Albright as an Orientalist

by J. M. Sasson

There is a letter in the Mari archives, now about 4000 years old, that Ishme-Dagan of Ekallatum sent his brother, Yasmakh-Adad, who was installed as king of Mari by his father, Shamshi-Adad. "I acceded to my father's throne," Ishme-Dagan says, "but having been very busy, I haven't sent you my news. Now you are my brother, and aside from you I have no other brother. I will make peace with any city or king that you take as vassal. Don't ever worry. Your throne is yours to keep." Ishme-Dagan then makes a couple of cute puns before ending with more pledges and reassurances.

Ever since it was published in 1951, this letter, known as *A(rchives) R(oyales) de M(ari)* IV: 20, has played a major role in the arcane world of Bronze Age chronology. It assured us that when Shamshi-Adad died, his son ruled Mari a few more years before Zimri-Lim chased him out. This key fact helps to date Hammurabi, who later defeated Zimri-Lim. Many chronographers have staked their reputations on the date years of Hammurabi, urging us to follow the high, middle or low chronology.

This letter, therefore, has entered into the lore as one of the great certainties of scholarship. Albright, who never hesitated to go his own way, simply balked at taking it at face value. It did not fit into his chronological scheme, which required Shamshi-Adad to live 10 years into Zimri-lim's reign. In his addenda to *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (1968: 232), Albright raised two objections:

> 1. Ishme-Dagan's tone should have been much more authoritarian had he replaced his father;
> 2. When speaking of his accession to the throne, Ishme-Dagan should have used the verb *wašābum* rather than *erēbum*.

Neither of Albright's reasons appears strong enough to overcome the plain evidence of the letter.

Paul Haupt (1858-1926), born and educated in Germany, had taught at Johns Hopkins University for twenty-five years when Albright became his pupil. Haupt was one of the major figures of "oriental" studies of his day, publishing extensively in Assyriology, Egyptology, Germanics and the classics. He is most remembered for the *Polychrome Bible*, an edition that color-coded the J-E-D-P documentary sources.
Photo courtesy of the Ferdinand Hamburger, Jr. Archives of the Johns Hopkins University.

Now comes the twist: a couple of years ago, *ARM* IV:20 was collated and, would you believe it, the letter was not written by Ishme-Dagan at all, but by an Ishme-Addu, a ruler of a minor city-state, Ashnakku. What's more, it wasn't sent to Yasmakh-Adad, but to Ibal-Addu, king of Ashlakka. Albright was right after all; the letter was not appropriate for discussing chronology. One cannot but envy an intellect so experienced that it could just sense the unlikely. And although evidence independent of this letter keeps Albright's chronological scheme in doubt, this anecdote helps me raise an issue about him that I want to consider in assessing Albright as an Orientalist: what is it about this man's background and training that made him so confident of ultimate vindication?

My assessment of Albright as an Orientalist will not entail an accounting of where Albrightian contributions stand today: if I cannot muster enough chutzpa to pontificate on the ideas he launched in disciplines that interest me—Semitic philology and the Near East of the Bronze Age, for example—I certainly will not want to evaluate his vocalization of Egyptian syllabic orthography, his contributions to archaeology, epigraphy, and paleography, not to speak of the current status of the myriads of subfields that he created. Instead, I will focus on two periods crucial to Albright's development: his apprenticeship, roughly until 1920, and his maturation, roughly until the mid-

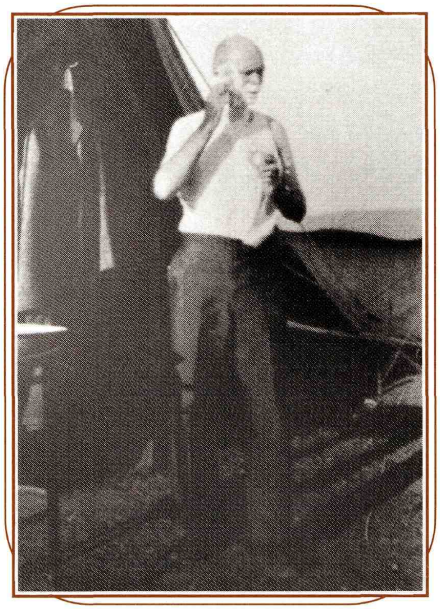
30s. I will stick to issues relevant to Hebrew history.

Albright's Apprenticeship

Albright came to adulthood in the first two decades of our century. At that time, the efforts of European scholars to flesh out biblical civilization had forked into two distinct yet dissonant undertakings. Julius Wellhausen lent his name to an approach that charted Israel's **memory** of its past rather than recreated its actual history. Neither religious skepticism nor historical nihilism prompted this strategy. Instead, by recognizing that the Bible was composed of documents that originated in different contexts, Wellhausenians were fulfilling a primary criterion for the writing of history: to revisit what truly happened in the past you must confront at least two witnesses to the same event. Wellhausen was giving historians four such documents!

At first, Wellhausenian truths were sold all over Europe not as a corrective to Israel's own notion of its culture, but as a lesson about what happens when dogma supplants faith and mechanical activities displace worship: a fine moral to draw before Catholics and Jews.

This essentially Protestant message reached America in the 1880s, and it sparked enormous interest. By recapturing God's earliest hope for humanity, progressive Bible scholars could reclaim backsliders and consolidate Christians behind a single set of convictions. Accordingly, as Albright, the son of missionary parents, was growing up in Chile during the last decade of the century, America was in the throes of a veritable "Bible Renaissance." The decade witnessed the founding of the *American Institute of Sacred Literature*, the YMCA, the Chatauqua Society, and the Sunday School programs.[1] However, by the time Albright came back for good to the States, around 1903, this new dispensation was falling prey to a grassroots counter-attack. For most fundamentalists, this foreign ideology was not only divorcing Americans from direct communion with their cultural icon, the Bible, but it was also compromising the way they charted their own past. Recall, please, that during the 19th century, the story of America was cast as a replay of the chosen people saga: immigrants leave their homelands for a New Zion, conquer Canaanites (read: Indians), battle Philistines (read: the British), and acquire an eternal charter. When the people defy this charter, they risk splitting their nation asunder. With a biblical plot to drive their own secular history, Americans did not find Scripture realistically wanting, and therefore had little use for more pristine versions.



Albright shaves in front of his tent at the Tell Beit Mirsim expedition camp. He attributed his ability to cope well with the physical demands of Palestinian summer excavation to childhood deprivation in the harsh Chilean climate.

I am willing to suggest that, raised in this atmosphere, but also experiencing America with the fervor of an immigrant, Albright acquired his hostility to Wellhausenianism early and held it constant throughout his career. In his own reminiscences of 1948, Albright acknowledged that he opposed Wellhausen "since boyhood" (1964:308). A second dimension of Albright's apprenticeship entailed his encounter with Pan-Babylonian perspectives. Though his espousal of Pan-Babylonian views was to undergo severe testing during the years of dizzying discoveries of mid-1920s Palestine, Albright remained deeply influenced by his years at the Johns Hopkins University and by the instruction of Paul Haupt.

Born to Protestant parents in Silesia (Görlitz) in 1858, Haupt studied with Friedrich Delitzsch, years before the latter began to obsess anti-semitically on Babel's primacy over the Bible. In those days, Delitzsch and Haupt shared an approach to realizing the past that was also followed by Gunkel. They reckoned that much culturally valid knowledge could be teased out from documents not normally read for historical information: myths, epics, and hymns. Philology allowed them to make direct links with long vanished authors because the same rules of grammar controlled ancient scribes and modern scholars. They also read widely in fields that were then coming to the fore: sociology, anthropology, psychology, and above all, folklore. But whereas someone like Gunkel could take seriously folklorist James Frazer's notion that cultures progress on the same evolutionary path, Pan-Babylonialists—Delitzsch and to some extent Haupt—looked to a major center such as Babylon from which Jerusalem took ideas and practices.

When Albright came to Hopkins, Paul Haupt had been there for a quarter of a century, bringing to America a mature sense of how to practice his art. It is difficult for us to recognize what a major figure Haupt was in his day. He was just 21 when he gave Sumerian its firm footing as a language with no known congeners. Haupt's first article, published in English, dissected the Semitic verbal system. Eventually, Haupt's bibliography of over 600 items had books and articles, some of them written in modern Hebrew, that spilled beyond Assyriology into Egyptology, Germanics, and the clas-

sics. He wrote on Hebrew metrics and on religious development, and although he is remembered longest for editing the *Polychrome Bible*, an edition that color-coded *J-E-D-P*, he was most keen to stuff its pages with notes on the anthropology of ancient Israel and with etymological studies of obscure Hebrew words. Haupt was not beyond exploring the Aryan ancestry of Jesus, a topic then the rage of Europe, but he did offer a scheme to ease the plight of Russian Jews by proposing to transplant them near Mosul in Iraq (Cooper n.d.).

In Haupt, the Orientalist, it is tempting to recognize where Albright got the inspiration for his work during and immediately after his doctoral days. He inherited from Haupt a European certainty about the human mind's capacity to coax secrets from the dimmest of testimonies. Albright instinctively shied away from Haupt's exposition of the Aryan ancestry of Jesus, but he followed him in combing Babylonian lore to solve biblical cruxes. Albright often gave credit to Haupt for his notions regarding early biblical history, themselves a curious juxtaposition of belief in the scientific plausibility of the miraculous elements and a denial of the historicity of biblical events.

However, what Haupt lacked, and therefore could not give his brilliant pupil, was a vision of the whole and a sense of purpose. Albright differed from Haupt in two other important respects as well: his Americanism, which was not acquired, and his interest in archaeology, which was.

The pivotal consequence of these differences gains pertinence in the aftermath of the first World War. After a period of democratic grace, totalitarianism was becoming rampant on the European continent. If only because of its increasingly pernicious use in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, intellectuals were beginning to mistrust the fruits of historical methodologies in much the same way as has occurred to us, American scholars, after Vietnam when, *en masse*, we moved from examining the history of Israel to analyzing its literature. In Weimar, Germany, then also in reaction to Hitler's regime, responsible scholars in our disciplines tightened their focus of research and declined to glance beyond their own specialty. The appeal that was heard most often was to mind one's business: Babylon should tell us about Babylon only, Egypt only about Egypt, and Israel... well, at most only about Yahweh.

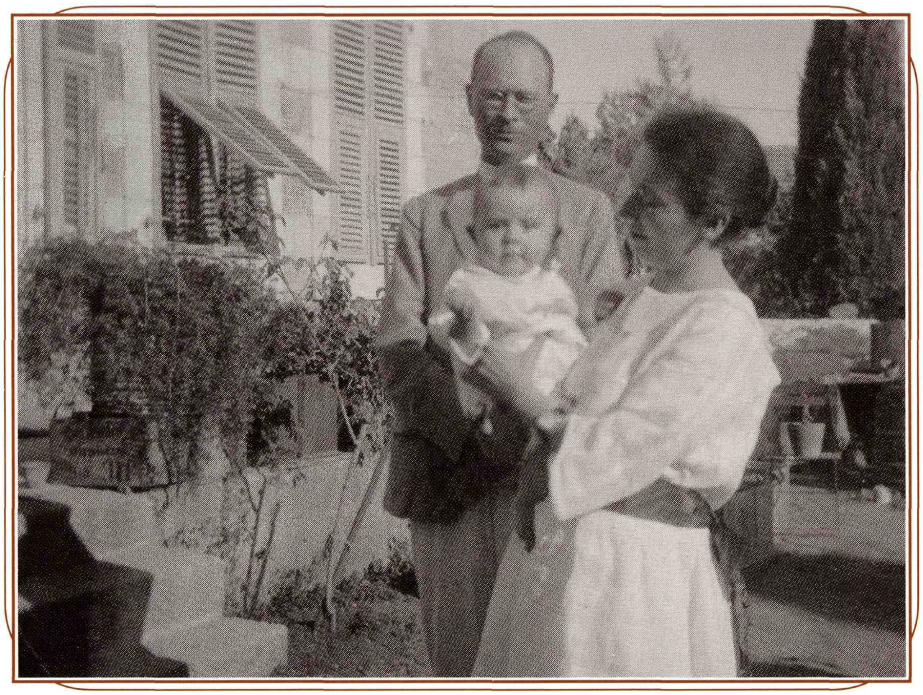
In America, however, this constriction of horizons hardly ever materialized, even when we faced the Depression and the second global War. To the contrary, Americans had few doubts about how to practice history and exhibited certainty about their place in it. Even as Benno Landsberger, in Leipzig and then in Exile, was teaching students how to concentrate on Akkadian to penetrate better its diverse cultures, James Henry Breasted was praising the internationalism of the Amarna period and declaring the unity of what he termed the "Fertile Crescent." When Nazi-inspired German Assyriology was praising Aryan contributions to the history of warfare, Daniel Luckenbill of the Oriental Institute was conjuring the shades of Assyrian kings, whose sordid deeds he knew so well, for a lecture on social justice and democratic ideals (1924:9-19). At the same time and place, Breasted was teaching a vast readership to honor Akhnaton, a failed but god-intoxicated Pharaoh, as a major shaper of human conscience.

Landforms in the region to the west of Tell Beit Mirsim. By all reports, Albright truly experienced Palestine as the land of the Bible. He found its landscapes reminiscent of those of his boyhood Chile. *Photo courtesy of Richard Cleave.*

Albright's Maturation

Albright's period of maturation began in 1919, when he arrived in Jerusalem. In addition to a formidable combination of philological gifts and vast intellectual curiosity, he brought into play American attributes that were more starkly in evidence then than now: the ebullient enthusiasm about the future, the boundless belief in providence, the sure sense of beginnings and ends, the moral justification for action, and

the simplicity of conviction. Decades later, as he reflected on his own life, Albright speculated that his early years in Chile prepared him for the Holy Land, whose climates and landscapes were "strangely reminiscent" of each other. Later too, Albright also concluded that Providence converted the deprivation and hurt he experienced in Chile into advantages, as work in Palestine made demands on body and soul.



Ruth Norton Albright holds her first son, Paul, as his father looks on in 1924 Jerusalem. Paul was born in December, 1922 at the Hospital of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Three more boys (Hugh, Stephen, and David) would complete the family.
Photo courtesy of David Albright.

The land that opened before Albright's eyes was the same as was observed by the Hebrew patriarchs. He traveled all over it and, as he recalled later, evidence confirming the reliability of Jewish scribes repeatedly assaulted his early skepticism. It did not take him long to acquire the vision that was missing: not so much that the Bible is true to history and that he, Albright, must prove to others that it is so; but that, despite the moral obtuseness of succeeding generations, history has remained true to the Hebrew people's instinct about God and about the validity of the covenant they established between each other.

It is important, therefore, to stress that Albright did not seek to peddle a Werner Keller, "Bible as History," program confirming the reliability of each and every biblical episode. That we tend to debate the historicity of the patriarchs whenever we think of Albright's biblical history is only because he changed his mind repeatedly on that score, and therefore, has left us an enormous paper trail with which to wrestle.[2] Rather, Albright deemed himself a philosopher of history, a historian of religions, not unlike Breasted in interest, but immensely closer to where the needed evidence was to be found. Albright knew Babylon, Canaan, and Egypt intimately and even appreciated their cultural superiority over Israel in all but two reciprocal components: Israel's capacity to discover the logic of monotheism, and its courage to broadcast it as a historical truth (compare Freedman 1989).

For Albright, Israel's great leap was not theology but reason; it occurred not just in the minds of the prophets, but already at Sinai when Moses first spied a bush afire but not burning. The centrality of Moses's discovery remained constant with Albright, from his earliest publications until the last, and even survived his Haupt era. In its least attractive manifestations, this credo could emerge in a dismissal of Wellhausen who, frankly, I think Albright never exerted himself to understand. It could also come as a coarse challenge to "nihilists" to mend their negative way of dismissing his findings.

To my mind, Albrightian confidence in the historicity of Moses and in the truth of Mosaic sentiments does not necessarily reflect a personal theological conservatism, as some have implied, but it feeds on the centrality of the Bible in the American vision, a vision that cuts across creed, color, and gender. Albright himself puts it bluntly in his writing. "In the center of history," he wrote in his autobiographical notes, "stands the Bible" (1964:291).[3]

This is the thought that I want to leave with you. If you recognize that we live at a time when orientalism is disparaged as a weapon of imperialism; when Near East politics force archaeologists into one region but not another; when history, like dreams, is said to be beyond reconstruction; when students are corseted into ever tighter fields of specialty; when the encyclopedic mind is distrusted—if you accept all of the above as signposts for our age, then you might also believe with me that we are not likely to be visited any time soon by the likes of William Foxwell Albright.

Notes

[1] I owe this information to R. Lee Carter, who is currently writing his dissertation at the University of North Carolina on the "Message of Higher Criticism."

[2] I may just mention here that Albright came secondarily to using near eastern documents from Mesopotamian sites to authenticate the patriarchal narratives, following

the lead of two other American orientalists, Ephraim A. Speiser and Cyrus H. Gordon. Earlier, he had depended on the Hammurabi and Hyksos dynasties to evaluate biblical parallels.

[3] Other American orientalists who wrote in the 30s did not differ much on this point, although someone like E.A. Speiser shifted the center somewhat. "Sooner or later," he noted, "the intellectual fortunes that we amass in peripheral fields get to be wisely invested in the Bible" (quoted in Finkelstein and Greenberg, 1967:612).

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