

Who were the Babylonians? By Bill T. Arnold. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004, xi + 148 pp., \$15.95 paper.

Bill T. Arnold's book, *Who Were the Babylonians?* is a recent addition to SBL's Archaeology and Biblical Studies series. The series aims to promote the illumination of the Bible through archaeological, sociological, and historical studies.

An extensive summary would not be feasible due to the six tremendously detailed chapters, but some highlights may be helpful. The first chapter deals largely with introductory matters of geography and inhabitants and serves somewhat as an overview of later chapters. Arnold is a strong proponent of comparative analysis (provided it is not "ideologically polemical or apologetic" in nature) and argues against "isolation and restrictivism" in regard to the individual disciplines. Unfortunately, he touches only momentarily on this scholarly controversy. One indication of his thoughts on the matter can be found in a brief section regarding the significance of Babylonian studies for the Bible student. Here he highlights the literary relationship between Genesis and Babylonian texts (Enuma Elish, Gilgamesh, and Atrahasis), the historical connection between references in the HB to events in which Babylon played central roles, and the need to recognize the ideological motivation of Hebrew prophetic literature which consistently demonized Babylon. With only a few pages of support, he begins immediately to make known the particulars regarding Babylon.

Arnold's historical survey begins with the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. The entire chapter is reminiscent of Samuel Kramer's *History Begins at Sumer*. The section on the Early Dynastic Period emphasizes the Sumerian King list and ideological writing. This is followed by the Old Akkadian period which includes the separation of the Sumerians from the Semites and Akkadians and the strength of Akkad under Sargon I.

Hammurapi is perhaps the most significant ruler in the Old Babylonian Period, and he rightly takes precedence in Arnold's third chapter. His so-called "law-code" was meant to prescribe directives for the future; although set out in casuistic format, they are probably not genetically related to specific cases. The Babylonian pantheon is also surveyed and Arnold takes a middle road between Jacobsen's very detailed reconstruction of the progression of [Mesopotamian] religion and Oppenheim's opinion that a Mesopotamian religion "cannot and should not be written."

Chapter four deals with the Middle Babylonian Period and Arnold highlights the Kassite Dynasty. Despite the non-distinctiveness of their religion, their political and literary stability make them predominant at the time. The Amarna letters give great insight into this era as scribes were both busy preserving classical literature and writing anew (*Ludlul bēl nēmei* is probably from this time).

What Arnold calls the Early Neo-Babylonian period extends from the fall of the Kassites to the rise of the Chaldeans. This is a pedagogically helpful separation considering both the vast political landscape and the lack of an overarching dynasty in control. It is interesting that this is the only period in Babylonian history when *actual Babylonians* have power. One highlight of this chapter is Arnold's denunciation of Maspero's "Sea-Peoples" hypothesis in favor of a multi-faceted answer to the collapse of the Bronze Age. Another is Arnold's post-Kassite dating of *Enūma Eliš* based on the rising literary preeminence of Marduk at this time.

The Neo-Babylonian period boasts many great rulers, but Arnold's sixth chapter rightly emphasizes Nabopallasar's removal of Assyrian armies and Nebuchadnezzar's tenuous hold of Syria-Palestine. The usurper Nabonidus distinguishes himself from these two earlier giants by

making himself an ally of the past Sargonid kings and becoming a religious reformer by elevating Sîn and demoting Marduk.

My criticisms and praise merely reflect personal preferences and each reader may have different thoughts regarding these matters. Some readers may be frustrated with his avoidance of controversial issues, but the book's purpose makes it necessary for Arnold to quickly pick a side and not waste too much time on speculation (e.g. his adoption of a middle chronology dating system, despite Gasche's recent dissent). Those accustomed to reading history through the three-tiered archaeological system (Stone, Bronze, Iron) may also find difficulty with his dynastic organization, but this complexity fades quickly. I appreciated his Pan-Babylonian borrowing scenario and found his explanations on spelling (Hammurapi, Nebuchadrezzar), his annotated bibliography, and his many pictures especially enjoyable. There are numerous books to read on ANE people groups, but this is the first on a single group which is handled so briefly and still so ably. But academic brevity requires density, so be ready for sometimes overwhelming amounts of information. Some other frustrations were the use of endnotes rather than footnotes and while I respect the book's main objective, I would have liked more discussion regarding the historical reliability of ancient ideological literature. It is true that he often mentions the paucity of information in these contexts showing that he understands the issues but chooses to skirt them in keeping with his bigger purpose. On the whole, I commend Arnold for a book that should and will certainly be used in college and seminary classes on the ANE.