

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN DIPLOMACY AND THE HEBREW BIBLE: SELECTED EXAMPLES OF EARLY CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

FELIPE A. MASOTTI¹

Abstract: The diplomatic letters from Amarna, Mari and Ugarit are among some of the oldest extant documents on diplomacy. They show a vast array of linguistic and cultural features proper to the covenantal language of Ancient Near Eastern documents from the 2nd millennium BCE. These features are closely related to selected actions, words and background information found in the Hebrew Bible (HB). The present article explores characteristics of these diplomatic texts, presenting features that are pertinent to the study of the Hebrew Bible. It concludes, probing the potential parallelism between them, with particular cases representing similar cultural phenomena found between potential parallel texts.

Keywords: Diplomatic Letters; Amarna; Mari; Ugarit; Diplomacy; Ancient Near East; Hebrew Bible.

A DIPLOMACIA DO ANTIGO ORIENTE PRÓXIMO E A BÍBLIA HEBRAICA: EXEMPLOS SELETOS DE DIPLOMACIA CULTURAL ANTIGA

Resumo: As cartas diplomáticas de Amarna, Mari e Ugarite estão entre alguns dos mais antigos documentos existentes sobre o fenômeno diplomático no Antigo Oriente Médio. Elas mostram uma vasta gama de características linguísticas e culturais próprias da linguagem pactual de documentos do Antigo Oriente Próximo a partir do início do 2º milênio AEC. Essas características são análogas a ações, palavras e informações particulares encontradas na Bíblia

¹ Mestre em Teologia Bíblica (Unasp, Engenheiro Coelho – SP). Doutorando em Exegese do Antigo Testamento (PhD, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, EUA). Professor do Seminário Adventista Latino-Americano de Teologia (IAP, Ivatuba – PR). Contato: femasotti@yahoo.com.br.

Hebraica. O presente artigo explora as características desses textos, apresentando detalhes pertinentes ao estudo da Bíblia Hebraica. Conclui-se, exemplificando o paralelismo entre eles, com casos específicos de fenômenos culturais semelhantes entre os textos paralelos.

Palavras-chave: Cartas Diplomáticas; Amarna; Mari; Ugarite; Diplomacia; Antigo Oriente Próximo; Bíblia Hebraica.

1. Introduction

Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) archives and libraries served several purposes, such as the preservation of the ritual texts, the training of scribes, the supernatural communication through omens, and the storage of historiographic accounts, treaties, and diplomatic documents. Therefore, archival systems were an essential feature of the ANE empires' rise, beginning in the Old Babylonian period, although they already appeared earlier (PODANY, 2010, p. 19–36).

The ability to store written material, the development of an international language, the rise of a web of sovereign empires, and the existence of a message exchange led to the development of the first known diplomatic system in human history. This system fostered an international interdependence based on the family metaphor of the ANE *paterfamilias* (DRUCKMAN; GÜNER, 2000, p. 174–190). It flourished particularly at the time of the so-called “Amorite kingdoms” (18th and 17th centuries BCE), being crystalized during the Amarna Age (15th to 14th centuries BCE). The system—or systems—was (were) finally supplanted by the arrival of empires—Greek and Roman—that held universal claims, which, therefore, could not play politically in the molds of the ANE Suzerain-patterned power balance (LAFONT, 2001, p. 39–41).

Several epistolary letters have made their way through the millennia and are available to the modern research of ANE diplomacy. These letters register the use of keen political movements, the standard language for international communication, international marriages for the consolidation of coalitions, and a plethora of orchestrated geopolitical movements, among others, that complement the historical and technical knowledge supplied by ANE treaty tablets (LEMAIRE, 1995, p. 119–142).

The present article probes such an ANE diplomatic activity, as found in the central archives of such nature, and offers a few comparisons with Pentateuchal material, demonstrating the existence of diplomatic language in the first books of the Hebrew Bible (HB). The analyzed documents are drawn from the archives of Amarna, Mari, and Ugarit. These documents register the development of the closest treaty traditions to the biblical covenant. Nonetheless, it is essential to add that cities such as Alalakh, Bogazkhöy, Qatna, and Babylon have also provided substantial material for analysis. However, for the sake of space, relevance, and the relatively smaller percentage of diplomatic texts in these cities, they are not directly presented here. Finally, the article explores a few biblical correlations with the analyzed diplomatic letters.

2. The Amarna Letters

The now so-called Amarna letters are around 380 letters found in Tell el-Amarna in Egypt, circa 180 miles south of modern Cairo. The finding was made on the ruins of king Amenhotep IV's palace (ca. 1377–1360 BCE) in 1887 by a Bedouin woman from a local tribe.

Her name, 'Amran, was adopted for the common designation of the Tell and its letters. After an illegal excavation, local dealers sold them to the Berlin (201 tablets), British (82), and Cairo (51) museums. Subsequent excavations unearthed additional 44 tablets (NA'AMAN, 1992, p. 174). By 1987—a century from the first discoveries—a full academic edition was offered in French containing “extensive philological discussions, and detailed indexes” (NA'AMAN, 1992, p. 174).

The study of the letters has led to the distinction of three categories of documents: (1) international correspondence between Pharaoh and other ANE great powers; (2) imperial documents registering petitions from rulers of Egypt's vassals Canaan to Pharaoh; and (3) tablets with exercises for scribal schools. Of particular interest for this article are the two first categories, consisting of 344 letters. The tablets' period covers the late 18th Egyptian Dynastic Period (1390–1295 BCE) (MORAN, 1987).

Egypt's equal Canaanite parties were Babylon (EA 1–14), Assyria (EA 15–16), Mitanni (EA 17, 19–30), Arzawa (EA 31–32), Alasia (EA 33–40), and Hatti (EA 41–44). These kings conveyed what scholars have called “The Great Powers' Club” (LIVERANI, 2000, p. 15–27). They had a standard language to greet each other. They would refer to any group member as “brother” and would be the only ones who could receive the epithet “great king.” The brotherhood language evidences the adoption of the figure of the *paterfamilias* as the cultural framework to international relations in the Amarna Age.

The great kings continually kept an active line of communication through their ambassadors. These professionals would bring written and oral messages from their respective kings, as well as expensive gifts. The exchange of luxury goods was a signal of good relations among the great powers (LIVERANI, 1972, p. 297–317). The letters register complaints about the quality of the gifts (ZACCAGNINI, 1973), especially of those coming from Egypt, and frequent petitions for Egyptian gold, which was the primary source of the material for the club:

May my brother send me in very great quantities gold that has not been worked, and may my brother send me much more gold than he did to my father. In my brother's country, gold is as plentiful as dirt. May the gods grant that, just as now gold is plentiful in my brother's country, he makes it even ten times more plentiful than now. May the gold that I ask for not become a source of distress to my brother, and may my brother not cause me distress. May my brother send me in very large quantities gold that has not been worked. Whatever my brother needs for his house, let him write and take (it). I will give ten times more than what my brother asks for. This country is my brother's country, and this house is my brother's house (MORAN, 1992, p. 44–45).

This letter was sent by Tušratta of Mittani to Nimmureya of Egypt, asking for an exchange of precious materials on a large scale. Interestingly, however, is the direct Mittanian suggestion that its bound to Egypt would be higher than previous royal generations could the amount of exchanged gifts be raised.

The exchange of women also signaled good relations among the great powers' club. However, a curious Egyptian idiosyncratic pattern was the denial for sending Egyptian princesses to Canaan. In EA 4:6–7, a Babylonian king firmly questions Pharaoh on this matter:

[Moreove]r, you, my brother, when I wrote [to you] about marrying your daughter, in accordance with your practice of not gi[ving] (a daughter), [wrote to me], saying, “From time immemorial no daughter of the king of Egy[pt] is given to anyone.” Why n[ot]?

The Babylonian king goes over attempting to constrain Pharaoh. With his arguments, he betrays his intentions, saying that any woman could have been sent as a Pharaoh's daughter,

for nobody would know she was not. This suggestion demonstrates that being part of the international brotherhood was also socially appealing within the club and surrounding minor states, especially if a princess and prince from the “brothers” married.

As seen, the interdependence of the great powers was connected to a need for status maintenance (ZACCAGNINI, 2000, p. 141–153). Therefore, changing the way one treated the other could signal the deliberate lowering of a kingdom’s status, which was strictly intolerable by the club’s members. Therefore, intelligence activities, even within the club, were routine and evident in their awareness about each other’s business (COHEN, 2000, p. 85–98). Alternatively, however, they would gladly boast about their position in the club to each other by freely giving supposedly secret information, a practice that may have fostered the anxiety registered in these letters (AVRUCH, 2000, p. 154–164):

When Aššur-Nadin-aḫḫe, my ancestor, wrote to Egypt, 20 talents of gold were sent to him. [W]hen the king of Ḫanigalbat [wr]ote to your father in Egy[pt], [h]e sent 20 talents of gold to him. [Now] I am the [equal] of the king of Ḫani[galba]t, but you sent me [...] of gold, and it is not enough [f]or the pay of my messengers on the journey to and back (MORAN, 1992, p. 39).

Besides the obsession for reciprocity, the language above indicates that these kings saw the entire ANE territory as the coexistence of neighboring paterfamilias’ tribes, as if the thousands of kilometers between some of them were not farther than the next village. This mindset was crucial to maintaining their local “tribal-type” kingdom, for being part of this club may have served as a propagandistic tool against a vassal’s potential rebellious pretension (NA’AMAN, 1992, p. 176).

The great powers’ letters also demonstrate the use of diplomatic service for pursuing mutual interests (ARTZI, 2000, p. 205–211). An example is a correspondence between Mitanni and Egypt, which conveys a set of documents richly forged with a complex diplomatic language. The letters show a clear mutual interest of approximation by displaying the international marriage of a Mittanian princess with Pharaoh and the exchange of luxury goods. Of particular importance to this international relation is the letter EA 24, in which the Mittanian king proposes a series of measures to form a mutual defense agreement with Egypt. Among the pieces of information provided by this long letter is the agreement about the diplomatic service that should carry the letters between the kingdoms:

And evil words are not spoken to my brother. And an evil word that anyone may say about me (or) about my land, —may my brother not hear those words if Mane and Kelaniya do not say them. But the (words) that Mane and Kelaniya say about me (or) about my land, they are true and right, and may my brother hear them. That too that anyone might express to me about my brother (or) about his land, those (words) I will not hear if Kelaniya and Mane do not say them. But what Kelaniya and Mane will say about my brother (or) about his land, they (the words) are true and right, and I will hear them (MORAN, 1992, p. 69).

The Mittani king sought an exclusive line of communication with Egypt, possibly doing so due to military rumors around him. However, unlike a vassal kingdom, he employed “elite ambassadors,” which seems to have been a privilege of the great powers.

The Egyptian correspondence to its vassals is the most extensive set of documents from Tell-Amarna, with 300 tablets. These letters show a different language from the previous type. They convey messages from vassals who present themselves in a consistent, self-deprecating pattern, as the letter sent from the king of Lakiša to Pharaoh shows:

To the king, my lord, [my] God, my Sun, the Sun from the sky: Message of Yabni-Ilu, the ruler of Lakiša, your servant, the dirt at your feet, the groom of your horses. I indeed prostra[te] myself at the feet of the king, my lord, my God, my Sun, the Sun from the sky, 7 times and 7 times, on the stomach and on the back. As to the [com]missioner [of] the king, my lord, [wh]om [the k]ing, my lord, sent to m[e], I have indeed heard all the words that Maya, the kin[g's] commissioner, has spoken to me. I am indeed carrying out every one of them (MORAN, 1992, p. 354).

Almost all the letters show the pattern presented above. However, this does not mean that the Egyptian vassals could not or did not wish to expand their territory, for ascending to the first rank of the great powers' club was a widespread desire.

The vassal correspondence shows that the Egyptian administration of its Canaanite territory during the Amarna age was divided into three provinces, which contained garrison cities as their administrative offices. The provinces were (1) Gaza, Palestine, and the Phoenician coast; (2) Sumur and the land of Amurru; and (3) Kuniu, administering an area including the whole perimeter defined by Qadesh, Hazor, and northern Transjordan (MORRIS, 2005). The letters devoted to issues regarding the northern Canaan demonstrate one of the corpus's major problems, the rise of Amurru as a dominant force in the region and its change from an Egyptian to a Hittite vassal.

Together with documents found in Hatti, the information provided by the Amarna archive suggests that Amurru became a strong kingdom after the destruction of Mittani by Hittite forces, shifting its vassalage towards Hatti and concealing it from Egypt:

To the king, my lord, my god, my [S]un: Message of Aziru, your servant. I fall at the feet of my lord 7 times and 7 times. Now as to a(NY) request that the Sun, my lord, makes, I am [yo]ur servant forever, and my sons are your servants. I herewith give [my] sons as 2 att[endants], and they are to do what the k[ing, my lord], orders. But let him leave [me] in Amurru (MORAN, 1992, p. 242).

Aziru's attempt to avoid traveling to Egypt hints at his concealed plans and keen strategical movements, showing with vivid details that the diplomatic language reflected by the tablets was a way to maintain the region's stability forcefully. On the other hand, the vassals' submissive language was not necessarily a sign of actual submission (DEVECCHI, 2012, p. 38-48; MORRIS, 2010, p. 413-438).

Another characteristic of the Amarna diplomacy is the vassals' consistent pursuit of Egyptian favor. Several requests and, sometimes, excessive addressing of their Suzerain indicates the need for constant acknowledgment and prevention of eventual political and military problems. An interesting case is the pedant correspondence from Byblos (PRYKE, 2011, p. 411-422). Accordingly, king Rib-Hadda of Byblos is the vassal king who most sent letters to Egypt. The issues are varied, but his posture follows a pattern, the repetitiveness, and the insistence on earning Egypt's favor by showing that he is alone suffering for his Suzerain. In nine letters, he replies to the Egyptian instruction that he should guard himself and his city with the assertion that such is impossible. He also replies to an Egyptian request for gold by saying he has none. It seems that Rib-Hadda searches every occasion to show himself as a poor and suffering vassal. Such might have been a calculated strategy to avoid the official protocol of sending gifts to the Suzerain while maintaining his protection until a more favorable panorama takes place.

The study of Amarna letters adds considerable information to the ANE diplomatic system of the Amarna Age. They also provide information about the political and military concealed agendas behind the treaties and international agreements of the period. Such

information conveys an essential matrix for comparative studies with biblical material (NA'AMAN, 1992, p. 179).

3. The Mari Letters

For almost one millennium, Tell-Hariri, located in the modern Iraq-Syria border, on the right bank of the Euphrates was the “ideal bridge among the great cultures: Sumerians and Akkadians to the South; Canaanites and Syrians to the West; Assyrians to the Northeast; Elamites to the East” (SASSON, 2015, p. 1). The place is the location of the ancient city of Mari, which was occupied from the early third millennium to the early second millennium BCE. French expeditions have excavated the city since 1933 (PARROT, 1935, p. 1–28). As a result of the archaeological and epigraphic work, thousands of tablets have been uncovered from Tell-Hariri and surrounding minor archives. These tablets attest several kinds of documents, such as:

[1] Letters, exchanged among kings, officials, kin, and diplomats; [2] compacts (drafts and versions of oaths and protocols) between cities as represented by their rulers; [3] a wealth of administrative texts, of great diversity, including many lists registering individuals for diverse purposes (harem functionaries, artisans, draftees, *tēbibtum* conscription, ransomed individuals). There are records of actions (protocols and oath-taking), registers of goods moving in (*šūrubtum*) and out of (*šūbultum*) Mari, audit inventories, disbursements (of animals, raw material, and completed objects) to temples and provinces, as well as a vast record of outlays for the king's meals (*naptan šarrim*); [4] scribal memoranda on activities that must be done; [5] a limited number of juridical texts, registering contracts and loans; [6] ritual scenarios; [and 7] cultic documents, among which we may include a couple of *eršahungû* (bilingual penitential prayers), several incantations, one in Hurrian, and an “eponym chronicle” that focuses on the family of Samsi-Addu and its deeds (SASSON, 2015, p. 4–5).

Although the city shows clear signs of a previous extensive settlement, the principal period represented by the tablets is the Old Babylonian (ca. 2003–1595 BCE). These documents mention several kings who played their role in establishing the city's last dynasty. The last king of Mari, Zimri-Lim, reigned for 14 years until the destruction of the city by Hamurabi of Babylon in 1759 BCE, who transported the population to Babylon and destroyed the city as a preventive effort to hinder the rise of new rival power (CHARPIN; ZIEGLER, 2003, p. 250–252; SASSON, 1998, p. 453–470).

As a result of its destruction by the Babylonians, the main textual corpora (around 80% of the total) found in the city is from Zimri-Lim's reign. The significance of this archive for the study of the diplomacy of the ANE rests upon a large number of diplomatic letters, with detailed descriptions of negotiations and Mari's representatives' perspectives about interstate relations (SASSON, 2013, p. 119–129). When combined with the information drawn from minor surrounding archives, the highly developed diplomatic system of Zimri-Lim's reign assumes a complex nature.

The first aspect to be noticed on the nature of his vast international apparatus is his search for luxury goods of several kinds. Durand and Guichard (2012, p. 9–18) demonstrate that there are registers of his demands for tin and animals as tributes from vassals and gifts from international brotherhood. Charpin and Ziegler (2003, p. 65) have shown that wood was also a recurrent material used as a gift. Kupper (1994, p. 265–270) observes that glass could also be used as a tribute. Of particular interest is the relation between the payments of

compensation for several kinds of actions aimed at maintaining the Suzerain of Mari's assigned order:

My lord looked at me with his kind gaze ("benevolent eyes"), thus determining my destiny. He instructed Itur-asdu as follows, "You must now release towns of mine (controlled by) Yakun-Dir." Having reached the heartland, I had not yet witnessed Itur-asdu's travel. Just now, however, he arrived and I asked him, "Why do you still retain my towns?" He has in no way satisfied me, even when he pledged to show up. Itur-asdu does not release even half a cubit of these towns. Yet Šubram (of Susa) is retaining 10 (of these) towns. So, to whom must I kowtow now: Itur-asdu or Šubram? Now, if it suits my lord, he should send one of his servants to act as inspector for me, so that he could restore the district to my control. I shall gladly pay in silver the nēbeḥum-compensation I have promised (SASSON, 2015, p. 54).

The somewhat natural increase of Zimri-Lim's wealth was backed by an intense preoccupation with keeping a vast array of diplomats, who had power for negotiation and confrontation over the king's vassals (SASSON, 2015, p. 87–88). This class of workers oversaw Mari's interests, including merchants and even those who married allies. The brotherhood language was used for the diplomatic texts, being deviations from such diplomatic protocol harshly condemned, as a letter from a Marian diplomat in Aleppo to Zimri-Lim demonstrates:

When I asked him this, he (Yarim-Lim of Aleppo) shouted, "What? To give (him up)? (Zimri-Lim) wants of me something unacceptable." Because I had insisted on his delivery and he did not give him to me, he was then summoned and (Yarim-Lim) addressed him, "why do you set yourself on a par with Zimri-Lim by writing him as 'brother'?" Once he told him this, he denied it, saying, "I did not write." As he denied it, I confronted him. Later, (Yarim-Lim) summoned him and said, "You will write (Zimri-Lim) as 'father' and lord. When doing so, you will write, 'To my 'father' and lord.' This is how you will write. Now go, this and that sheik will take the following sacred oath in the temple of Addu: 'Any enemy, here or elsewhere, who becomes hostile to Zimri-Lim, I shall battle while giving help (to Zimri-Lim).' All those sheiks who are with you must take an oath, so that your lord (Zimri-Lim) can commit ('touch his throat') and thus true peace can be achieved (DURAND, 2002, p. 4–7).

The emphasis on maintaining the international linguistic protocol evidences the already mentioned concept of diplomatic signaling, which involves the patterned use of language to signal either changes or continuity of a given accorded international arrangement (SASSON, 2015, p. 86–87). Therefore, a king who belonged to the vassal rank could show aspirations for a higher rank by addressing his Suzerain as "brother" instead of the standard epithet "father and lord." The importance of these protocols is also attested in the correspondence between Mari and its powerful Mediterranean sister, Babylon.

Several documents deal with disputes between Mari and Babylon, being these mainly reports from Marian ambassadors about discords involving territory. The kingdoms seldom had disputes over important cities along their border. Additionally, the letters offer information about the elaborated protocol ambassadors would go through when on a mission to Babylon. Issues such as the treatment given by the Babylonian king to the ambassadors of different cities-state in official banquets and the differences in their position and rituals at the banquet table were often mentioned in letters from ambassadors to Mari's king.

These features add to the understanding of the interstate atmosphere of the period. Even though these could be aspects exclusively proper to Zimri-Lim's kingdom, the information about several other kingdoms and their ambassadors rather suggests a genuinely international community using a well-developed diplomatic matrix. This is especially valid regarding the

information some letters give about the procedures the ratification of an international treaty or an oath between kings would involve. They seem to show that the process could be classified as either face-to-face or long-distance agreements (LAFONT, 2001, p. 213–328; EIDEM, 2011; CHARPIN, 2010, p. 154–177). The first would involve a direct meeting of rulers. The second was intermediated by diplomats who could carry back and forth successive preliminary drafts of the text to be agreed on until the final version went through a ritual of homologation in the local deity's shrine.

An example of a face-to-face agreement is a letter from Yasim-El, Zimri-Lim's envoy to the vassal kingdoms in the Habur valley, who supervised a treaty agreement between these vassal kingdoms. The letter shows that it was possible to vassal kingdoms to settle on treaty relations, forming a kind of "minor brotherhood" subservient to a common Suzerain:

When Asqur-Addu heard this assertion of Marduk-nišu, he answered him, "Aside from Zimri-Lim, our father and leader of the kings of this entire upper land, the name/prestige of another king could be established here and there." Conciliatory words thus came out from his mouth. In their deliberation and in their covenant-making, the kings have thus set my lord as their father and leader. Before the donkey-foal was slaughtered, Atamrum signaled to Asqur-Addu and told him the following, "You are my 'son'; keep it so! I want now to talk to Ḥaqba-ḥammu and the elders of Numḥa." He then summoned Ḥaqba-ḥammu and the elders of Numḥa, and engaged them as follows, "Before the donkey-foal is slaughtered and the oath by the gods is taken, take a bit of time and tell me what is yours for me to release." Because he thus addressed them, they claimed an arable field. Atamrum answered, "As to this field, having sown (it) myself, I want to harvest it and haul away (even) my chaff. But after the harvest, the thunderbolt of Addu and the weapon of Šamaš should lie down on this field and so authenticate the owner in his field. If the field is yours, take it! But if it is mine, then I shall take it." Because Atamrum spoke in this manner, they voiced their approval. Aside from this field, there is no other claim among them. So, by their donkey-foal (sacrifice) and their deliberation, (each) king is fixed in the whole land (SASSON, 2015, p. 94).

There are two examples of a long-distance agreement involving a king of Mari, one of his vassals and a suzerain equal party (KITCHEN; LAWRENCE, 2012, p. 218–219). However, evidence about such a document's procedures appears in a letter between a Marian ambassador and Zimri-Lim. The letter not only details such procedures but remarkably demonstrates the existence of intelligence activity in ANE:

About matters regarding the ruler of Ešnunna that Hammurabi has charged me with and which I have communicated to my lord: When Hammurabi went to Borsippa, messengers for the ruler of Ešnunna reached him but (did not meet) with him. The next day they sat before him (at supper). He had them stay overnight, and then responded to their message. He instructed Sin-[x], son of Kakkaruqim, and Marduk-mušallim ... and sent them on a mission with them. They took a small tablet with them, (with terms) on which they will have the ruler of Ešnunna commit ("touch his throat"). When [x] will come here, Hammurabi will commit (with the terms). Once they (both) commit to the terms on the small tablet, Hammurabi will convey to the ruler of Ešnunna a large tablet, a register of stipulations, upon which he will have the ruler of Ešnunna take an oath. The ruler of Ešnunna will then remit the large tablet, the register of stipulations, to Hammurabi. They will then have contracted an accord between them. The accord between them is already set, or will be so shortly. This is quite clear. Now, so far no reply from the group of Sin-[x] and Marduk-mušallim has come back to me from Ešnunna, so I have not posted this news to my lord. I will post my lord whatever news reaches me from Ešnunna after (sending) this tablet (SASSON, 2015, p. 96).

The letter shows the dynamics behind a long-distance agreement:

1. The Suzerain sends a small tablet to the vassal.
2. To which the vassal agrees and makes an oath.
3. The messenger comes back to the Suzerain as a witness of the vassal's oath.
4. The Suzerain makes the oath and prepares a big tablet.
5. The tablet is sent to be stored in the vassal's local deity's temple (EIDEM, 2011, p. 257–258).

The Mari letters add several elements to the knowledge about ANE treaty cultures. However, the central perception about these documents is that the kings of the period were prone to a high level of diplomatic activity. It is also suggestive that the proximity to another Suzerain region, Babylon, led to Mari's relatively swift destruction, even in the face of the intense diplomatic relation between the two powers. Such geographical proximity and the exchange of letters may show that Mari's diplomatic activity samples the overall diplomacy of the period. Another observation that supports this possibility is the almost total absence of preserved treaty tablets, even though the diplomatic tablets mention them abundantly. Scholars have theorized that these documents were either taken by Hamurabi during his destruction of Mari or hidden by the city's officials before the impending attack. Both possibilities show a treaty tablet's essential and sacred natures for these kingdoms (DURAND, 1992, p. 525–38).

These documents also help understand the maintenance of the different strategies employed to enforce obedience. Dynastic marriages, calculated wars, and diplomatic negotiations show that the region's geopolitical balance in this period was a carefully crafted project (SASSON, 2015, p. 183).

4. The Ugaritic Letters

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Tell Ras-Shamra lies on the northern Mediterranean coast of in Syria. Claude Schaffer excavated the place uninterruptedly from 1929 until the beginning of the Second World War (SCHNIEDEWIND, 2007, p. 8–9). The Tell's stratigraphic level I corresponds to the period from which the majority of the tablets were found (1600–1180 BCE). The work unearthed a once-prosperous city, with its religious activity connected to the gods Dagan and Baal. Additionally, hundreds of cuneiform tablets were found in the temple and palace areas. These were written in a local west-semitic cuneiform consonantal script—the now called Ugaritic language—, Akkadian, Sumerian and Hurrian.

The 1,500 Ugaritic texts so far published, were found in approximately seventeen archives, and represent several textual categories: (1) religious and Ritual texts; (2) epistolary texts, containing royal and non-royal letters; and (3) administrative texts, containing lists, official acts and commercial documents (PARDEE, 1992, p. 706). For the purposes of this section the main focus will be on the epistolary texts, which are divided in royal and non-royal letters.

The royal letters from Ugarit were mainly written in Akkadian, for they concern international diplomatic issues. A first important observation of these letters is that the family terminology was not always used in the same fashion of other ANE sources. Whereas Ugarit's Suzerain, the Hittite king, always writes with the epithet "the Sun, the king of Hatti" (PARDEE, 1992, p. 710), other vassals and presumably kings with an equal status addressed the kings of Ugarit using the terms "son" and "father" (PARDEE, 1992, p. 710). However, only the Hittite king addressed the Ugaritic king by name (PARDEE, 1992, p. 711). This slight derivation of the standard international language may indicate that there could have been different linguistic protocols in operation within the several ANE diplomatic areas.

“The content of the royal letters is similar to that of the hundreds of known Akkadian letters from the region: usually matters of tribute and trade, duties to the ‘Great Kings’ of Hatti and Egypt and responsibilities to the fellow kings of the region” (PARDEE, 1992, p. 711). Like the Amarna and Mari letters, Ugarit’s royal correspondence displays the use of diplomatic representatives for political negotiation. An interesting letter found in Ugarit samples this reality:

Tudhaliya, the king of Hatti, sent me a second messenger carrying two tablets (proposing) war and one tablet (proposing) peace. He presented me with the two tablets of war. When my soldiers heard these messages of war they burned to march (into combat), and the messenger of the king of Hatti saw it. After three days had passed, the messenger of the king of Hatti presented me with the tablet of peace and on that tablet it was written: “(I swear) by the Storm-god and by the Sun-goddess that I am not at war with the king of Assyria, my brother, [but rather that] I am at peace. (I swear that) the fugitives ... I will return to him and the soldiers of ... who fled from before the king of Assyria and ... and entered the land of Hatti, I ... and I will return (them) to the king of Assyria. ... Why should we, who are brothers, be at war with each other?” (TUGENDHAFT, 2018, p.120)

It seems that this letter is a report given by the Assyrian king to the Ugaritic king about the alleged treacherous behavior of Tudhaliya. The letter goes on by trying to show how the Hittite king’s behavior finally led Assyria and Hatti to war. The Hittite ambassador’s concealment of the possibility of peace stirred the Assyrian army up, which was subsequently melted into a peace agreement by a calculated move. Scholars have noticed the importance of this document, for it shows how crucial a diplomat could have been in the period (MEIER, 1989, p. 170–173).

Another interesting feature from the Ugaritic royal diplomacy is that it parallels the poetry found in its mythic literature. Aaron Tugendhaft has interestingly theorized that the so-called “Baal’s cycle,” has been written with a brotherhood language proper to the interstate official correspondence of the period: “Your vassal is Baal, O Yamm, your vassal is Baal, [O River;] The son of Dagan, your captive; He will bring your tribute, as the gods, bring [your gift,] as the holy ones, your offerings” (TUGENDHAFT, 2012, p. 89–104). The poetic representation of the international brotherhood into a mythic account, however, may also have given the Ugaritic kings the idea that they were mimicking the gods while observing a patterned international protocol.

Another set of important documents for the study of the diplomacy of the period is the non-royal epistolary letters. These letters show an interesting communication between members of the Ugaritic royal household and foreign important members of their local and surrounding society(ies). The royal household used a big array of titles (PARDEE, 1992, p. 712) in their communication, and seemed to resemble the wording used between the kings in the wider ANE diplomatic scenario:

To Yarduma, our master, say: Message of Pinhathu and of Yarimhaddu, your servants. Greetings to our master! May the gods guard you and keep you well. At the feet of our master twice seven times we fall from afar. Here Bin-Ayyana is continually making requests to your maidservant. So send a message to him and refuse him. As for me, I have taken on a workman and repaired the house (PARDEE, 1992, p. 712).

The interesting aspect of this letter is the use of the titles “master” and “servants” together with the customary royal addressing formula “to fall at one’s master feet.” The document seems to demonstrate that a local minor royal households would communicate in

the same terms of its immediately superior administrative circle, which possibly indicates that even lower realms could have had their own protocols resembling wider ones.

The study of the Ugaritic epistolary letters sheds light over the apparent ubiquitous use of a diplomatic language varying in accordance with its respective royal realm. The variation happened within a concentric social structure having the local king orbiting the realm around the great Suzerain—who, in the Ugarit's case, was the Hittite king. These “realms” present the same evidence for the use of diplomacy as found in other archives. But unlike these, the Ugaritic letters reveal a vassal king in contact with his peers and nobility, instead of a Suzerain receiving messages from his vassals or equals.

5. Concluding Biblical Remarks

Apprehending the diplomatic realm within which several ANE periods operated helps understand the background of certain scenes described in the HB. A few examples of textual correlation between the diplomatic practices demonstrated above and the HB probe the interpretive usefulness of Amarna, Mari, and Ugaritic diplomatic texts.

The first set of textual parallels comes from the Amarna letters. Several geographical and structural correlations are found between these documents and the HB. A general one is a close relationship between the description of the city of Shechem in the days of Abimelech (Jdg 9) and the Canaanite cities in the Amarna letters. An interesting feature of both sources is the mutual description of a Canaanite city in terms of rulership. Judges 9 narrates the ruling of Abimelech, son of Gideon, over Shechem. According to the chapter, he convinced the men of the city to give him money for hiring mercenaries so he could murder his brothers and reign alone (vv. 1–5). The account shows a local council that resembles those mentioned in the Amarna letters, against which several Canaanite kings asked Egypt for help:

Then they moved against me, but I killed them. They said, “How long can you go on killing us? Where will you get people to live in the city?” So I wrote to the palace for troops, but no troops were given <to> me. Then the city said, “Abandon him. Let’s join Aziru!” I said, “How could I join him and abandon the king, my lord?” Then my brother spoke and [sw]ore to the city. They had a discussion a[n]d the lords of the city [were] joined to the sons of ‘Abdi-Ašrati (MORAN, 1992, p. 222).

This description shows a keen negotiation made by Rib-Addi of Byblos to retake the city of Asirty back into a vassalage relation to Egypt. Interestingly, the negotiation follows the same pattern found in Judges 9, with the lords—men—of the city entering in a meeting with the local king and settling their choice for a Suzerain, after the death of many people. Furthermore, the Hebrew term (כְּלִי-בַעַלִּי) used for describing the lords of Shechem is the same Akkadian term (bēlē āli) used in the Amarna letters for the leaders of the Canaanite cities (NA’AMAN, 1992, p. 179).

Another example stems from the Amarna corpus, which provides that Pharaohs would not give their daughters as wives for foreign kings (EA 4:8–22). This information offers a critical window into the significance of Solomon’s marriage with an Egyptian princess. Accordingly, 1Kgs 3 registers Solomon’s treaty with an Egyptian king ratified by a royal marriage. Under the light provided by the Amarna Letters, this would have been a remarkable event due to Pharaoh’s special treatment of Solomon. Accordingly, the Israelite king would have been recognized by Egypt as part of his time’s great powers’ club.

The second set of correlations with the HB involves the book of Genesis. Both Abraham’s meeting with Abimelech (Gen 21:22–32) and Isaac’s with the same king (Gen 26:26–31) closely

resemble the treaty mentioned above between Mari's northern vassal kingdoms of the Harbur valley. This treaty was supervised by Zimri-Lim's envoy, Yasim-El, and had a ceremonial meal before its oath ratification:

Once they came to agreement on their particulars, establishing terms for treaty-making, the donkey-foal was immolated. They made each other take sacred oaths and sat to toast (each other). Once they carved (the meat) *igrušu* and drank their cups, they exchanged gifts between themselves; then, Asqur-Addu broke camp toward his land, and Atamrum did the same into Andarig proper (SASSON, 2015, p. 94).

Abraham's meeting with Abimelech and Phicol (Gen 21:22–32), the commander of Abimelech's army, shows several parallels with the above text: (1) the covenant is made between a minor ANE king and a tribal leader, (2) it involves animals as gifts; (3) it contains an oath blessed by a deity; and (4) the whole process is witnessed/supervised by one of Abimelech's officials. However, unlike the Marian tablet, the animals were not eaten but given to Abimelech as a sign that Abraham is indeed the owner of a well, which Abimelech's servants unjustly seized.

An even more striking parallel, however, is found in the account of Isaac's meeting with the same Abimelech, his commander Phicol and a friend named Ahuzzath (Gen 26:26–31):

Then Abimelech came to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath, one of his friends, and Phicol the commander of his army. And Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?" But they said, "We have certainly seen that the LORD is with you. So we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, between you and us; and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, since we have not touched you, and since we have done nothing to you but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.'" So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. Then they arose early in the morning and swore an oath with one another; and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace.

This account contains all the elements found in Abraham's meeting with Abimelech. Unlike it, however, it registers the making of a covenantal meal. The information that Isaac, Abimelech, and his friends "ate and drank" is a precise parallel to the same covenantal expression found in the Marian tablet. Both Abraham's and Isaac's meetings with Abimelech show that the social protocols involved in ratifying an ANE treaty/covenant/oath were a reality during the Genesis' writer's times.

Another example of "an ambassador" in the HB as connected to the Mari letters is in Genesis 24. This chapter pictures one of Abraham's servants on a mission to his master's hometown to seek a wife for Isaac. The servant received a clear message: the wife had to be from Abraham's family (v. 4), and she had herself to agree in marrying Isaac (v. 8). As a result, when the servant arrives at "the city of Nahor" (v. 11), he tests God, by asking for a woman who would give water to his camels, therefore being the one that attended Abraham's specifications. God answered the test by "sending" Rebekah to give water to the animals. However, before knowing her identity, the servant gives her "a golden nose ring weighing half a shekel, and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels of gold" (v. 22). The procedure presented in Genesis 24 resembles the royal marriage negotiations found in the Mari letters, which also register the same type of jewelry for dowry. However, the difference in the biblical account is that Abraham's ambassador negotiates with YHWH first, as demonstrated by his action of giving the gifts to Rebekah even before he knew her identity, leaving the negotiation with her father as mere ratification of God's will for her.

The third set of textual correlations regards the Ugaritic letters. The importance of these documents lies in the fact that “Ugarit reached its political and economic zenith in the thirteenth century BCE, that is, precisely the time when Israel first appears in the historical record in Canaan.” However, the Ugaritic rise as a noticeable power did not allow it to join the great powers’ club of its time, and instead, it remained one of the essential vassals of Hatti for most of its known history. This way, the Ugaritic diplomatic correspondence is primarily in Akkadian, from which two examples are drawn here.

A first example comes from one of Suppiluliuma’s letters to Niqmaddu. The opening of the letter contains the following phrase: “Thus says the Sun, Suppiluliuma, the Great King, King of Hatti, the Hero.” Several letters from Ugarit present the formula “thus says X.” All, however, are related to kings of a high status addressing either their vassals or equal parties from the great powers’ club, never the other way around. The Hittite Suzerain’s self-presentation contained in the letter finds a strong correlation to a so-called “prophetic formula” in the HB, “thus says the Lord.” The HB also uses it to describe Moses’ diplomatic address to the Edomites: “And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: Thus says your brother Israel ...” In this verse, the phrase is a clear diplomatic signal to Edom, that Israel, as a newly formed state, should be seen by Edom as an equal kingdom in the international rank.

Another example stems from the ANE traditional formula for addressing a Suzerain king: “At the feet of my Lord from afar, twice seven times I bow down.” This phrase is found in Ugaritic letters and shares a typical formulation with the Amarna letters. It is also interestingly reflected on the biblical language of the events for the ratification of the Sinaitic covenant. Talking to the elders who approached the mountain with him up to a certain point, Moses says: “Come up to YHWH ... And bow down from afar” (Exod 24:1). This formula indicates YHWH’s establishment of Israel’s ritual institutions and model of kingship at the Sinai event. Therefore, the nation was to have a divine kingship, a radical difference from other ANE treaty traditions. In Israel, YHWH not only watches over the kings’ faithful actions, but He is also king Himself.

Finally, the sevenfold bowing at the Suzerain’s feet parallels Genesis 34. The chapter narrates Jacob’s encounter with his brother after years abroad. However, before meeting Esau, verse 3 provides a suggestive piece of information: “And he passed before them, and bowed down seven times until he came to his brother.” The information is suggestive, primarily because, in the previous chapter (Gen 33), Jacob had become Israel, the forefather of YHWH’s future nation. He had also sent several messengers—ambassadors—before him as if preparing the way for the meeting with his brother, who also represented a future great nation. However, when the meeting finally happened, Israel prostrated himself as a vassal of his brother, showing a humble attitude. This action might have delivered a cultural and diplomatic message to the ancient reader, namely, that these two men—as archetypes of the future nations they would originate—found the answer to their struggle in humble diplomatic covenantal forgiveness.

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