

Nations and People of Ancient Near East and their Impact on the Current African Kenyan Set Up

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Abstract

This paper examines the land of the ancient Near East that had complex urban centers in Mesopotamia, the land between Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The history of Mesopotamia is inextricably tied to the greater region comprising the modern nations of Egypt, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, the Gulf states and Turkey. We must acknowledge that Egypt is part of Africa. The whole of this geographical area is often referred to as the Near or Middle East. The topography of this place was a vast desert rimmed by rugged mountain ranges, punctuated by lush oases and flowing through this topography are rivers. Its terrain was rough, sand, rocky, and mountainous. There were several communities who lived within this geographical area. Some of the names used for a people or community also referred to their nation. They lived within the same locality and so they heavily influenced each other. This work examines the life of the people in the ancient Near East by comparing it to the Kenyan set up for valuable lessons. The influences infiltrated through marriages and assimilations. Some of the areas of impact included religion, politics, economy, and social life. This is how such an impact penetrated into the Old Testament from the people and nations of the ancient Near East. The Old Testament shows such impact in its literature, name of God, language and linguistic styles, culture, geography, art, worship, sanctuary, construction material, task force or personnel, designs, liturgy, ritual, and religious elements. Such impact also took place with African communities beginning in Egypt which are centrally found in the Bible and spreading to other places like Kenya which will be given some focus in this article. Such impact in Kenya touches on food, family set ups, means of transport, and trade among others.

Key Words: Ancient, East, Egypt, Israel, Mesopotamia, Near

Introduction

Studies on the origin of the world and people are common. Such studies are also interested in knowing how and where the first people lived. Such studies are usually in the Old Testament field like this one. Such previous studies have exposed that Israelites lived together with some other communities in the ancient Near East. Their interactions led to intermarriages and social mixing that fractured the social systems. This study presents the people of the ancient Near East. The primary task includes doing comparison to the African Kenyan set up. The study provides understanding of the topography, geographical extent, nations and how the people of the ancient Near East lived. The work demonstrates comparisons of life in the ancient Near East relating it to the Old Testament world and how this impact, shapes the life of the African Kenyans for positive living. The work is structured in a way that builds the understanding of Old Testament Studies. It samples some recent debates on this topic, helpful to a reader who can pick life skills or lessons to be learnt for survival in the 21st century and beyond. This is not only meant for Kenyans but everyone. The work is very helpful to all the Old Testament readers struggling with to understand its background.

The research has exposed some necessary understanding of terminologies related to the ancient Near East and proposed methodologies for doing studies on ancient Near East.

Proposed Methodology of Studies on Ancient Near East

The prime, core, and most revealing method to do studies on the ancient Near East is archeology. Archeology has yielded fruits as notably, the “Institute of Archaeology at the University of London has made important contributions towards helping scholars to ‘read’ the soil and the pots of ancient ruins” (Livingston, 1987:5). While archeology does not enjoy this privilege alone, there are initial expressions by Anderson (1957:vi) claiming that there are steady gains made in the fields of historical criticism, archeology, and Biblical theology. These approaches must be in line with Anderson’s (1997:xvii) later review of what he calls the literary criticism. He echoes that the best way to understand the faith of ancient Israel is to use an approach that takes into account the interrelated dimensions. Informed by these, this study applies comparative studies.

This method is deliberately proposed because it is anthological in nature. It is backed up by the views of Walton (1989:15) that comparative study may supply comparison surveys which results in what may look like an anthology. Attention is given by concentrating on the types of “literature that have been viewed as most important regarding the light they shed on the literature of the Old Testament or the value they have for comparative study” (Walton, 1989:15). It then elucidates that genres with little or nothing to be compared with from the Old Testament are left out. The reason is that comparative studies profit as much from differences as they do from similarities. The researcher interacted with some recent studies showing that there is need to forewarn on the basis of cultural differences. For the purpose of this study, “caution must be exercised when using both Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia for comparison” (Walton, 2018:6). The significance and the goal of background studies is to examine the literature and the archeology of the ancient Near East. This should help us to reconstruct our behaviour, beliefs, culture, values, and worldviews.

Comparative studies constitute a branch of cultural studies that attempts to draw data from different segments of broader culture into juxtaposition with one another to assess what might be learned to enhance the understanding of another. Such studies include the larger issues of literary genre, analysis of specific traditions and texts, and use of individual metaphors, idioms, and words. In this study, we must cautious of the:

“Polemical application resulting to abuse of comparative studies and expressing the confession of some scholars that comparative studies pose the danger to the biblical text wielded in its skepticism and unbelief while critical scholars ridiculed it as feeble attempt by apologetics to use comparative studies to prove that the bible was true” (Walton, 2018:8”).

From these arguments, you can never ignore the similarities and differences between the Biblical and ancient Near East literature. When doing comparative studies, be aware of Fretheim (1996:70) considerations of proliferation of new directions due to the discovery of ancient Near Eastern creations and flood accounts. He suggests we go the way of new literary approaches, historiographical method and theological development based on issues generated by scientific research, environmentalism and feminism.

Terminologies, Geographical Extent, and Topography of Ancient Near East

Ancient Near East is a term derived from “Russian’s reference to Afghanistan and Persia neighbouring Europe and best expressed as ‘Western Asia’. It included Northeastern Africa covering Egypt and Sudan but using it poses a terminological problem” (Snell, 2011:2). This area was inhabited by several tribes. Third (2023:3) affirms that these people did not live in a vacuum, travelers from Mesopotamia and Egypt traversed through carrying out economic activities of that time.

Levant is a term described as the cradle of ancient civilization. Mark (2018:1) defines this region as Middle East curving like quarter-moon shape from Persian Gulf to modern-day southern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and northern Egypt. Ancient Levant covered “modern Israel, Palestine, Transjordan, Lebanon, and coastal Syria. During Early Bronze Age trade with Egypt, strongly defended cities developed in this region forming centers of independent states”. (German, 2015:1). This region has long recognition for its vital contributions to the world culture stemming from civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Its inhabitants were responsible for development of civilization by Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Phoenicians.

Fertile Crescent according to Mark (2018:1) was coined in 1916C.E. by Egyptologist James Henry Breasted claiming that the Fertile Crescent is approximately a semi-circle, with the open side towards the south, having the west end at the south-east corner of the Mediterranean, the center directly north of Arabia and the east, end at the north, end of the Persian Gulf. Considering this description, it would be right to say it forms an “arc of fertile land that skirts Arabian desert, reaching from the Persian Gulf through the alluvial plains of Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, curving around Syria and Palestine and continuing towards Nile in Egypt” (Anderson, 1997:27).

It is undeniable that biblical scholars like Snell (2011:2) indicate that the ancient Near East meant Mesopotamia comprising the areas of Syria and Iraq. These areas are now in the modern countries of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Iran. We need not differ that this is where we find the cradle of civilization rising from Sumerians.

According to Third (2023:1), the ancient Near East is divided into three geographical regions: *Egypt* to the west, *Canaan* in the middle, and *Mesopotamia* to the east. Many times, scholars tend to use the term *Near East* referring to the area where Asia, Africa, and Europe come together, *ancient* means the period from c.3000B.C. when written records first began though to 333B.C. and connecting to the Greco-Roman period or late antiquity.

We also find that biblical scholars agree that Mesopotamia is a historical region of Western Asia situated within the Tigris and Euphrates River system or the northern Fertile Crescent. It occupies modern Iraq including Kuwait, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. For some reasons it may refer to “Middle East with areas in the east including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and west including Arabic and Berber-speaking coast of North Africa” (Snell, 2011:2).

In the Old Testament studies, we consider the ancient Near East as Israel and her neighbours. The community’s name is also the area its people occupied. You find that its terrain and topography was a Fertile Crescent served by Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The exterior land was arid and served by oases. The banks of River Nile were fertile owing to silting that deposited alluvial soil thereto. This area attracted great settlement due to its life support. Arguably, the Fertile Crescent was densely populated:

“Mesopotamia remains a region of stark geographical contrasts: vast deserts rimmed by rugged mountain ranges, punctuated by lush oases. Flowing through this topography are rivers and it was the irrigation systems that drew off the water from these rivers, specifically in southern Mesopotamia, that provided the support for the very early urban centers here” (Mark, 2018:12).

It is worth noting that Third (2023:3) explains three regions beyond the main ancient Near East playing a biblical historical role namely Persia, Greece, and Arabia. Traversing this region, you would go through the Way of the Sea which was the principal coastal highway chosen by traffickers between Mesopotamia and Egypt. It provided water, food, and helped avoid highlands. The other route was via Damascus way that led to the northern junction heading to the Sea of Galilee, then Jezreel Valley and Megiddo, reaching the Mediterranean coast and following it until Zoan in northern Egypt.

Third (2023:2) also supports the idea of three regions in the ancient Near East. Namely, *Egypt* as the Nile valley, home of Egyptians; *Mesopotamia* as Tigris and Euphrates valley, home of Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hurrians; and *Canaan*, the land between these two great powers listed above that hosted Canaanites and Israelites. It was the ‘third world’ of ancient times. We are bound to agree that Canaan had amorphous boundaries defining it as the area bounded by the shore of the Mediterranean to the west and Syrian Desert to the east.

We concur with De Vaux (1966:10) noting that Israel received the divine revelation that gave her a unique theological distinctiveness reflected in the cultures of the ancient Near East.

It implies that Israel cannot be understood in isolation but from ancient Near Eastern cultural context. Ancient Near Eastern literature shaped the biblical worldview that Israelites conformed to or departed from. Understanding the Bible is not possible unless one understands it in the background of ancient Near Eastern history. The historical and linguistic connections of the Old Testament and ancient Near East are undeniable. The “Israelites’ awareness of culture and literature of the ancient Near East is demonstrable by biblical records and archaeological data” (Walton, 1989:13). We find that the same kind of awareness spreads throughout Africa reaching Kenya. It impacts behaviour, language, and culture. The animals reared by Kenyans are like those reared in ancient Israel. Kenyan foods and drinks also exemplify elements of influences.

The People of the Ancient Near East

In this work, when the term people of the ancient Near East is used, it is understood to mean Israel and her neighbours. These were the people of the ancient world. The main importance of nations is to give people an identity. The nations of the ancient Near East identified people and the places where they lived. The people of the ancient Near East did their best to defend their nations strongly from invaders who tried to settle within their territorial boundaries. The ancient nations tried to enlarge their places of settlements by extending the boundaries. Doing so created rivalry with neighbours. The significance of this section is to paint a picture of nations that were in the ancient Near East.

The nations of the ancient Near East occupied a geographical area with amorphous demarcations. Third (2023:2) argues the most commonly given people that inhabited the ancient Near East were Egyptian, Mesopotamians, and Canaanites. Backing the same claim, McCray (1990:69) says that the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon of Gerar then Gaza and extended to Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, as far as Lasha. When the Egyptians continued living together with other nations, their challenges increased. There was something good coming from their land which was “cut off to the east by the Red Sea and Sinai desert whose people created a hieroglyphic writing system and its later improvement” (Soden, 1994:1).

Ancient Near East was the scene of Israel and her neighbours. In demarcating ancient Near East, Snell (2011:2) expresses that you talk about the geographical coverage, people, and their language. According to him, it covered the Middle East with areas of east including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, and West along Arabic and Berber speaking coast of North Africa.

He also spoke about a group of people called Aram who are said to have never emerged on the political scene until the 12th century B.C. when the Israelites were settling in Canaan after the Exodus. Discussions about this group emerge with great concerns. It is because scholars argue that Israel's "ancestry from Arameans is stronger than the links with Amorites, and that the back-and-forth migration from Haran to Canaan was aimed at keeping in touch with Mesopotamian relatives reflecting ethnic continuity from Amorites to Arameans" (Anderson, 1997:38-9).

Trying to trace those who were the real inhabitants of Mesopotamia, you get enmeshed with so many people. A reliable source described them as the people who were on the move in particular the Amorites, Hurrians, *Apiru (Habiru)*, and Arameans" (Anderson, 1997:29). The same source discusses how after the Sumerian fall, there came another people called Hurrians who were related to Horites (Hivites) and they were non-Semitic people who kept pushing the Mesopotamian settlers from Caucasian Mountain of Armenia to the plains of Tigris and Euphrates. The said Hurrians must have been the settlers coming from Caucasian highlands to resettle in Mesopotamia. The same source expresses that in the 17th century B.C. Some other people called Hyksos dominated Egypt, establishing a powerful empire that extended all the way to Palestine and Syria. The discussions also introduce Shechem as the fortress of this hated regime that was overthrown by Ahmose, capturing the capitals Avaris and Shechem. This is said to have happened before the Hyksos period when the Egyptian capital was at Thebes. These arguments are raised by Anderson (1997:44).

Another captivating history entails the turmoil of the ancient Near Eastern people in the 24th century B.C. It captures the period when the people of "Sumer came under the control of Semitic people known as the Akkadians led by their ruler Sargon for almost two centuries" (Anderson, 1997:29). It also entails about the Ebla Akkadian rivalry in northern Syria that rose to commercial and military power that were later destroyed by Naram-Sin, Sargon's grandson. Anderson (1997:31) reveals that the Sumerians got back to power when the barbarian invasions from Zagros Mountain brought Akkadians to an end. The said Sumerians revival lasted briefly with a devastating attack by Elamites who stormed down from their mountainous homeland (modern Iran) into the converted Mesopotamian plains.

At this point it is important to look back and find out 'who were the Semites'? Lack of clarity how the term Semites or Semitic was applied can lead to controversies. We need to have a guided understanding. The chosen guidance claims that it referred to the:

"Jewish people living in Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Arabia, and North Africa. Origin is Shem, Noah's son (Gen9:18). Shemites were in the center of Fertile Crescent and its fringes while Hamites were in northern Africa. Semites were ancient people speaking related languages; East Semitic (Akkadians- Babylonian and Assyrian), North Semitic (Phoenicians/ Canaanites, Aramaic, and Hebrew), and Southern Semitic (Arabic and Ethiopic)" (Anderson, 1997:31).

This can only be taken to suggest that Semites were invaders into Mesopotamia from whichever the direction. We can argue that Semites was a word used to refer to any group of people invading into Mesopotamia. There are a total of nine tribes mentioned above in reference to Semites.

It may be somehow convincing going by statements from McCray (1990:77), that Ham was the ancestor of four descendants namely Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan (Gen10:6-20) whose nations are listed geographically from south in Africa to north in Canaan where the Hebrew-Israelites came to live. As demonstrated by Anderson (1997:31), the semi nomadic Semites also flooded this country from the Arabian desert with amazing political energy overrunning Mesopotamia, establishing dynasties in every major city, were known as *Amurru* (Amorites), and the bordering city of Mari was their center of rule. The discovery of clay tablets containing business and administrative matters show that:

“Leadership shifted to the city of Babylon where Amorites established the First Babylonian Dynasty, their greatest king was Hammurabi (1728-1686) who conquered Mari in 1697B.C. Amorites extended their influence from Mesopotamia down through to Syria and Palestine dominating Canaanite population. Abraham’s migration into Canaan was connected to Amorite infiltration into Mesopotamia and Syria; he may have been a contemporary of Hammurabi. Haran Abraham’s home town was an Amorite settlement. Hebrews might have learned Mesopotamian laws in their Amorite homeland influenced by the famous Code of Hammurabi through the Canaanites among whom they later settled” (Anderson, 1997:2-3”).

The Hurrians emerged again spreading with great political power through the entire Mesopotamia during the time of Hammurabi. The Hurrians are said to have “clashed frequently with Egyptian armies that advanced into Canaan, Syria, and Upper Mesopotamia (Metannian)” (Anderson, 1977:34). Bright (1981:39) reveals that the closing centuries of the 3rd millennium brought the verge of age in which Israel’s story begins when they are already in Mesopotamia. This brought an end to the long history of Sumerian culture. At the same time Egypt had a time of disintegration and confusion while Palestine experienced sheer havoc.

Some scholars have looked at the possibility of the presence of black people in the ancient Near East. Some statements by McCray (1990:67) give some indications that Ham was the father of the black people in the Bible. This draws much attention to an African reader because it relates to them. Most of the African natives have black skin.

The nations of the ancient Near East with the most influential interactions with Israelites were:

Sumerians

These people are not directly mentioned in the Old Testament and the “first evidence of their culture was found in Tell al-Ubaid in lower Mesopotamian valley and they are first mentioned by name in inscriptions dated about 2400B.C.” (Livingstone, 1987:21). Their history shows that they had a kind of “civilization fixed in classical form with organized city-states each, a theocracy ruled by the god as god’s estate and the temple as his manor house” (Bright, 1981:34). Resulting from the need to manage spaces like the temple, gardens, fields, and storehouses, the Sumerians had a well-organized economy with the earthly head of state-*lugul* (Great man) being the king or priest ruling the local temple and managing the estate as representative of god. Bright (1981:34) reveals that kingship was sanctioned by divine election, developed as an emergency measure but it was a permanent institution.

The Sumerians practiced urban and agrarian life that offered economic stability with few bitter, sporadic, and local wars hence peace and flourishing better agriculture, urban life, and specialization in art and crafts.

They lived in humble houses and had numerous temples, refined metal-working, and gem-cutting. Livingston (1987:21-2) and Bright (1981:34) sums up that ox or ass drawn wheeled vehicles offered military and pacific purposes, influential trade and culture while flourishing temple scribal schools produced a vast body of literature. The Sumerians invented writing and “like all peoples throughout ages, they were troubled by the problem of human suffering” (Pritchard, 1975:136).

Akkadians

Their history indicates competition between Akkad in north and Ur in south created two centralized regional powers at the end of the 3rd millennium being military in nature and the art of this period generally became more martial. Livingston (1987:25) and German (2015:1) outline that the Akkadian Empire was begun by Sargon, a man from a lowly family who rose to power, and founded a royal city of Akkad (modern Baghdad). Other sources show that the Akkadian Empire “collapsed after two centuries of rule” (Livingston, 1987:25) and the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (Ur III) arose soon after. This period was referred to as the Neo-Sumerian since it was ruled by Sumerian Dynasty and comes after the earlier Sumerian period of c.2112–2004B.C. Akkadians may have been the Semites who absorbed the Sumerian culture with little change, “their specialty was commerce with trading routes covering the ancient Near East” (Livingston, 1987:25; McCray, 1990:90-9). This view is objected by Bright (1981:35) claiming that there is no evidence that Akkadians preceded Sumerians in Tigris-Euphrates plain. He says that they were by no means newcomers there. They were the semi nomads in the west of Sumer from the earliest times with increasing numbers taking over

Sumerian culture in all its essentials and adapting it to themselves. The sources above agree that the Sumerians spoke Semitic language (Akkadian), they borrowed cuneiform syllabic script for writing, and adopted Sumerian pantheon of gods adding to their gods in Semitic names with no racial or cultural conflicts.

Canaanites

They were the descendants of Ham in the ancient Levant speaking Semitic language related to Hebrew with “whom they had the most continuous interrelationship as long-term inhabitants of Palestine referred to often in Pentateuch than any other people” (Livingston, 1987:31; McCray, 1990:115). During Early Bronze Age their trade with Egypt increased. They are said to have strongly defended their cities developed throughout their region forming centers of independent states. German (2015:1) tells that the Egyptian campaigns were occasionally launched against some Canaanite cities but their relations were normally maintained through trade.

McCray (1990:69,126) lists the descendants of Canaan including Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites, and Hamathites.

Some history indicates that starting around 2000B.C., the Canaanites began to infiltrate into the Egyptian Delta. By 1700B.C. they had seized control of the Delta and established local their dynasty known as *Hyksos* or ‘Shepherd Kings’. The period between 1700–1480B.C. saw the development of rich imaginative artistic style because the Canaanites developed an alphabetic writing system that was passed on to the Phoenicians. Around 1550B.C. Hyksos were driven from Egypt by the energetic kings of the 18th Dynasty as Tuthmosis III (1504–1450B.C.) put the entire Canaanite region under his direct imperial control. These are suspected to have been the Semites who had “remarkable influence on Egypt through their religion of Baalism accepted by the Egyptians” (Livingston, 1987:33). In the period of the Egyptian Empire, some “disaffected and dispossessed Canaanites that Egyptians called *Habiru* migrated into their hill country regions forming the kernel of historical Israel” (German, 2015:1).

Hittites

These are the people who are said to have established the great empires of the ancient Middle East between 1400-1200B.C. encompassing the areas of central Turkey, north western Syria, and the Upper Mesopotamia. Arguably, the Hittites “spoke Indo-European language and adopted the traditions of Mesopotamia including cuneiform writing system. They were famous for their skill in building, using chariots, pioneering manufacture and use of iron” (German, 2015:1). Sometimes it is not clear whether the same people as Livingston (1987:29) says may have been the ones called Hivites.

By 1300B.C. their empire bordered Egypt. Competing with Egyptians they vied for control of the wealthy cities along the Mediterranean coast. This led to the Battle of Kadesh with Rameses II in 1274B.C. Through civil war and rivalry, they claimed the throne but combined external threats weakened the Hittites and by 1160B.C. their empire collapsed. German (2015:2) expresses that the Hittite culture survived in some parts of Syria like Carchemish which was once under their power. Neo-Hittites wrote in Luwian language related to Hittite using hieroglyphic script. There are many modern cities in Turkey today with names derived from their Hittite name, for example Sinop or Adana. This is an indication showing the impact of Hittite culture in “Anatolia, their center of power” (Livingston, 1987:29).

Babylonians

These people were Mesopotamian inhabitants “referred to as Shinar (Genesis 11:2; cf. Isaiah 36-47) or Chaldees (Gen11:28)” (Livingston, 1987:25). The city of Babylon was along the river Euphrates in southern Iraq. It is mentioned in some documents of the late 3rd millennium B.C. coming to prominence as the royal city of King Hammurabi as McCray (1990:90) argues. This man called Hammurabi was a great ruler who established control over many other kingdoms stretching from the Persian Gulf to Syria. Both Livingston (1987:25) and German (2015:1) argue that in 1500B.C. a dynasty of Kassite kings took control of Babylon unifying southern Iraq into the kingdom of Babylonia. Some of the Babylonian cities were centers of great scribal learning that produced writings on divination, astrology, medicine and mathematics. These Kassite kings corresponded with Egypt as revealed in cuneiform letters found at Amarna in Egypt. The research findings show that Babylonia had uneasy relationship with its northern neighbour Assyria and opposed its military expansion. In 689B.C. Babylon “was sacked by the Assyrians but this city was highly regarded and restored to its former status soon after” (German, 2015:1).

Amorites

They are fairly mentioned in the Pentateuch as the “tribal based gentilic” (McCray, 1990:122). During their time they were “not clearly distinguished from the Canaanites, and they could be the Semites who migrated west from the lower Mesopotamian Valley to the upper Euphrates valley and on into Palestine” (Livingston, 1987:25). Amorites must have been the indigenous people of central inland and northern Syria speaking Semitic language related to the modern Hebrew. During the Early Bronze Age (3200–2000B.C.), they developed powerful states such as those centered on Ebla, Carchemish and Aleppo. The Amorites lived “enclosed behind large fortification walls.

Their cities had elaborate palace and temple buildings as they maintained close diplomatic trading relations with cities in Mesopotamia to the east and south” (German, 2015:2). Their contact is reflected in art and architecture that was influenced by Mesopotamians’ cuneiform writing system adopted from southern Mesopotamia for writing local Semitic languages.

The Amorite city-states-maintained trading links with Canaan and Egypt but they destroyed Syrian cities including Ebla around 2300B.C. in military expansion of the kings of Akkad from southern Mesopotamia. There was swift recovery however, by the end of this period many Amorites had moved southwards along the Euphrates River and settled throughout Mesopotamia. History has that by 1900B.C. the dynasties of Amorite rulers were controlling many important cities in this region including Mari and Babylon whose most famous king was Hammurabi (1792–1750B.C.). German (2015:1) argues that during 2nd millennium, the Amorite population of Syria fell under the control of the Hittite Empire.

He adds that this empire collapsed in the 20th century B.C. did the Amorites re-emerge as vibrant and energetic people called Aramaeans. Archaeologists discovered clay tablets related to Amorites with inscriptions “of legal nature, everyday domestic, and business affairs that throw some light on Patriarchal customs” (Livingston, 1987:25).

Assyrians

The Assyrians are severally mentioned in the Old Testament. Studies have shown that they were the people who “had lived for many centuries in Mesopotamia, their capital was Ashur, and kept raiding in Palestine in the 9th Century B.C.” (Hinson, 1990:122; McCray, 199:91-2). Surprisingly, the Assyrians dominated the Fertile Crescent for half millennia, amassing vast wealth led by aggressive warrior kings. Their empire dominated Mesopotamia and all of the ancient Near East for the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. They were led by a series of highly ambitious and aggressive warrior kings. Among the popular history about them is the claim that their “history became a repeated story of submission to Assyrians and rebellion against them” (Hinson, 1990:122). The reason behind it was that the Assyrian society was entirely military with men obliged to fight in the army. The Assyrian state offices were under military purview. The culture of Assyrians was brutal with “army seldom marching on battlefield terrorizing opponents into submission and once conquered, were tortured, raped, beheaded, and flayed their corpses publicly displayed. The Assyrians torched enemies’ houses, salted their fields, and cut down their orchards” (German, 2015:3).

Persians

These are the people who lived in the heart of ancient Persia now southwest Iran in the region called the Fars. History shows that in the 2nd half of the 6th century B.C. the Persians (Achaemenids) created an enormous empire reaching from the Indus Valley to Northern

Greece and from Central Asia to Egypt. They were commonly known as Elamites “living in the mountains to the east and they were a plague of nations in Mesopotamian valley” (Livingston, 1987:23). The surviving literary sources on the Persian empire were written by ancient Greeks who were the sworn enemies of the Persians and highly contemptuous of them. The Persians were quite tolerant ruling a multi-ethnic empire. Persia was the first empire known to have “acknowledged the different faiths, languages, and political organizations of its subjects” (German, 2015:3). The tolerance of cultures under Persian control was carried over into administration of the conquered lands and continued use of indigenous languages and administrative structures. For example, the Persians accepted hieroglyphic script written on papyrus in Egypt and traditional Babylonian record keeping in cuneiform in Mesopotamia.

Kassites

It is argued that these were the original inhabitants of Ethiopia (*Cush*). It referred to an area and people in the northern Tigris valley. Livingston (1987:26) says that the Kassites lived far to the north and moved lower into Mesopotamian Valley about 1530B.C. to destroy Babylonian Empire. They had control for four centuries before being overthrown by Assyrians in the 13th century millennium. The Elamites were their death blow. McCray (1990:81-2) discusses their paternal ancestry from Cush developing into a great civilization south of Egypt.

Philistines

These people were a small group in southern Palestine related to Egypt. They had settled in the East Mediterranean shore where McCray (1990:103) argues they built strong city-states. Livingston (1987:30) says they came from the Aegean Sea Area, destroyed the Hittite empire, and moved into Levant from Anatolia. The Philistines may have been the “Sea People that came from Crete with roots showing definite contacts with Egypt” (McCray, 1990:134). They tried to invade Egyptian land but were repulsed. They had learnt the methods of tampering iron from the Hittites and had a monopoly of metal for centuries. It enabled them to gain economic and military advantage but their weak leadership led to little profit before David reduced them to servitude. The Philistine community produced two famous men; Goliath and Achish.

Eblaites

There is little history known about these people. It is thought that they were Semitic inhabitants of Ebla in northern Syria. Among the things known about them is the claim by Livingston (1987:28-9) showing that they had a strong leader, Ebrum, associated with Eber of Gen10:21. The Eblaites power spanned the period from 2400-2250B.C.

Recent Debate on the People and Nations of Ancient Near East

This section exposes some of the recent literature on this topic including recent findings and publications done in relation to such findings. The section counters the thought that there is not much recent publication on this topic, the following paragraphs present some arguments raised on this topic.

In the ancient Near East, the name used to refer to any people and also referred to their nation and language. Recent scholarship debates question the development of ethnicity, language, and the problems of understanding land tenure.

The complexity is expressed by Rubio, & Chavalas (2007:2,26) claiming that the study of early Mesopotamia has been marred by succession of ethnic fallacies gravitating around allegedly clear ethnic divide between Sumerians and Akkadians. They affirm that to get a clear strand of one tribe is cumbersome and bulky from the different claims made by different scholars. The example can be seen from the following argument:

“Apiru (Habiru) scattered through Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and Egypt, it referred to the social stratum of people who lacked citizenship, in the established nations of Near East as wanders or outsiders who lived rootless existence. They formed guerrilla bands that attacked caravans or raided villages, they hired themselves out as mercenary soldiers, and were sometimes forced into slave labor on public projects” (Anderson, 1977:37)”.

This is what makes the recent scholarship to claims that Abraham lived such a life and time.

There is some recent debate raised to discuss the Sumerian problem. It is an attempt to “understand their ethnic make-up in Mesopotamia, traditional interpretation held that the south was populated by Sumerian speaking peoples while the north was occupied by Semitic group” (Rubio, & Chavalas, 2007:7). He also illustrates that the Hittite scholarship is frustratingly limited for various reasons. The two main ones that he gives are; records are found on fragmentary tablets which must be painstakingly pieced together, the Hittites did not use a common dating system for the records so creating chronology is somewhat limited to few convergent points with Mesopotamia. This being the case, then it is true to say that the “knowledge about the Hittite language and geography makes the task of correlating the information into cohesive and consistent narrative somewhat problematic” (Rubio, & Chavalas, 2007:91-2). He raises the challenge of focusing on aspects of their culture obscuring the ability to view them in the larger context or make better use of historical data.

Some valuable information on this topic was recently unearthed by Snell (2011:144) in his examination on the area of Syria and Palestine in the historical context of the ancient Near East. He argues how the modern scholarship on this region has passionately diverged given the Biblical context of the area and the ferocity of the modern Cultural Wars.

He summarizes varied approaches of studying the people that lived there focusing on scholarship bodies of Syrian archaeologists, Biblical scholars and also examines the methods and mindsets that creates distance between the two, particularly in Syria. His archaeological summary through the eye of the recent scholarship shows that Syria is increasingly placed in the larger context of Mesopotamian history and so it appears more Mesopotamian than previously thought, given the facts of the recent excavations at Ebla, Mari and other sites.

The significance demonstrated in these recent debates show the connections to the present-day life set up in Kenya with the happenings of the ancient Near East.

The elements like the name of any people were the same as their nation. This has been the case in Kenya. The name of a tribe also meant their nation. The language of any people was also called by their name and this is another similar case in Kenya up-to-date. Recent debate shows that communities get mixed up with one another and some completely get subsumed to never get back to their origin as a pure tribe. This is what has been happening in Kenya recently. Kenyan tribes have become so much mixed that in major Kenyan towns you can find settlers from any Kenyan tribe. Some tribes have even completely vanished.

Another element seen is the loss that occurs when tribes start warring with others. Such losses include not only lives, but also history contained in artifacts that are burnt or destroyed during wars. Property and wealth are also lost through such war incidents.

The findings can guarantee a proposal of considering the generational gap or distance between the present-day history reader and the person being read in the history. Kenyans have and must always recognize that their forefathers lived a very different life from how they live today.

Impact on the Old Testament and Kenya Africans

There are various ways of expressing the impact of the ancient Near East on the Old Testament. In so doing we must recognize that “to understand the faith of ancient Israel one can only use approaches taking into account the interrelated dimensions of story and history, of tradition history and final literary formulation” (Anderson, 1997:xvii). This view limits us from quickly jumping to conclusions prematurely. It is true that the Old Testament literature has interrelations with the literature from the ancient Near East. This does not open a room for us to always think that it is the Old Testament that was influenced. One must investigate from which point of view a story is presented. Premature conclusions lead to stereotyping which is not acceptable. Similarly, some Kenya tribes are only hostile to the others because of stereotypes which should be reworked for reconstructions.

There is another issue of concern pertaining to the divine highly abhorred and prohibited alliances among the Israelite people. It actually served a variety of functions in the areas of “confederations, intermarriages, habitations, possessions of lands, and war” (McCray,

1990:33). Intermarriages are nowadays very common. The Old Testament (Deuteronomy 7:3) presents prohibitions of intermarriages. Most of the Kenyan tribes shunned intermarriages but this has slowly been accepted by many tribes. It has gradually been happening and now has grown to higher levels. Anyone can marry from or be married to a partner from any tribe including those from outside Kenya.

Culture is another aspect of a people that cannot be overemphasized. The cultural elements of biblical literature were “dependent and even borrowed from the literature of the dominant cultures represented within Tigris and Euphrates rivers” (Walton, 2006:15). Religious studies have clarified that both the Jews and Christians appropriate scriptural heritage of ancient Israel in differing ways that had impact on the terms used for the Name of God coming from shared cultural expression. Cultural language variation gives varying meaning depending on a person’s understanding and the level of awareness. The language and linguistic styles applied show some impact notably, the Bible being a “latecomer in world literature is filled with adaptations from mythology of ancient Near East” (Walton, 2006:17).

Looking another element which is language. All languages are important not only for the purpose of religious literature and worship but general communications. Anytime you think of writing or talking, you first consider the language you will use to do so. The language of the source must be understood by the recipient for communication to flow and bear fruits. The linguistic development everywhere including Kenyan set up seems to be a never-ending journey. Even today language has kept growing. Some of the elements of a language that get lost are completely forgotten and generations coming later will know nothing about them. There are languages that have now lost so much and borrowed so much that by and large, they can only be said to be new languages.

Drawing to some conclusion, it has become clearer that the people of the ancient Near East existed in the same time and place sharing life settings and experiences with the Israelites. If anyone intends to make use of the term ‘*borrowed*’ to show the impact, it should not be done as a quick conclusion. The ancient Near Eastern people shared geography, worship, sanctuary, construction material, task force and designs. All these sharing had to impact their liturgical, ritual, and religious elements. It is remarkable that biblically all the “Mesopotamian influence virtually ceased after the beginning of the dynasties, relationships with Phoenicia, Palestine, and the adjacent lands continued with few interruptions” (Bright, 1981:39).

Finally, there are many critical moments that Egypt is mentioned in the Bible. This should trigger in the mind of a reader that it is in African. It is wrong to assume that Africa is not mentioned in the Bible. The life set up in Egypt has influenced other parts of Africa including Kenya.

The areas of influence include culture, economic activities, religious literature, social set up, and feeding habits. This helps to recognize that the pure history of a people is not formulated easily.

Conclusion

There was boundless sharing between the Israelites and the people of the ancient Near East. Such was unavoidable because they shared a geographical scene where the Old Testament recorded events and experiences took place. An Old Testament reader requires information on the background of the ancient Near East and common practices to understand it better. If anyone does not recognize that the Israelites existed alongside other people such would not grasp the Old Testament theological concepts. Understanding ancient Israel and her neighbours is worthwhile and helpful in addressing what appears like biblical inconsistencies. Human history is older than the invention of writing, the available literature backs up the existence of humanity and continuing discoveries unearth valuable information about human history. There could be so much information that is not written down anywhere holding valuable information about human history. Such information can be retrieved from tribal myths, folklore, sages, and various forms that circulate their history. Doing either anthropology or ethnology of a given tribe is a helpful way to understand that tribe. The people of ancient Near East had very close interactions just like the African Kenyans do even now living in the same country.

The biblical dates of some events and existence of some people raise concerns of exactness. Unfortunately, the calendar was introduced or created by humanity to serve his/her purpose and it is not universally adopted in the same format. Documents and records on clay and stone tablets discovered contain certain dates which indicate that by that time humanity had started using calendars. At the same time writing must have been invented. Such proposed dates are always debatable because the calendar was introduced to serve humanity. After fact finding, you can refute or support the events of certain biblical dates.

The general understanding of the ancient Near East contributes greatly to the understanding of the world of the Old Testament. The totality of the ancient Near Eastern background informed the Old Testament writers. Subsequently, the readers of the Old Testament must recognize the geographical place where the recorded events and happenings took place. Failure to recognize that the Hebrew people existed alongside other people would only lead to failure of grasping how and why the Old Testament concepts are the way they are.

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