

Dr. David B. Schreiner, Pondering the Spade, Session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Schreiner, Pondering the Spade, Session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. David Schreiner's "Pondering the Spade" series explores broad convergences between archaeology and the Old Testament. **The lecture focuses on two key areas:** the archaeological site of Mari in Syria, highlighting its insights into Amorite culture, dimorphic societies, and the prophetic institution; and the Epic of Gilgamesh, emphasizing its value as a comparative tool for understanding ancient Near Eastern worldviews and the development of the Old Testament canon. Schreiner explains the archaeological process, stressing the importance of patience and data analysis. He contrasts the insights gained from Mari and Gilgamesh with biblical accounts, showing how they illuminate but do not definitively prove the historicity of biblical narratives. The lecture concludes by emphasizing the significance of these broad convergences for a deeper understanding of the Old Testament's context and theological uniqueness.

2. 24 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Schreiner, Pondering the Spade, Session 1 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Archaeology).



**Schreiner_Ponderin
g_Session02.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided source, "Schreiner_Pondering_EN_Session02.pdf":

Briefing Document: Schreiner on Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic

Executive Summary:

This briefing summarizes Dr. David Schreiner's lecture on the significance of the archaeological site of Mari and the literary text of the Gilgamesh Epic for understanding the Old Testament. Schreiner emphasizes the concept of "broad convergences," where these sources illuminate the worldview and social structures that indirectly clarify the content of the Bible, rather than providing direct points of contact. He highlights the patience and long-term nature of archaeological work, and how findings can reshape our understanding of scripture. The lecture underscores the value of comparative studies in understanding both the historical context of the Bible and the unique theological claims it makes.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Broad Convergences:

- Schreiner introduces the concept of "broad convergences" as a way to understand the relationship between archaeology, ancient texts, and the Old Testament. This is a framework where indirect illumination of worldview and social structure, rather than direct points of contact, is the focus.
- He notes that Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic do not provide direct proof of biblical events, but help understand the culture and context surrounding these events, which then help us understand the Bible better.

2. The Nature of Archaeology:

- Schreiner emphasizes that archaeology is "monotony, punctuated, maybe, by a significant find." It's a long, tedious process involving meticulous data collection, analysis, and often long periods before a payoff is seen.
- He refutes popular misconceptions of archaeology as treasure hunting, instead focusing on data collection and painstaking effort.
- Archaeological insight does not occur in the field, but after the fact, as "archaeology really is the compilation of data."

3. Mari: A Window into Amorite Society and Prophecy

- **Location and Significance:** Mari, situated in modern Syria, is strategically located at a crossroads of ancient trade routes. It is a site with three major phases of occupation. City 3, associated with the Amorite ruler Zimri-Lim, is the most important for understanding prophetic and societal institutions.
- **Amorites:** The Amorites were a widespread culture defined by a mobile, pastoral lifestyle and a shared language, rather than by national or geographic unity. They are mentioned in the Old Testament and generally viewed negatively.
- Quote: "They were a diverse people group. They were a diverse culture... unified not by any nation, not by any particular location, but by a specific way of life and a language."
- **Dimorphic Societies:** Mari's texts highlight the existence of "dimorphic societies" composed of both urban dwellers and agro-pastoral nomads. This helps to understand Old Testament narratives such as Abraham, Lot and the patriarchs and the interaction between settled and mobile peoples.
- Quote: "Dimorphism refers to separate but identifiable elements within a society that collaborate for the good of society."
- **Prophecy:** The texts of Mari provide critical insights into the institution of prophecy in the ancient world. Mari uses a variety of terms for prophets, suggesting that function is more important than the particular term used, and they are also associated with crisis and power structures.
- Mari confirms various modes of prophecy— both intuitive (receiving a direct word) and inductive (using established practices and criteria).
- Prophets are seen both as theological and social figures.
- Quote: "Mari shows us that a variety of terms were used to talk about a singular social institution."

4. Mari and the Patriarchs:

- Mari illuminates the social context of the patriarchal narratives. The social description of mobile herders interacting with urban populations isn't a fantasy but a real feature of ancient near eastern life.
- Quote: "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."
- However, Mari cannot be used to prove the historicity of the patriarchs, as that would be "overreaching" and "going beyond the evidence" as it only establishes the real framework in which they could have existed, not the existence of the specific characters themselves.

5. The Gilgamesh Epic: A Lens on Ancient Worldview:

- **Story Summary:** The Epic recounts the story of Gilgamesh, a harsh king who learns humility through his friendship with Enkidu. Their adventures lead to the death of Enkidu, which sends Gilgamesh on a quest for immortality. This quest includes the story of Utnapishtim, who survived the great flood, and his story mirrors that of the biblical Noah. Gilgamesh eventually realizes that immortality is not for humans.
- **Discovery:** The discovery of the Gilgamesh Epic was gradual, beginning with Layard's initial finds at Nineveh in the mid-19th Century, and followed up by Rassam's digs, and ultimately understood by George Smith at the British Museum after he pieced together the fragments of the text that had been brought back.
- **Comparative Value:** The epic serves as a valuable comparative tool for understanding Old Testament themes and the ancient Near Eastern worldview. This does not provide proof or disproof of the text, but insight into the culture, ideas, and context.
- **Literary Development:** The Gilgamesh Epic exhibits a long history of literary development. Multiple independent narratives were brought together and edited, a process that parallels how the Old Testament was compiled.
- Quote: "The Gilgamesh epic allows us to identify and put the pieces together that inform that [canonical] conversation."

- **Ancient Near Eastern Worldview:** The Gilgamesh Epic provides insight into how ancient cultures understood the deities, humanity's relationship to them, and life's pursuits of immortality. This contrast helps us understand the unique theological potency of the Old Testament.
- Quote: "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."

6. Theological Significance

- By understanding how the world *around* the old testament did things, we can better understand the unique character and import of the theological claims in the old testament, because these are not made in a vacuum. Understanding the context shows us how the unique claims in the Old Testament really are.

Conclusion:

Dr. Schreiner's lecture establishes the significance of Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic as "broad convergences" that can offer valuable indirect insights for interpreting the Old Testament. The lecture stresses the importance of patience, data compilation, and comparative study in understanding the historical and cultural background of the Bible. While these sources do not offer direct proof of biblical events, they do contextualize them and clarify the distinctive claims the Bible makes. The understanding of ancient near east worldview helps the modern interpreter to better understand the Old Testament's theological claims.

4. Schreiner, Pondering the Spade, Session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic

Study Guide: Mari, the Gilgamesh Epic, and Broad Convergences

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What does Dr. Schreiner mean by the term "broad convergence" in the context of archaeology and the Old Testament?
2. Why is the archaeological site of Mari considered important for understanding the Old Testament?
3. Describe the Amorites as a people and their significance, as understood from the Mari texts.
4. What is a "dimorphic society" and how is it reflected in the Mari texts and the Old Testament?
5. How do the Mari texts help to illuminate the social role and function of the prophets?
6. What is the significance of the Mari texts in relation to the historicity of the Old Testament patriarchs?
7. Briefly summarize the plot of the Epic of Gilgamesh, focusing on its central themes.
8. How was the Gilgamesh Epic discovered and what role did figures like Layard, Rassam, and George Smith play in its recovery?
9. What does the Gilgamesh Epic reveal about ancient Near Eastern worldviews?
10. How does the Gilgamesh Epic serve as a comparative tool for understanding the Old Testament?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Broad convergence refers to indirect points of contact between archaeology and the Old Testament that illuminate issues of worldview and social structure, rather than direct historical events. It helps us understand the context in which the Bible was written.

2. Mari is important because its texts provide valuable insights into the social and cultural background of the Old Testament, including the Amorites, dimorphic societies, and the institution of prophecy, even though it is not directly mentioned in the Old Testament.
3. The Amorites were a diverse, widespread people group unified by a specific mobile pastoral way of life and language, rather than a nation or location. They are often portrayed negatively in other Near Eastern texts and the Old Testament.
4. A dimorphic society is composed of separate, identifiable elements that collaborate for the good of society. In the Mari texts, this is seen in the relationship between agro-pastoralists and urban dwellers, a relationship also reflected in the patriarchal narratives of the Old Testament.
5. The Mari texts show that prophets were identified by a variety of terms, and they help clarify the social role of prophets, showing their functions during times of crisis, associated with central or peripheral power structures, and as individuals who saw their word as part of something larger.
6. The Mari texts provide social descriptions that support the historical plausibility of the patriarchal narratives, showing that the interactions and societal structures depicted in the Bible were not fictional, but rather rooted in real social dynamics. However, it cannot prove the specific historicity of the figures of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
7. The Epic of Gilgamesh tells the story of a king, Gilgamesh, who befriends Enkidu and goes on various adventures. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh embarks on a quest for immortality, ultimately coming to terms with his humanity and its limitations.
8. The Gilgamesh Epic was discovered gradually during excavations in Mesopotamia. Austin Henry Layard discovered the first tablets, Hormuz Rassam continued the excavations, and George Smith deciphered the texts, recognizing the flood narrative and piecing together the epic.
9. The Gilgamesh Epic reveals that ancient Near Eastern peoples had a different worldview than that of the Bible, particularly in their understanding of the gods, humanity's relationship to the gods, and the nature of immortality. The gods in the epic are more capricious and less in control than the God of the Bible.

10. The Gilgamesh Epic serves as a comparative tool by illustrating how scribes compiled and edited narratives, and by giving us a parallel context for understanding the theological uniqueness of the Old Testament. It shows us the cultural and intellectual context in which the Old Testament was composed.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Write an essay addressing each of the following prompts.

1. Analyze the significance of the archaeological site of Mari for understanding the social and religious context of the Old Testament, paying particular attention to the Amorites, dimorphic societies, and prophetic traditions.
2. Compare and contrast the depictions of prophecy found in the Mari texts and the Old Testament. How do these similarities and differences contribute to our understanding of prophecy in the ancient world?
3. Evaluate the importance of the Gilgamesh Epic as a comparative tool for understanding the Old Testament, focusing on its literary development and its insights into the ancient Near Eastern worldview.
4. Explore the themes of mortality, humanity, and the divine as they are presented in the Epic of Gilgamesh and discuss how these themes compare and contrast with similar themes in the Old Testament.
5. Critically assess the concept of "broad convergences" as it relates to the study of archaeology and the Old Testament. How effective is this approach for understanding the context of the Bible, and what are its limitations?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Broad Convergence:** An indirect point of contact between archaeological discoveries and the Old Testament that illuminates broader cultural, social, or worldview issues rather than direct historical connections.
- **Mari:** An ancient Mesopotamian city in modern-day Syria whose archaeological findings, especially texts from its royal palace, provide insights into the Old Testament period.

- **Amorites:** A widespread and diverse people group in the ancient Near East known for their mobile pastoral way of life and specific language; they are mentioned in the Old Testament.
- **Dimorphic Society:** A society composed of separate, identifiable groups or elements that collaborate and interact for the benefit of the whole, such as urban dwellers and agro-pastoralists.
- **Zimri-Lim:** An Amorite king of Mari whose palace archives have provided valuable texts for understanding ancient Near Eastern society and religion.
- **Prophet (Ancient Near East):** A social institution in the ancient Near East, evidenced in the texts of Mari and the Old Testament, serving to convey divine messages or guidance, often in times of crisis.
- **Intuitive Prophecy:** Prophecy that comes directly from a divine source, without prior observation or reasoning.
- **Inductive Prophecy:** Prophecy based on observable phenomena or established norms to interpret signs and provide meaning.
- **Epic of Gilgamesh:** A Mesopotamian epic poem recounting the adventures of King Gilgamesh, focusing on themes of friendship, mortality, and the search for meaning in life; it contains a flood narrative similar to the biblical account.
- **Utnapishtim:** A character in the Epic of Gilgamesh who is granted immortality by the gods and who recounts the story of the flood to Gilgamesh.
- **Akkadian:** An ancient Semitic language spoken in Mesopotamia, the language in which the Epic of Gilgamesh was written.
- **Cuneiform:** An ancient writing system using wedge-shaped marks impressed on clay tablets, used in Mesopotamia.
- **Scribal Conventions:** The rules, techniques, and practices that scribes used when writing, editing, and compiling texts; understanding these conventions helps us interpret the text's history.
- **Ancient Near Eastern Worldview:** The cultural, religious, and philosophical perspectives of the civilizations of the ancient Near East, including their understanding of the gods, humanity, and the cosmos, which provide the context for understanding the Old Testament.

5. FAQs on Schreiner, Pondering the Spade, Session 2, Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What is the significance of the archaeological site of Mari, and how does it relate to the Old Testament?** The ancient city of Mari, located in modern-day Syria, provides a wealth of information about the social and cultural context of the ancient Near East, particularly during the Middle Bronze Age (c. 2000-1550 BCE). Specifically, the texts found at Mari shed light on the Amorite people and their mobile, pastoral lifestyle, which is also mentioned in the Old Testament. These texts describe a "dimorphic society" where agro-pastoralists interacted with urban populations, a societal structure that is reflected in stories of the biblical patriarchs like Abraham and Lot. Mari also helps us understand the institution of prophecy, showing a variety of terms used to describe prophets who functioned similarly to those in the Old Testament.
2. **What is a "broad convergence," and how do Mari and the Gilgamesh Epic exemplify it?** A "broad convergence" refers to instances where archaeological and textual evidence indirectly illuminates the worldview, social structure, and cultural milieu of the Old Testament, rather than providing direct points of contact. Mari exemplifies a broad convergence through its documentation of Amorite culture and dimorphic societies, which clarifies the social background of the patriarchal narratives. The Gilgamesh Epic, on the other hand, provides insights into the ancient Near Eastern worldview and literary conventions. Together, they provide a broader understanding of the historical and cultural backdrop of the Old Testament, making the content more accessible and illuminating its theological significance.
3. **What does the archaeology of Mari reveal about the Amorites, and how are they portrayed in the Old Testament?** Archaeological findings at Mari highlight the Amorites as a widespread, diverse culture unified by a mobile, pastoral way of life and a specific language. They were not a unified nation, but rather a loosely defined polity. The Old Testament acknowledges the Amorites as a presence in the central highland regions of ancient Israel before the Iron Age, often portraying them negatively, associating them with Canaanite paganism and even attributing them as the cause of sin for some kings, which echoes the negative views found in some Mesopotamian texts.

4. **What is "dimorphism" in the context of ancient Near Eastern societies, and how does Mari illuminate this concept?** "Dimorphism" describes societies composed of distinct but collaborating elements, often referring to the interaction between urban, settled populations and mobile, pastoral groups. Mari's texts document the tension and interaction between these two spheres, highlighting how each group functioned within the larger society. The texts at Mari document this type of societal structure, which helps to illuminate the backdrop of some Old Testament narratives.
5. **How do the Mari texts help us understand the role of prophets in ancient Near Eastern societies and how is that related to the prophets of the Old Testament?** The texts from Mari reveal that prophecy was a diverse institution with prophets playing a vital social role. Various terms were used to describe prophets, whose profiles are defined more by their function than their title. The texts show that prophecy was both inductive (based on observations) and intuitive (divinely received) and was associated with times of crisis. The Mari texts highlight prophets both central to power structures and on the fringes, mirroring the dynamics seen with the prophets in the Old Testament. It shows that the function of the prophets at Mari is similar to the function of the prophets in the Old Testament, and helps to give the context of the institution of the prophets.
6. **What is the Gilgamesh Epic, and what is its basic storyline?** The Gilgamesh Epic is an ancient Mesopotamian text recounting the exploits of the historical king of Uruk, Gilgamesh. The story follows Gilgamesh's journey with his companion Enkidu, their slaying of the forest deity Humbaba, and the subsequent punishment from the gods that led to the death of Enkidu. Gilgamesh embarks on a quest for immortality, seeking out the immortal Utnapishtim, who tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood. While Gilgamesh is unable to achieve immortality, the story highlights some of the big questions of what it means to be human.

7. **How was the Gilgamesh Epic discovered, and what is the importance of its discovery?** The discovery of the Gilgamesh Epic was a gradual process, with initial fragments found by archaeologists like Austin Henry Layard and Hormuz Rassam in the 19th century. George Smith, a British Museum repairer, was instrumental in piecing together and translating the texts, including Tablet XI which contained the flood narrative. The discovery was important because it revealed a Mesopotamian account of a great flood with significant parallels to the biblical narrative, prompting discussions about the origins and context of biblical texts. It also offered valuable insights into ancient Near Eastern worldview and scribal practices.
8. **What are the main implications of the Gilgamesh Epic for our understanding of the Old Testament?** The Gilgamesh Epic serves primarily as a comparative tool for understanding the Old Testament. It illustrates the literary development and editing processes of ancient texts, offering a parallel model for understanding how the biblical canon may have developed. Furthermore, it provides crucial insights into the ancient Near Eastern worldview, allowing for a better understanding of the theological significance and unique characteristics of the biblical narratives, particularly in regards to how they portray God's nature and humanity's purpose. It shows a comparison between how Israel and its surrounding neighbors understood divinity, which gives a better understanding to the unique theological potency of the Bible.