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## **The Seleucid Period in Light of *The Rise of Scripture*<sup>1</sup>**

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Those who have not been following Fr. Paul Nadim Tarazi's career in recent years, most notably the publication of his recent monograph *The Rise of Scripture*, might be taken aback by his audacious thesis that the Bible was produced as an anti-hellenistic epic specifically aimed at trumping the philosophical and epic literature of the Greeks—in other words, a literary act of defiance aimed at Hellenistic cultural and political hegemony. Tarazi's own literary-critical approach undermines the well-worn default modes of biblical literalist and historicizing trends that began among European (most notably German) Protestant scholars in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, he presents the Hebrew epic as an edifying story, or *mashal*, that conveys a body of essential teaching appropriate for Jews, Christians, or Muslims. Consequently, Tarazi disdains archaeology almost as much as he eschews theology; however, by situating the Bible's origin and function in a specific location, namely Coele Syria,<sup>2</sup> at a particular time, circa the third century BCE, he makes of it an artifact, and thus fair game for exposure to the rigors of scientific method.

It is important to realize that the type of archaeology Fr. Paul is opposed to is modern biblical archaeology, a pseudo-science founded in the early twentieth century by William Foxworth Albright (1891–1971), whose extensive surveys and excavations throughout Palestine were influenced and guided by the methodologically flawed conviction that archaeology reveals and supports an actual history for a dubious land called biblical Israel. Albright's many valuable methodological contributions to Syro-Palestinian archaeology notwithstanding, the generations of American, British, and Israeli archaeologists Albright influenced continue to bewitch Jewish and Christian religious conservatives with the illusory spell of biblical historicity. Each new material discovery—authentic or not—rekindles the fires of conviction that the biblical story is historically reliable to a high degree. My own twenty-year long career in Syro-Palestinian archaeology has led me to the conclusion that the remembrance of actual toponyms incorporated with plausible details in the weaving together of a grand narrative does not support the historicity of the Bible, which raises the need for producing other interpretational possibilities. The purpose here will be to explore and possibly expand the sociohistorical and archaeological underpinnings of Fr. Paul's hypothesis regarding the Bible as an anti-hellenistic, anti-urban manifesto.

It has not gone unnoticed that of all the pages devoted to hellenistic cultural and political

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reprint of an article published in the 2019 Festschrift volume in honor of V. Rev. Dr. Paul Nadim Tarazi.

<sup>2</sup> The name, which from the Seleucid era means "all Syria," generally refers to the region between the Euphrates river and the Mediterranean sea.

hegemony in the ancient Near East in *The Rise of Scripture*, no supporting scholarly citations are found other than the occasional self-referencing of the author's previous works.<sup>3</sup> This is not a deficiency, but simply an observation that Tarazi is above all a pastor—that is, a shepherd—who with staff in hand herds people through the process of careful reading to a proper understanding of Scripture. Given his nearly seven decades of faithfully proclaiming the Word, perhaps Tarazi is more than a pastor; rather, a something akin to a prophet, who has no need to cite his Source. At any rate, those of us who labor in academia's ivory city tower are not so privileged. Thus, I will be addressing the anti-hellenism thesis in *The Rise of Scripture* in scholarly historical and archaeological terms, with special attention devoted to the biblical symbols of Aram and Aramean, offering documentation and nuance to strengthen the connection between parish and classroom in line with the work and mission of OCABS. The aim here is merely to investigate, assess, and in the end provide support for Tarazi's seemingly audacious and extraordinarily unconventional claims.

### The Semitic view of man

One of the pillars of the book's argument for the "rise" of Scripture concerns the difference in anthropological perspective between the Macedonian Greeks and other peoples of the ancient Near East. Mesopotamian cosmogonies assert that human beings are basically blood-filled dirt pods that emerge from the ground and return to it when their breath departs. In the Sumerian *Song of the Hoe*, Enlil, with the help of Ninmena the birthgiver, cultivates humans like seedlings from the soil.<sup>4</sup> In the Akkadian story of *Atrahasis*, Enki commands that the blood of a slain god be mixed with clay, thus forming humans. In the *Enuma Eliš*, Marduk slays Tiamat's champion avenger Qingu, causing his blood to fall upon the dust of the ground and sprout into human beings. Finally, in the book of Genesis, God fashions *ha'adam*, the first man, from *ha'adamah*, the ground, the latter a feminine noun. (2:7) In light of this shared worldview, Fr. Paul Tarazi asserts that Mesopotamian sources not only regard human beings as inextricably tied to the ground, but they make no essential distinction among other ancient Near Eastern peoples. Thus, even the priests of Babylon are able to welcome Cyrus the Great, leader of the Persians and the Medes, as a deliverer and less a foreign conqueror.

By contrast, the Macedonian Greek leaders brought with them a variety of strange new ideas, institutions, and attitudes, all summed up in the *polis hellenis*, a term used by Strabo, Josephus, Plutarch, and others, referring to a sui generis urban phenomenon by which Macedonian hegemony was maintained over the broad expanse of Mesopotamia and its many urban settlements.<sup>5</sup>

It is archaeology, not literature, that attests to the fact that Alexander was not the first to bring Greek culture to Syria,<sup>6</sup> for such is already evident from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE onward. What Alexander brought to the region was bureaucracy in the founding of the Greek city, accompanied by the establishment of a political elite, military garrisons (*choria*) to protect them, and colonies (*katokiai*) of relocated citizens from the Greek mainland that would ostensibly support hellenist ideals, values, customs, and way of life. Its institutions included Hellenistic educational facilities

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Daniel Ayuch's review of *The Rise of Scripture* in *Theological Review* 39.1 (2018): 53-56.

<sup>4</sup> Black, J.A., Cunningham, G., Fluckiger-Hawker, E, Robson, E., and Zólyomi, G., *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford, 1998–2018.

<sup>5</sup> Getzel M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in the East from Armenia and Mesopotamia to Bactria and India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 360.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus records that the biblical Aram was designated "Syria" by the Greeks, in reference to the Assyrians (VII.63).

such as the *gymnasion* and *ephebion*, Greek theater, and other public fora, moving the heart of city life from the city gate to the city center, and the most offensive cultural imposition of all, imposition of the Greek cult.<sup>7</sup> Resistance to these institutional impositions is especially evident roughly a century later in the books of the Maccabees, where Judean taboos against nudity, disguised play-acting, an occupier's military garrison, and the installment of pagan shrines become reasons for resistance. Another factor—also evident in 1 Maccabees, but often overlooked—is the complicity of native collaborators who support the occupier for personal advantage.

## Mesopotamian urbanism and the advent of Macedonian hegemony

The way of life established by Alexander and his immediate successors in Mesopotamia only grew and intensified with the establishment of Seleucid rule. Sometime after the untimely death of Alexander, Seleucus, who was a junior officer and protégé of Perdiccas, Alexander's regent in Babylon, led a mutiny against his patron and murdered him in his tent, thus acquiring the satrapy of Babylon. For the next several years the young warrior was involved in wars among his fellow *diadochi* and eventually fled Babylon for protection in Egypt. In 312 BCE, Seleucus returned to Babylon and with Ptolemaic support proclaims the Anno Græcorum, ushering in the Seleucid era. Upon killing Antigonus “the One-Eyed” at the Battle of Ipsus (301 BCE), Seleucus becomes ruler of all the land stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to modern day Afghanistan, and founds a number of cities, most notably Seleukeia on the Tigris, and Antioch on the Orontes, a Syrian city located today in south-central Turkey. Seleukeia replaces Babylon as the key administrative and commercial center of the region, and, with the founding of Antioch, Seleucus has a new capital city in Syria.

Unlike the polis, for which abundant documentation in Greek sources exists,<sup>8</sup> only a paucity of primary texts witness to Mesopotamian urbanism before the advent of Alexander. Under the Achaemenid Persians, Mesopotamia was divided into four distinct areas comprising roughly twenty satrapies with several relatively autonomous cities. Again, archaeological research supplements the picture. The Mesopotamian city (u r u, *ālu*, in Akkadian)<sup>9</sup> was a unique institution that resulted from a process of conglomeration beginning with the sharing of social and economic power between a growing centralized administration and the temple, leading to integration among city-dwellers, agriculturalists, and pastoralists.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that anti-urban movements existed,<sup>11</sup> such as the kind we find in *The Rise of Scripture*, but mostly in the form of a symbiotic

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Seleukeia on the Tigris remains the only hellenistic site that has been systematically excavated, and excavations at the hellenistic level remain incomplete. Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Greek and Latin sources include Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, and others.

<sup>9</sup> According to Oppenheim, these terms are not indicative of the size of the settlement. The term applies to any permanent settlement constructed of mud brick or huts, including a structure serving an administrative function. These settlements were usually walled, situated along a river or water channel, and in proximity to its own shrine (*bīt akītu*). A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, 1976), 114.

<sup>10</sup> The larger cities themselves consisted of distinct parts. There is the city proper, which included the temple-palace complex along with residences for administrative personnel; the city gate (*babtu*), where the affairs of the city were conducted, serving judicial, storage, military, and cultic purposes. Surrounding this was an outer city, consisting of domiciles, agricultural plots, and pastures for sheep and cattle. There was probably also a dock on the water channel. See Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 110.

tension between urban society and the farmers and pastoralists that interacted with them. It is the case that farmers and shepherds had no intrinsic need for the city and could survive just fine without it; but this need was not reciprocal.

With the coming of the Macedonians, things changed, but some things remained the same. One of the things that changed was the sizeable increase in the number and types of cities, especially with the founding of several Greek cities in northern Syria. Alexander the Great, Antiochus I, and Seleucus all founded cities across the Macedonian empire. Appian lists several Greek and Macedonian cities that were named in honor of the Greek kings or their achievements, or after places in Macedonia (Syr 57).<sup>12</sup> The colonization of Syria, Mesopotamia, and western Iran was, in effect, an effort to establish a new Macedonia in the Land between Rivers.<sup>13</sup> Seleucus alone founded at least twenty of these cities, of which the most famous are those of the Syrian tetrapolis: Seleukeia-in-Pieria, Laodikeia, by the sea; and Antiocheia and Apameia, both along the Orontes river, and all of which situated roughly thirty miles from the Mediterranean.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, pre-established Mesopotamian cities remained structurally unaltered and Hellenization policies were only moderately enforced as efforts were made to accommodate native religion, culture, and civic administration. Also, sources indicate that the Seleucids respected the native priesthoods outside Judea there appears to be no record of suppression. As a result, Greek ideas had a great deal of influence among the educated class, to the point that many learned Greek and opted into the Greek bureaucracy.

It is here that the line between Greeks and Arameans begins to blur. The situation is complicated, and it is important not to force too great a distinction between them. As indicated earlier, Arameans were already well acquainted with Hellenistic culture. Greek political hegemony was established by the imposition of the polis, but for those western Mesopotamians who knew Greek and were amenable to the presence of Greek culture, ethnicity was something that was apparently mutable. In other words, one could join the occupation as a collaborator and be viewed by outsiders, including members of one's own family, as a Hellene. Writing about the inhabitants of Seleukeia on the Tigris, Josephus observes that the population consisted of many Macedonians, ~ a majority of Greeks and not a few Syrians.<sup>15</sup> He adds that there had been civil unrest between Greeks and Syrians, but when the Jewish community increased the citizens turned their attention toward them. Writing about the Hellenistic Levant, Herodotus asserts "the kinship of all the Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods, and the sacrifices we all have in common, and the likeness of our way of life,"<sup>16</sup> again suggesting that being a Hellene was not necessarily an ethnic distinction but a cultural one. Elsewhere, Josephus observes that Jews were permitted to refer to themselves as Macedonians.<sup>17</sup> In 1 Maccabees, the priestly Oniads, Jason (born Yeshua) and his brother Menelaus serve as regents of Jerusalem. Furthermore, young Judean men are reported to have had their circumcisions surgically altered (*epispasmos*), ostensibly in an effort to reduce or altogether remove the embarrassment of provincialism and become cosmopolitan—literally, citizens

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<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 305.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Shipley, *The Greek World after Alexander 323-30 BCE* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 305.

<sup>15</sup> Jewish Antiquities 18.372-74.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 361.

<sup>17</sup> Jewish War 2.488.

of the world.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Josephus records an account by the Peripatetic philosopher, Clearchus of Soli, which describes Aristotle's encounter with a Jew from Jerusalem named Hyperochides, who Aristotle refers to as Greek not only in language, but also in his soul."<sup>19</sup> It thus appears that the designation Hellene could apply to hellenized natives, even if ethnic Greeks themselves did not accept them as such.<sup>20</sup> One did not have to be Greek ethnically to be considered a Greek functionally. All one would have to do is participate in what Oppenheim calls the "deeply agonistic mood of the Greek city where an ever-enlarging arsenal of complex and elaborate practices was needed to keep the city government functioning in the face of the ambition of certain individuals, who wished to assume control and to exercise power over their fellow citizens."<sup>21</sup>

## Chariots of fire

In addition to Scripture's obvious anti-urban and anti-king agenda, one finds also a critique of Israel's dependence on its military weaponry, most noticeably the chariot.<sup>22</sup> For biblical Israel, these military tanks of the ancient world are all but missing from Scripture. Apart from Solomon's exorbitant number of chariots (40,000 stalls, 1 Kgs 4:26; but 2 Chr 9:25 records 4,000 stalls), only Israel's enemy neighbors have chariots—and quite a lot of them. But according to Scripture, Israel's highest and best line of defense is not represented by chariots constructed of wood and metal, but by chariots of fire and horses of fire (2 Kgs 2). In 2 Kgs 6, the fiery horses and chariots that passed between Elisha and Elijah show up again when Elisha and his disciple find themselves surrounded by Aram's massive army of horse-drawn chariots. Elisha's disciple is filled with fear, but the prophet admonishes him, saying they are not outnumbered, but that they outnumber them. The disciple's eyes are then opened, and he beholds the mountains all around him gleaming with chariots and horses of fire (v. 17).

The fact that biblical Israelites lack chariots when all the surrounding nations have many is significant. The fact that Aram and the Philistines have the most chariots to bring into battle against biblical Israel is also significant. The Greeks had hundreds of dreaded scythed chariots, many of which they took from the Persians. According to Greek historians, Seleucus had no less than 120 scythed chariots at his disposal at the battle of Ipsus (301 BCE),<sup>23</sup> and he and his successors continued using them, with varying degrees of success, in his wars with the Ptolemies as well.

This ties in well with Fr. Paul's thesis regarding the nations. How so? The interchange of symbols between Aram and Aramean creates an ambiguity between the fixed permanence of the former, and the fluidity of "Who or What is an Aramean?"—a wandering inhabitant of the earth, according to Fr. Paul.<sup>24</sup> Geographically, Aram (called Syria in the LXX) overlaps the Syrian

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Macc 1:11-15; Jub. 15:33-34.

<sup>19</sup> Against Apion 1.21.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *Hellenistic Settlements*, 368, fn 28.

<sup>21</sup> Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 114.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolae Roddy, "Chariots of Fire, Unassailable Cities, and the One True King: The Prophetically Influenced Scribal Perspective on War." Perry T. Hamalis and Valerie A. Karras, eds.; *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 61-84.

<sup>23</sup> Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *The Seleucid Army: Organization and Tactics in the Great Campaign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 83-84.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Nadim Tarazi, *The Rise of Scripture* (St. Paul: OCABS Press, 2017), 297 ff.

Wilderness, a symbolic region that figures so prominently in *The Rise of Scripture*. The Scriptural Arameans are descendants of Aram, a son of Shem, a son of Noah (Gen. 10:22), of the significant Sethite lineage. Throughout the book of Genesis, the biblical ancestors are described as Aramean, and in the book of Deuteronomy it is part of the memorializing confession: “A wandering Aramean was my father” (Deut 26:5). In the Former Prophets, Israel battles the Arameans. They fatally wound King Joram, and the Yahweh sends them with the Babylonians, Edomites, and Moabites to destroy Jerusalem. Thus, there is an interesting kinship between the biblical ancestors and their later antagonists, so that being Aramean appears less an ethnic designation, than a geographical one. *The Rise of Scripture* situates them among the nations, but tying together everything we have covered, I would suggest that while the Philistines are stand-ins for the Greeks (and Goliath as Alexander), the Arameans are stand-ins for Greeks and natives together as people who inhabit Aram, some of which wander about the region, while others dwell in cities. It is the latter of these that desire to seize and wield control over the Syrian Wilderness.

In Scripture, Aram is also an arena for antagonism against Israel’s kings and the wars of conquest against them, as in the Aramean-Israel alliance formed by kings Rezin and Pekah respectively against King Ahaz of Judah. In addition to being a battleground for iron chariots (*rekeb barzel*), Aram is linked to significant prophetic activity, most notably that of Elijah and Elisha, whose divinely endowed power is represented by fiery chariots and horses.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, there seems to be a clear distinction between Aram’s overlap with the Syrian wilderness and the biblically ambiguous Arameans themselves. The literary ambiguity of being Aramean vis-à-vis a fixed Aramean nation brings enemies together on a level playing field. Ethnicity is malleable; just as for Paul there is no Jew nor Greek, neither is there Syrian or Macedonian. All are accountable to the God of Scripture. As Fr. Paul Tarazi points out, the God of Scripture grants victory and healing to this leprous enemy king, Naaman the Aramean, whom Elisha heals without condition so that the enemy king goes his way acknowledging the scriptural Deity.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, Elisha’s servant is punished with leprosy for his greed in running after Naaman and shaking him down for payment. By leveling the playing field in this way, one sees that no inhabitant of the earth is privileged.

## Conclusion

The task here has been to explore further the real world out of which the Bible is purported to have emerged according to Tarazi’s *The Rise of Scripture*. The book’s general assertions about the Greek presence in Mesopotamia are reliably sound but benefit from a few significant nuances. First, the putative scribal community that produced the Bible was ostensibly one of many other anti-urban groups, but the fact that it is the only one known to have provided a cryptic account of its own unique story makes it difficult to elevate the hypothesis to the level of theory. To be sure, the hypothesis is supported by a persuasive literary analysis out of which the Bible seems to function as a scathing, self-effacing epic that criticizes its own institutions, which I have identified elsewhere to include the city, the monarchy, the military, and the cult. The question is whether this overall critique is rooted in an anti-hellenistic literary campaign, as Tarazi asserts, or is a concerted Persian-era response to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Such a critique of institutions would be

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<sup>25</sup> See 2 Kgs 2; 6:8-23; 13:14-16.

<sup>26</sup> Tarazi, *Rise*, 302-303.

appropriate in either case.

Finally, while Greek ethnocentricity was strong and immutable, elements of hellenistic ethnicity were fluid, which is to say that hellenism was a concept that non-Greeks could ostensibly buy into whether the ethnocentric Macedonian Greeks actually accepted them or not; thus, the antithetical stereotyping of Greek and Mesopotamian urbanism can be misleading. For example, scholars generally agree that the political organization of Mesopotamian cities was not significantly affected by the arrival of the Greeks,<sup>27</sup> even though the idea of having individual citizenship was foreign to Mesopotamian urban society. Even under Greek hegemony, Mesopotamian cities continued to be made up of a conglomeration of social configurations—familial, ethnic, residential, etc.—in contrast to Greek cities, where free citizens are primarily regarded as individuals, albeit drawn together by public places like the agora, fora, or baths, and in institutions such as the assembly. In sum, there remained more similarities than differences between Greek and Mesopotamian cities.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while the biblical Philistines may be stand-ins for the Greeks, as Tarazi asserts,<sup>29</sup> the ambiguous Arameans may well represent both urban Macedonian invaders and Mesopotamian pastoral wanderers interacting in the (historical) Aram overlapping the (literary) Syrian Wilderness, offering a scathing comprehensive critique of all human beings on a level playing field.<sup>30</sup> Such would accord quite well with Tarazi's hypothesis. Although actual literary connections to the sociohistorical milieu remain tentative, the Scriptural effect is not dependent upon the putative sociohistorical cause.

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<sup>27</sup> Marc van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 253.

<sup>28</sup> Van de Mieroop, *Ancient*, 258.

<sup>29</sup> Tarazi, *Rise*, 265 ff.

<sup>30</sup> This might explain the assertion expressed in 1 Macc 12:20-23, echoed by Josephus in Ant. 12:4:10, that Jews and Lacedemonians (i.e., Spartans) stem from a common ancestor.