

Dr. David Schreiner, Pondering the Spade, Session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic, Two Broad Convergences

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This is David B. Schreiner in his teaching on Pondering the Spade. This is session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic, Two Broad Convergences.

Welcome, this is our second lecture of four and I left you off with a quick discussion about William Dever and his idea of convergence and how we're going to use that idea and develop that idea and talk about narrow convergences and broad convergences as we kind of begin to tease out over this lecture and the next lecture of William Deaver's teaching on Pondering the Spade.

What does this intersection, this convergence between archaeology and the Old Testament, really look like? In this lecture, I want to talk about a couple of broad convergences, and hopefully, by the end of this lecture, you'll understand what I'm talking about when I talk about a broad convergence. Again, it's not necessarily a direct point of contact, but rather it illuminates issues of worldview and social structure; it indirectly clarifies the content of the Bible. And so, I want to talk about Mari, a specific place, for reasons that will become very, very clear, and then I also want to talk about a text, the Gilgamesh Epic.

And these are two very, very important results of archaeological research and they've been around for a really, really long time. Unfortunately, in recent memory, the stuff at Mari has had to take a back seat due to the issues of ISIS and the turmoil inside the Syrian government. But I am sure because it has basically been going on since the early 20th century, I'm sure it's going to pick back up at some point.

It's way, way too important to just let go. So, I'm confident that Mari will pick back up. So, I often ask my students, and I just do this to kind of pull the room more than anything else, but I often ask my students, you know, what's the nature of archaeology? And I get a host of different responses.

I'll have people that will say things like, ah, to prove the Bible is true. And I'll have some people who are a bit of a contrarian say, ah, to disprove the Bible. To find something valuable, we're looking for something that's really going to be valuable that we can sell to a museum.

More often than not, these people have been influenced by movies like National Treasure, Indiana Jones, and The Raiders of the Lost Ark, and that's fine. But I often

finish out this conversation with a discussion of what archaeology really is. And it's funny, it's funny, I get kind of a kick out of it.

I just see their demeanor, and their faces just completely change. Particularly when I tell them that archaeology really is monotony, punctuated, maybe, by a significant find. You are going to do the same thing day after day after day after day.

And if you're lucky, you'll find something that's going to be really, really important. But you can't bank on that. You are going to stare at a lot of dirt.

I mean, I remember when I was at Tel Rehov, it was digging dirt, putting dirt in buckets, and bucket chaining the dirt out of the hole. And we'd scrape a floor clean, and we'd sit there, and we'd say, okay, what do you think? And we'd look at it, okay? And it was dirt! Yes, it's dirt, but is it significant dirt? I don't know! And then we'd shift over, and we'd look at a bulk wall. And we'd say, okay, clean up that bulk wall.

And we would literally take brushes to sweep the dirt off of dirt. But this is what you need to do. And we'd stare at a bulk wall and be like, oh, okay, look at that.

Ooh, ash mark, okay, all right. Ooh, there's a floor right there. And so, it's a lot of staring at dirt.

You stare at the dirt and try to figure out if this dirt is significant. However, the payoff largely does not come until archaeologists hold themselves up in their offices. Years after the fact, they begin to pile all their data.

Archaeology is very much the compilation of data. Data, data, data. Plot it, log it, put it in the database, and we'll come back to it.

That's what archaeology is. At the end of the day, when everybody's done digging, they go back to their offices and begin to put everything together.

So, you have to be dedicated. You have to have your mind set on the long-term goals. The endgame, if you will.

If you are patient. If you're patient enough and you see this thing through, chances are you're going to come up with some significant insights. And if you're lucky, you're going to change the way people look at ancient Israelite society.

They're going to change the way that people read the Bible and understand scripture. And here's an example of that. And there's an example of that that's actually not anywhere in modern Israel today.

It's in a place called Syria. And that's the ancient site of Mari. And Mari is a great example of how patience, year upon year upon year of digging, charting the data, logging the data, eventually publishing the data, will change the way we understand things about scripture.

So, this is what I want to get at first in this lecture. I want to look at a place called Mari, Ancient Mari.

And on this map here, this is where Mari is essentially. Notice it is just inside the Syrian border. It lies in a valley that connects ancient trade routes.

There are people actually who specialize in plotting ancient trade routes. And it's very, very fascinating. A guy by the name of Dorsey actually published a pretty significant book back in the day.

He talked about the ancient highway systems in Israel where they came through and what valley did they take, etc. So, ancient highway systems are very important because that is where trade lived. So, ancient Mari is in a valley that connects.

Over here is Mesopotamia. Down through here is where ancient Israel is. So, you can see the criticality of this location.

It's very, very close to the Euphrates River. And there is evidence to suggest that this place was actually connected to the Euphrates River by man-made channels. So, very sophisticated architectural features, infrastructure, etc.

And this is what is feeding the strategic importance of this site. It has a history, ancient Mari has a history of occupation that can be kind of summarized in a tale of three cities. And that first city dates to the beginning of the third millennium B.C., 2000 B.C. something.

This is an old, old city that has a very, very long and rich history of occupation. City 1 was followed by City 2, which was then followed by City 3. City 2 is probably the most well-documented of all three cities. It was probably the most sophisticated of all three cities.

We know this largely by the development of the central palace system. So, excavators have focused in on the central palace system. And they can identify phases of development.

And a very, very significant and massive phase of development is associated with City 2. So City 2 is very well-documented. However, probably the most important city for our discussion is City 3. City 3 and a guy by the name of Zimri-Lim. Zimri-Lim was an Amorite ruler, an Amorite king of ancient Mari.

He was one of the last Amorite kings of ancient Mari. He left a pretty significant textual hoard, a textual documentation of how Mari went about its business on a day-to-day basis. City 3 was eventually sacked and burned to the ground.

And Zimri-Lim is there watching it all happen and unfold. So, the correspondence between Zimri-Lim is what we are going to focus on. For reasons that will become clear in a few minutes.

So, it was eventually sacked by Hammurabi as he made his way down through Mesopotamia and ultimately found Babylon. So that's the guy who eventually undid everything. Now, what is the legacy of Mari? Again, what I just talked about was a few basic details about the city, the length of occupation, very, very old city, what's important.

So now, I want to get into actually what is important. I'm going to basically give you the important data, summarize it for you, and then bring it back to the Old Testament. One of the first things we have to understand is the legacy of the Amorites as a particular culture and dimorphic societies.

Now, that may sound complicated, but let me clarify. The Amorites are a distinct people group. There are actually Amorites discussed in the Old Testament in certain locations.

Not often, not nearly as often as some of the Canaanites, but we do talk about the Amorites in the Old Testament. So, the Old Testament is aware of this particular culture. They are a very widespread culture, a very hard-to-define culture.

But they're there, we can identify them, we can kind of identify who's an Amorite and who's not by a variety of reasons, but it is very, very difficult. They were a diverse people group. They were a diverse culture, unified, and we can thank Daniel Fleming for beginning to articulate and clarify a lot of this, but they're unified not by any nation, not by any particular location, but by a specific way of life and a language.

So, they held to a specific style of language and they held to a specific way of life. And that way of life is defined as a mobile pastoral way of life more than anything else. This was not a culture that tended to settle and urbanize.

No, they went from place to place following seasonal migration patterns for their herds, and they did things differently than the local urban centers. They were also perceived negatively. There were some positives, but there were a lot of negatives as well.

So, when we read about Zimri Lim's correspondence talking about the, I'm sorry, when we read certain documentation from Mesopotamia that's talking about the Amorites, some of it's positive, but there's also a lot of negative as well. But they're also talking about these people defined by a specific way of life. Now, speaking of where the Amorites are echoed in the Old Testament, the Old Testament also remembers them as a loosely defined polity in the central highland regions prior to the Iron Age.

They're a Late Bronze Age, Middle Bronze Age phenomenon associated with the highland regions, which is where this mobile pastoral way of life really took hold in that region. And the Israelites in the Bible seem to remember them negatively. So, for instance, Manasseh is described negatively in his regnal evaluation, and his sins are actually aligned with the Amorites before him.

So, it's very negative. I believe it's Manasseh. I'm pretty sure it's Manasseh.

Because it kind of jumps out of nowhere. But they do pop up in the Old Testament. There's discussion about them in Deuteronomy as well, associated with the Canaanite paganism as well.

So, they are remembered negatively. But again, they're remembered for a particular way of life, they're remembered as a loosely defined polity, and they're remembered negatively. Now, the other thing that the texts of Mari talk about is this idea of dimorphic society.

Dimorphism refers to separate but identifiable elements within a society that collaborate for the good of society. Now, admittedly, dimorphism is hard to define. But I think that we can be fairly confident in understanding that certain societies, particularly in the ancient world, were composed of different spheres, if you will, different elements.

And a lot of times, there were people in that society who made their living and functioned daily as animal herders. And so Abraham did this, the patriarchs did this. They would follow seasonal migration patterns up and down the Central Ridge Road, and this is what we're talking about.

The texts of Mari talk about these agro-pastoral people in relationship to the people who lived in the cities. And a lot of times, they talk about the tension involved there. They did things differently.

A great example of this is Lot near Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah are towns. They're urban centers. A lot seems to be associated with this agro-pastoral way of life.

These are dimorphic societies that are well documented in Mari. And the importance for that we will get to in a second. But again, the implications of Mari are largely associated with the legacy of the Amorites and the dimorphic societies, and how do we define them?

It also illuminates, and this is probably my favorite element of the Mari texts because up until the Mari texts, we were doing a little bit of shadow games when it comes to defining the prophets. Who were they? How did they function as a social institution? We had some text. We had some evidence from certain locations.

But with Mari, things really began to be clarified. And we can thank a few scholars, like Abraham Malamat, in particular, for really beginning to kind of articulate the institutional profile of the prophet that was possible because of the Mari texts. Now, what Mari does, Mari will speak about prophets.

It will talk about prophets in these cuneiform tablets. They will talk about prophets in terms of a variety of terms. They will use a variety of terms to talk about this prophet.

And what does that mean? That means that the prophetic institution should not be dwindled down to a specific term. So, you may have heard somebody say, well, you know, that guy, he's called a navi, so therefore, he's a prophet. But this guy over here, he's not called a navi, so he's just a seer, or he's just a visionary.

He's not really a prophet. That's hui, that's hogwash. That's not proper because what Mari shows us is that a variety of terms were used to talk about a singular social institution.

We create a social profile based mostly on function. How did these people function within the context of their societies? More so than how were they referenced. Reference is important.

I'm not saying that reference doesn't matter, but I'm saying if all we lean upon is how they are referenced, then we can potentially get into problems. But Mari shows us that a variety of terms could be used to talk about prophets. The Mari texts, when talking about the prophets, therefore, function as a very valuable comparative tool.

They show us that the prophets of Mari and these texts date to 1750-ish B.C., so during the patriarchal period, not during the period of the kings and the united and divided monarchies. This is hundreds of years earlier, but they are still showing us similar methods of prophecy. Inductive prophecy versus deductive prophecy.

How were they giving prophetic oracles? Mari is showing us that they're doing things similarly. Intuitive prophecy alongside inductive prophecy. Intuitive prophecy is when a word just comes upon a person anointed by the divine spirit.

They just get a word. Maybe you've heard it. I've got a word for you that came from the Holy Spirit.

That's an intuitive prophecy. Inductive prophecy is using some type of baseline, some type of observable phenomena, and then you're seeing something, looking at something, and saying, okay, what does that mean? Okay, what does my lack of a better term textbook say? So, they go back to established canons, established criteria, and say, okay, if the crow flies over your house at this time of the day, then we're probably dealing with something ominous. So that's what deductive prophecy was.

You see things, and you observe something, you experience something, then you go back to an accepted canon in order to understand what that means. So, we have that in the Old Testament. We had that at Mari.

Again, helping us to understand this institution in the context. We also see at Mari that prophecy is associated with times of crisis. Prophecy is associated with certain power structures.

So, there are central prophets in Mari and peripheral prophets in Mari. Peripheral prophets are those prophets not associated with the central power structures. Elijah, Elisha, Micah.

These are prophets who run around on the fringes of society. They're not associated. They're not associated with the central monarchy.

But then we have prophets like Nathan. We have prophets like Gad. Isaiah probably is more of a central prophet.

He's got easy access to King Hezekiah and King Ahaz. He's probably more of a central prophet than a peripheral prophet. So, we have these in the Old Testament.

And prophecy associated with times of crisis? I mean, the entire Iron Age was a huge time of social transition and crisis, particularly when the Neo-Assyrians and the Babylonians came onto the scene. So again, in Mari we see prophets functioning, carrying out their business in the same way. It becomes a valuable comparative tool to build a profile for the institution of the prophet.

We also see at Mari that prophecy is understood in the context of something greater. And boy, is this exciting. This shows us that Israelite prophets, because they

understood their word to be a part of something greater, the covenantal idea, redemptive history, God's relationship with Israel, the same thing, similar things were happening at Mari.

It wasn't nearly as theologically developed. But there is evidence to suggest that the prophets at Mari understood that their utterance would impact something larger than that specific interaction. So Mari interestingly provides a nice cross-section.

Again, dated approximately 1750 BCE-ish. Okay, that's about the time of Zimri-Lim. It gives us a valuable cross-section at a point in time where the Bible gives us more of a diachronic view.

Together, these two things really allow us to speak confidently about who the prophets are, how they conduct their business, and what they do in society. We begin to understand that the prophets performed both a theological and social role. It's very difficult to distinguish between these two.

Yes, they brought the word of God to the people, to the kings, to the priests, to the populace. And when they did that, they performed a specific social function. So again, very, very valuable insight when it comes to the Mari text and how it helps us to define the profile, the institutional profile of the prophets.

Now, going back just a few minutes, just a few minutes based on what I said, what does Mari have to tell us about the historicity of the patriarchs? Again, we look at the Mari text, and we see this interaction between agro-pastoralists and the urbanites. And I mentioned briefly that this sounds a lot like Lot. This sounds a lot like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

I mean, Abraham comes back, he has an interaction with Melchizedek, who's clearly associated with an urban location near him, and they're having this interaction. What does this tell us about the historicity of the patriarchs? And the conversation about the historicity of the patriarchal narratives is a long one. And I don't want to necessarily regurgitate those details.

But it's something that's been hashed out in the 70s and 80s, and it was a very, very fierce debate. But what's interesting about Mari is that it shows us that the social descriptions, the background information, the context in which the patriarchs lived is not fantasy. It's reality.

This is the way these societies function. This is the way these elements within the societies function and interact. So, when it talks about Abraham having these periodic interactions with people from the city, when it talks about Lot kind of interacting with urban centers, etc., when it talks about this stuff, this is not fantasy.

The biblical text is seizing upon a well-documented memory, the memory, the reality of the patriarchs. Mari allows us to understand that stuff with a little bit more detail. Does it prove the historicity of the patriarchal narratives beyond the shadow of a doubt? No, it doesn't do that.

So, you should not invoke the text of Mari, which talks about dimorphic societies, which helps us to identify and understand these types of societies. You should not seize upon those texts and use them apologetically as support for the historicity of the patriarchal narratives. You cannot do that because the evidence only goes so far.

It only goes so far to the point where this interaction, this type of interaction, this type of society, was a real one. When you begin to use that evidence to try to argue for the historical historicity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you're overreaching. You're going beyond the evidence.

So, take what the evidence gives you. But again, I think it's important. I think it's important because it anchors these narratives in a real historical framework, and that's important.

So that's Mari, and I want to switch gears here. I want to switch gears here and talk about the Epic of Gilgamesh. Again, Mari is a site, and we're concerned with City 3. It's a particular site that really illuminates the social background, the social makeup of the prophets, dimorphic societies, the Amorites, et cetera.

Again, a broad convergence. But here I want to talk about the literature. I want to talk about literature, and this is where things get really, really exciting.

I like the Gilgamesh Epic. I've grown to like it, and I think it's really, really fascinating for a number of reasons. But we have to begin because it's a text; we have to begin with the summary of the storyline.

It begins by recounting the exploit. Gilgamesh—I shouldn't say it begins, but the Gilgamesh Epic is essential. It's more than this; it's very philosophical in a sense. But it is largely about recounting the exploits of a historical king of Uruk, and his name was Gilgamesh. Now, initially, Gilgamesh apparently had a very difficult personality.

The opening lines of the Gilgamesh Epic talk about his harshness towards his people, and he just wasn't a pleasant leader. And this reality caused the people to kind of, I don't know, cry out. In images that remind me of Exodus Chapter 1, the populace is crying out in response to a non-benevolent leader in an oppressive context.

It's similar; it's not exact, but it does remind me, when you read the opening verses of Gilgamesh, it does remind me of that in Exodus Chapter 1. And the gods get together, and they hear the cries of the people, and they say, okay, essentially, we've

got to do something about this, and what are we going to do? Okay, let's give him an adversary. Let's give him somebody that's going to put him in his place, that's going to reign him in, and that's going to make him a more benevolent ruler. And we're going to give him Enkidu, and this is a wild man.

So, Gilgamesh is from the city, he's a king, and in response to him, the deities are going to give a mountain, if you will. And Enkidu, the way he's described, he's just, I mean, that's what he is, he's a mountain man. He's a man of the wilderness, and he's very untamed, but this is the individual who is going to keep Gilgamesh in check.

The problem is, is that when Enkidu and Gilgamesh finally converge on each other, they fight, they wrestle, and it's a very, very long fight that pops up and kind of goes from place to place, but ultimately, Enkidu and Gilgamesh don't hate each other, but they rather become BFFs. I mean, a bromance ensues, essentially is what this is. And so the plan from the deities kind of backfired.

Gilgamesh becomes Enkidu's best buddy, and this begins to feed the rest of the narrative. One of the things they do is that the narrative kind of jumps ahead from certain times; it shows things, and it advances the narrative. And then, after Enkidu and Gilgamesh become friends, essentially, they're sitting around, and they get bored.

What are we going to do? I don't know. We could wrestle some more. Oh, no.

Done that enough. Let's go up and kill something. Let's go up and hunt.

And so, Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide that they're going to go up to the forest of Lebanon and engage their masculinity, and they're going to hunt for a mythical-type deity thing called Humbaba. And this is a deity that rules the forests, the fringes of the terrestrial realm. And one of the things you have to understand about forests in ancient Mesopotamian literature is that they are often symbolic of the transition zones between things on earth and everything beyond the terrestrial realm, the supernatural, if you will.

So, the forest is this wilderness, this transitional zone where some crazy, scary things live. And one of those crazy, scary things that live in the cedar forest of Lebanon is this thing called Humbaba. And so, Enkidu and Gilgamesh decide that they're going to go up and they're going to slay Humbaba.

They eventually get there after a long journey. And it's during this journey where they really think, you know, do we really want to do this? But they come to the conclusion that they're really going to go after this guy. And they're really going to go after this guy.

And eventually, they go up to the forest of Lebanon. They slay Humbaba after Humbaba has insulted them. But they eventually subdue him, and they take him back.

They take evidence of the victory back to Uruk, where they're going to celebrate. They're going to have a big party. And it's during that party that Ishtar begins to have goo-goo eyes for Gilgamesh.

She makes advances upon Gilgamesh. And Gilgamesh rebuffs her. And this makes Ishtar angry.

And so, she goes to her dad and says, you know, Gilgamesh has rebuffed me. I've never been so shamed. I'm saddened.

Do something, daddy. Do something. And so, her dad, you know, it's very interesting how the interaction between the deities is described in this text.

It's very childish and those types of things, very entitled. But eventually, the cosmic bull is released. The cosmic bull is supposed to go down to Uruk and just ransack everything.

And this is payment. This is payment upon Gilgamesh for rebuffing Ishtar. Well, unfortunately, Gilgamesh and Enkidu spring into action again.

And they vanquish the cosmic bull, which makes people even more angry. So you have Gilgamesh, empowered by Enkidu, who's beginning to cause the deities in the pantheon even more problems. So, what are they going to do? And here, at this point, there's a pretty stark break.

There's a break in the text that we have. And then when things pick up, there's this conference, if you will, this divine conference that's going on, where the deities are saying, okay, something's got to happen. We've got to start back at square one.

And that means taking Enkidu off the table. Enkidu is taken off the table, and he's killed. And this is very, very upsetting for Gilgamesh.

Because this was his best friend, this was his bro. They had this great bromance where they did everything together, this very intimate relationship with this guy, and he's immediately taken.

And so, Gilgamesh begins to spiral. He begins to spiral out of control emotionally and psychologically, and his mind begins to wander. And where it ends up is he's going out, and he's going to try to make sense of this all.

He's going to go on a walkabout if you will. And he's going to pursue this idea of immortality. Death is so tragic.

Death is so awful. I do not want to experience it. And he begins to seek immortality.

This quest, this quest for immortality is going to take him to an individual named Utnapishtim. Because as far as Gilgamesh knows, there's only one human that has ever achieved, there's only one human that has ever achieved immortality. And so logic would tell him if there's one human that's done it, I need to go find that individual, ask him how it happened, and that's the key to my success.

So, he's out to seek immortality in response to the death of Enkidu. Utnapishtim, and we'll get into this picture here in just a second. Utnapishtim recounts, ultimately Gilgamesh finds his way to Utnapishtim.

Utnapishtim lives in the border regions, the transitional zones between the terrestrial realm and the heavenly realm, because he's immortal. This makes sense. So, Gilgamesh, through a very difficult journey, finds himself in the company of Utnapishtim, and he basically says, how'd you do it, man? How'd you do it? I want some of that.

A conversation ensues, and that conversation takes the form of a story. Utnapishtim recounts how he secured immortality, which involved the flood sent by the gods.

It involved the boat that saved him and members of his community. It involved him sitting on that boat for an extended period of time. It involved the global flood receding so that the boat would eventually hit ground.

He gets off the boat, and then, all of a sudden, the deities are irate. Oh, my goodness, humanity has survived. We started this flood to kill humanity.

We wanted humanity off the table and yet they live. What happened? And so there begins this infighting amongst the deities because the deities know somebody spilled the beans. Who was it? And so Utnapishtim finally gets the offer of immortality.

And he says, okay, you got us, you did it, you're divine. But in the process of recounting that story, which sounds an awful lot like the biblical flood narrative, but in the process of recounting that story, Utnapishtim will look at Gilgamesh and say, it was a one-time deal, buddy. You're not getting this.

But Gilgamesh isn't satisfied with that. He keeps pushing, he keeps pushing, he keeps pushing. He wears Utnapishtim down.

And Utnapishtim finally says, okay, all right, if you can stay up for a week straight, all right, if you can stay up for a week straight, you'll have it. He can't do it. He's so exhausted by his journey.

He's so exhausted by everything in his life. He doesn't make it very long. And to prove his point, Utnapishtim has a cake baked.

He's like, here, you wake up. You said you didn't sleep, but here it is because we got all this food made, and you did fall asleep. But Gilgamesh still isn't satisfied.

He still keeps pushing, and he still keeps pushing. And then finally, Utnapishtim says, okay, okay, okay. If you can descend to the primordial waters of the Apsu, there's a plant that grows at the bottom of the lake.

If you can get that plant, you can bring it back up. That's your ticket. You'll become immortal if you can do that. And Gilgamesh says I take that bet.

I'll do it. So, he straps some heavy rocks to himself and he wades out there and he sinks to the bottom and he gets the plant. And on his way home with that plant that's going to give him immortal life, he stops to take a rest.

And what happens, he doesn't see it, but up from behind him a snake comes and takes away the plant, eats the plant. And that plant that was going to give Utnapishtim eternal life is gone. And it's at that point that Gilgamesh, I'm sorry, he's going to give Gilgamesh eternal life, it's gone.

At that point, Gilgamesh finally realizes that immortality is not for humanity. And he decides to go back home with some newly found friends and to live the rest of his life at Uruk. And there's this weird interaction where all of a sudden Gilgamesh is descending into the nether world and looking for Enkidu again.

And Enkidu tells him essentially, don't go down this road, don't look for this. It's interesting because it shows that it's really hard to kind of understand where that scene kind of fits in the larger story, but it does speak to the complexity of the narrative and how it developed. But again, essentially, this story is about humanity and about humanity manifested in the person of Gilgamesh coming to grips with who they are what they're supposed to do, how they're supposed to live, and what is their purpose in life, what's their relationship to the deities.

So, it is an epic tale that talks about some of life's great questions. And so, the story of finding the Gilgamesh, we have to pause and talk about this because the story of finding the Gilgamesh is just as interesting as talking about the content of the Gilgamesh. We'll go back to the content, we'll talk about the implications of all of

this, but we do have to take a few moments to talk about how the Gilgamesh epic was found.

The text of the Gilgamesh epic, how was it found? Now we have to realize it wasn't found all at once, it was found in steps. And those findings, if you will, were associated with the earliest excavations of Mesopotamia, ancient Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian capitals, etc. And so, it starts with a guy by the name of Austin Henry Layard.

And Austin Henry Layard was a guy who grew up as a diplomat, he eventually becomes an archaeologist in modern day Sri Lanka. He spent some time in modern day Sri Lanka. But he eventually begins the excavations at ancient Nineveh.

And this guy, in the middle of the 19th century, if you remember our conversation in Lecture 1, this was the time of glorified treasure hunting. So this guy's just digging trenches, digging holes, he's just looking for huge stuff. And he's putting it on crates, and he's shipping it down the river, and he's shipping it back to the British Museum.

And so, he's finding these massive statues, he's finding these gold overlays that are decorating palaces, and he's just putting it all back on crates. Some of the crates are sinking to the bottom of the river and they're never to be found again. But this is the way this guy's operating.

But in the process of looking for these big finds, he's also smart enough to realize that, oh, look at all these tablets. There's some sort of writing on them. And it's around this time that cuneiform is being deciphered. So Layard understands that there's some potential importance here.

He's putting those in crates and he's shipping them all back to the British Museum. Not to be looked at immediately, rather just to sit in a box in the basement of the British Museum. We'll get to it later, but look at this big statue.

That's essentially what Austin Henry Layard was about. But he's the guy who found the first remnants of this story in some of the excavations. Layard would eventually give way to Hormuz Rasim, and that's the guy that will succeed him, and it will be much of the same type of stuff.

Rasim will look for big finds, again in the process of finding these things, looking for throne rooms, looking for statues, looking for gold crowns, etc. Just stuff that is eye-popping, etc. They will find more and more tablets that are going to be shipped back to the British Museum eventually to be looked at.

All of this will give way to George Smith. George Smith, by all accounts, was an ivory-tower academic. He had the personality of a wet blanket, but he was a genius.

He eventually taught himself Akkadian, cuneiform, and his earliest works are still cited today. He was a genius. But he eventually works in the basement of the British Museum as a repairer, which is essentially putting together all the broken tablets.

And as he's putting these together, he's sight-reading these things. Because he's basically fluent in Akkadian and cuneiform at this point, and he's just looking at them, looking at them, okay, put this one together, what does it say? Okay, nothing. But in the process of doing this, he comes across the tablet, and he begins to read this tablet. It sounds an awful lot like the biblical flood narrative.

And so, he reads some more, he's getting excited, and then he begins to realize what he has. He has found what's called tablet 11, and that's the story of Utnapishtim that I recounted just a few minutes ago. Utnapishtim looking at Gilgamesh, and this is his story.

Okay, you want to know how I got immortal? This is the story associated with. It involved the flood. It involved the boat.

It involved me duping the deities. All those types of things. Smith understands that it sounds an awful lot like the biblical flood narrative.

So, he begins to find other tablet pieces that are talking about this, and he begins to put the narrative together to the point where he eventually offers a presentation to basically everybody who would listen to him, even royal dignitaries are there at this lecture. And he lays out the Mesopotamian account of the flood narrative. And he basically says, look, folks, we have an account from Mesopotamia that sounds an awful lot like the biblical account.

What are we going to do with this? We need to understand this. We need to begin to look at the relationship between these texts, etc. He becomes a celebrity instantaneously.

He becomes a celebrity. And he's tagged to then start the other excavations. Now, Smith doesn't want to do this.

Smith wants to sit in his basement of the British Museum, look at texts all day. He doesn't want to be out in the field. But George Smith has something that no one else has, and that is his ability to look at a text and decipher its worth or its not worth, whether it's worth something or whether it's just worthless.

He can do it like that. And that is his value. So he begins to lead a couple excavations, a couple more excavations.

He begins to compile and put this Gilgamesh epic together piece by piece by piece. And eventually George Smith will die tragically, and that will end his tenure, obviously. But that won't stop the compilation of the Gilgamesh epic.

Honestly, the Gilgamesh epic continues to go on today. We're still finding fragments. We're still understanding the textual history behind this epic, which we'll talk about in a second.

We're still understanding that more and more each day. But it is associated with all of these early excavations in Mesopotamia, beginning with Laird, then to Rassam, and then ultimately to George Smith. So, let's look at some of the implications.

Let's look at some of the implications of the Gilgamesh epic. Largely, the importance of the Gilgamesh epic is a comparative one. The Gilgamesh epic is a powerful comparative tool for us to understand certain elements of the Old Testament.

It's not there to tell us about a specific exegetical insight, about a passage or anything like that. You could make the argument, potentially, for the biblical flood narrative but it's largely there as a comparative one. The Gilgamesh epic exhibits a lengthy history, a lengthy and complicated history of literary development.

We know, based on all the textual fragments that we have, that this story started as individual tales that were at some point brought together to form a unified narrative. And that unified narrative also went through subsequent stages of clarification, editing, precision, etc. So, the Gilgamesh Epic that we have is the result of a very long and complicated process of literary development.

The reason why this is important is because it shows us how scribes worked and how people brought together independent narratives under a unified narrative. It shows us how things were edited, how things were compiled, how things were clarified, etc. It gives us insight into scribal conventions and scribal tendencies, all of which impact the way we understand the canonical process of our Old Testament.

The Old Testament that we have, the Book of Kings, the Pentateuch, the historical books, they did not come down to us like that. The evidence at the Dead Sea, whether it's the other traditions of Jeremiah, whether it's the other editions of Daniel, they prove to us that these texts that we have in our Bible are the result of a hard to define but evident literary development. The Gilgamesh epic allows us to identify and put the pieces together that inform that conversation.

The canonical conversation, how our Bible got to be the way that it is, our Old Testament got to be the way that it is, is a complicated one. It's one that demands that we spend, look at things across centuries, look for clues, and consider scribal

conventions. The Gilgamesh epic provides us with a parallel model that shows us how that stuff worked.

So that's one of the major importance of that. The Gilgamesh epic also articulates in ways that the Bible cannot the ancient Near Eastern worldview. And when we understand the ancient Near Eastern worldview, how they viewed the Pantheon, how they viewed the gods, how they understood humanity's relationship to the gods, when we begin to understand how the larger ancient Near Eastern milieu looked upon those things, we begin to understand the significance and the theological potency of the Bible.

The Bible understands humanity's relationship to God Almighty in remarkably different ways than what is understood by texts like the Gilgamesh epic. The Bible's understanding of a global flood is remarkably different in many ways. It's the same. There's this basic framework that's there that's remarkably similar, but when you get into the details of the biblical account, the way God Almighty kind of is always in control, He doesn't say much, that's remarkably different than the deities in the Gilgamesh epic who are losing their mind.

The biblical flood account tells us specifically why God chose to do that. The Gilgamesh epic is remarkably unclear and almost seems to rationalize it through childish reasons, if we can even call childish reasons a rationalization. So, understanding the theological worldview of these ancient texts and the Gilgamesh epic gives us a ton.

How did they understand life's pursuits of immortality, etc., the relationship to the... I've just talked about all of this. When we understand that, we understand the theological potency of Scripture's theology all the more. Again, it is a comparative tool that is remarkably important.

Remember, Israel was a particular culture that functioned in a particular time and had a particular way of discussing and doing things. If we want to take seriously the idea that God used ancient Israel as the chief mechanism for communicating His revelation, we have got to take texts like this seriously because they show us how everybody was doing it. And when you understand how everybody was doing it, you understand the significance and the differences of Israel all the more clearly.

That's a very, very important implication of the Gilgamesh epic. And that's where I'll leave us. At this point, in our next lecture, we're going to look at some specific, narrow convergences.

But again, Mari and Gilgamesh are talking about illuminating Scripture, the background material, the social material that's important to Scripture, through indirect means, through broad convergences.

This is David B. Schreiner in his teaching on Pondering the Spate. This is session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic, Two Broad Convergences.