C. presence in Egypt.

Ahent Hammurabi

As we move to the east, in 1908 Hammurabi of Babylon would have escaped a second millennium B.C. focus, because in those days scholars had him living hundreds of years earlier (about 2350 B.C.). In contrast, the merchants of Cappadocian Kanesh had been placed three centuries later (and in some calculations even later), almost within grasp of the Egyptian Dynasty 18. Still, Hammurabi’s impact was pervasive, and cultures away from Babylon were judged on whether or not they had absorbed the legal codification that Hammurabi eternalized on a basalt stele that Jacques de Morgan had found in 1901 at Susa (in Khuzestan, Iran) (fig. 1). The literature of the time heavily discussed the Amorites because they appeared in many documents of the era. Frequently cited was a certain Abi-ramu, whose name readily conjured the presence of the patriarch Ab-ram, just before he morphed into Abraham.1

Such a conjunction might seem trivial today, but at the turn of that century, similar tidbits provoked one of the most vitriolic and nakedly anti-Semitic diatribes ever staged in our field. A learned Assyriologist, Friedrich Delitzsch, who died in 1922 on the day of this symposium, forced the issue on whether Babylon—Babel—was a truer intellectual ancestor than Bible—the Bible. The arguments were mostly specious and often incongruous; nevertheless, armed with misdiagnosed readings of such texts as the Gilgamesh and Babylonian creation epics, Delitzsch’s contrast between Babel and Bible was meant to establish a pedigree for Europeans that leapfrogged any meaningful dependence on Hebraic ideals.2

Fig. 1. The Law Code of Hammurabi, excavated at Susa during the 1901–2 season by the Délégation Scientifique Française en Perse

Paradigms for History

Had you attended our convocation of a century ago, your sense of how the past had unfolded might have been controlled by two powerful paradigms. One consciously retrojected a quixotic vision of Semitic hordes periodically spilling out of the heart of Arabia, overwhelming prevailing cultures, and imposing new perceptions: Akkadians, Canaanites, Amorites, Arameans, maybe the Hebrews, certainly the Arab tribes. This paradigm, in fact, was not fully shelved until the documents from third millennium B.C. Ebla made it clear that most ethnic groups mentioned in later records had been there at least from the dawn of history. And of those entities not yet reported at Ebla, I would not be shocked if they showed up at another contemporaneous site, perhaps at Tell Beryar.

The other paradigm, however, had a more insidious inspiration, as it was modeled on the forceful control Europe then had over most of the globe. In 1908, those of us who lived in the west could be confident that providence was shaping our destiny and that our capacity to dominate was the consequence of natural selection. In the process, we believed ourselves to be custodians of the past, heirs to the best among preceding cultures. We were the better-organized over those thought to lack the will to succeed. Just as museums gloried in the splendid catalogue about it. This observation brings me back to the exhibition we are all enjoying today and, with it, to the second, and much briefer, parting shot I promised you above.

I estimate that about two thirds of the displays in the “Beyond Babylon” exhibition are devoted to the Late Bronze Age, as well as about the same percentage of pages in the splendid catalogue about it. This is perfectly reasonable, given the luck of the draw, the type of gifts that arrived, and the incredibly rich material produced by the Egyptian empire and its contemporaneous powers. Yet the very laconic written records from the first half of the second millennium B.C. display a western Asia with all the hallmarks of the incipient political and cultural internationalism that is now of so much interest to us. If I may focus on the extensive archives recovered from eighteenth-century maps of Asia, I will find there all the necessary elements for a globalized culture.

Gifts and Commerce

Interestingly, the motivation behind this exchange was not commerce in our sense, and certainly not greed in our sense. Rather, it was a gauge of their own standing among their contemporaries. Ego was easily ruffled if a gift received was deemed of lesser value than one sent. What if others heard about such an unequal exchange, would it not invite

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One day, the envoy of the neighboring bully might knock at your gate, bringing you a throne or a palanquin with the emblem of his master stamped on it. You might also bring you a ceremonial garment, and a fancy wig. You were expected to sit on that throne in a public setting and wear the robe and the wig, for all to see how much of a flunky you have become to that gracious bully. You would not dare send much of a flunky you have become to that mighty ruler. As you might imagine, his gifts were as a weapon, for in our modern times we often meet with folks with the attitude of aggressive potlatchers. Let us imagine you were one of the minor rulers of the times. One day, the envoy of the neighboring bully might knock at your gate, bringing you a throne or a palanquin with the emblem of his master stamped on it. It might also bring you a ceremonial garment, and a fancy wig. You were expected to sit on that throne in a public setting and wear the robe and the wig, for all to see how much of a flunky you have become to that gracious bully. You would not dare send these gifts back, not only because you know yourself incapable of matching such ostentation, but also because armies would be at your gate, come springtime.

Not surprisingly, this exchange of goods could be used as a weapon, for in our records we often meet with folks with the attitude of aggressive potlatchers. Let us imagine you were one of the minor rulers of the times. One day, the envoy of the neighboring bully might knock at your gate, bringing you a throne or a palanquin with the emblem of his master stamped on it. It might also bring you a ceremonial garment, and a fancy wig. You were expected to sit on that throne in a public setting and wear the robe and the wig, for all to see how much of a flunky you have become to that gracious bully. You would not dare send these gifts back, not only because you know yourself incapable of matching such ostentation, but also because armies would be at your gate, come springtime.

Today, we might first use mineral analysis to determine the origin of its raw material. We might then study its shape, decoration, and artistry to trace the aesthetic traditions that streamed into its construction and speculate on the trading channels it traversed to reach its destination. However, the intellectual and emotional investments that it demanded, from those who ordered the throne’s fabrication to those who in full humiliation felt forced to sit on it, remain largely beyond our grasp, perhaps because such a trajectory has yet to capture our full interest.

We continue to forge new perspectives, urged on by concerns that change with successive generations. I have the greatest desire to include the families of rulers, their gods, important officials, and envoys, and you will realize how productive protocol could be as an engine for manufacturing goods. In the Mari of Zimri-Lim, a whole army of artisans was kept busy creating such artifacts, often enough, I am sorry to say, melting down or dismembering what had been received in order to create what was to go.

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