



June 2002

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Porcaro, David S. "Sacred Libraries in the Temples of the Near East." *Studia Antiqua* 2, no. 1 (2002).
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol2/iss1/8>

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Sacred Libraries in the Temples of the Near East

David S. Porcaro

Since the beginning of written records, libraries have been a source of sacred knowledge. In the ancient Near East, however, libraries were more than mere record depositories. The libraries of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel were intimately connected with temples whose librarian-priests held a monopoly on the art of writing and even performed ritual. Libraries and temples in these areas worked together as an important part of ancient society.

Walking into the library today, one enters a sacred place. The atmosphere is hushed and books are handled with care. Many mysteries are to be found in the words enscribed in the multitude of books on the shelves: information at the fingertips of anyone willing to enter this hallowed world. While walking down the rows of books one may wonder how the library has developed into this state and why this public building conveys a sense of sanctity. To answer these questions it is necessary to look at the traditions that led to civilization as a whole. It is the rise of civilization that introduced records. To be civilized is to possess law and order, art and science, all of which produce and require a literary tradition. This search for the root of libraries and archives inevitably leads the searcher to the “proto-librar[ies]”¹ of the temple.

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¹ Michael H. Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World*, 4th ed. (Metuchen, N. J. and London: Scarecrow, 1995), 8, where Harris calls the temple the usual example of the proto-library.

Here, in the archives of the ancient Near East, the intimate relationship between temple and library is found. Examination of the role of the library in the ancient temples of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel demonstrates that libraries in ancient temples played a much more important role in society than merely a place for storing documents. Often the libraries were used to store sacred writings, business documents, and state records. They were even places where rituals were performed, lessons learned, and documents formed.

Mesopotamia

As the earliest record of writing has come out of Mesopotamia, so has one of the earliest centers of record keeping. Just exactly which factor came first—organized religion requiring the organization of writing, or religion advancing under the convenience of writing—is a debatable topic.² Either way, Mesopotamian religion was deeply connected with a scribal tradition.

The role of the temple library in Mesopotamia is similar to that of Egypt. It presumably started as gaps developed in the oral transmission of sacred tales. The need arose to organize and canonize the religious literature, due to variations in ritual or the oral tradition. The incantations, omens, prayers, scriptures,³ creation stories, genealogies of the gods, sacred laws, rituals, and songs were preserved as an attempt to define that which is orthodox and that which is orthoprax⁴. As the centuries continued, commentary on

² Don Heinrich Tolzman, Alfred Hessel, and Reuben Peiss, *The Memory of Mankind: The Stories of Libraries Since the Dawn of Time* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2001) 1.

³ Harris, 21.

⁴ Stephen J. Lieberman, "Canonical and Official Cuneiform Texts: Towards an Understanding of Assurbanipal's Personal Tablet Collection" in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, eds., Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard, and Piotr Steinkeller (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 305–36; Lieberman discusses to some detail the steps temples go through in order to produce what is canonical.

the primary texts was added to the library.⁵ The business transactions of the temple, including deposits to and loans from the temple, were also recorded in the temple archives. The scribes were often trained in the sciences, which were considered a facet of religion; hence texts were recorded on astronomy, astrology, math, and medicine.⁶

In addition to the need to record and canonize, the change of culture and language led scribes to preserve texts in libraries in fear of losing them to the “invading” language.⁷ One example of this is demonstrated during the introduction of Akkadian at the end of the Ur III Dynasty. With the fear of losing not only the Sumerian language but also the religious gems found in Sumerian texts, priests and scribes worked frantically to preserve the traditions and texts that were recorded in the dying language.⁸ Hence libraries emerged to store these records and to understand the mysteries they contained. The library became essentially the root of wisdom and learning, and the home for preservation of many types of knowledge.

Mesopotamian examples of temple libraries abound as demonstration of their importance to society. The oldest temple archive documents in Mesopotamia were found in Erech and date to about 3100 B.C. These mostly contained records of sheep and goat deliveries to the temples.⁹ The libraries in the temples of Ur held many business records, which display superb organization and cataloguing ability.¹⁰ Excavations in Sippar revealed more than 2,000 documents in the temple of Shamash.¹¹ In Nuzi, the library

⁵ Harris, 8. This is a business which has kept many a scholar alive today; one need only look as far as the stacks of biblical commentaries in any library today for an example.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ Mogens Weitmeyer, *Archive and Library Technique in Ancient Mesopotamia*, *Libri* 6:3 (1956), 224–25.

⁸ Menahem Haran, “Archives, Libraries and the Order of the Biblical Books,” *Journal of Near Eastern Society* 22:54.

⁹ Weitmeyer, 219.

¹⁰ Posner, 46.

¹¹ “Intact Temple Library Found at Sippar” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July/August 1989): 50–51.

was nearly the center of the temple; in fact, only a wall separated the temple's cella from the archive.¹² The temple in Nippur contained religious and even private business documents, oaths, and deeds.¹³ The acropolis at Nimrud had a building complex that included the Temple of Nabu, which had records of all types, including menologies, and hemerologies: reference files of the temple staff.¹⁴ Assurbanipal, famous for his library in Ninevah, also established a temple library separate from his palace library.¹⁵

Erech, Sippar, Nuzi, Nippur, Nimrud, and Ninevah are just a few of the many temple libraries that played a major part in shaping Mesopotamian cultures, and in preserving them until today. Not only did Mesopotamian temple libraries play a very important role in business transactions and record keeping, but were often the sites where great religious texts and epics were discovered.

Egypt

“We must look to the temples of ancient Egypt for the first libraries;” so begins James W. Thompson's book *Ancient Libraries*.¹⁶ In Egypt, like elsewhere in the ancient world, the temple was the center of society. The temple not only was the center of worship and the house of the gods, but the source of law and the home to priests, granaries, courts, libraries and schools.¹⁷

In addition to the temple's central role in society, the priests themselves held an important place in society. They often held the monopoly on literacy, and were usually classed with the nobles of society.¹⁸ Egyptian priests kept the records in both the temples and

¹² Weitmeyer, 220.

¹³ Richardson, 49.

¹⁴ Posner, 41.

¹⁵ Harris, 22.

¹⁶ (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1940), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ Ernest C. Richardson, *The Beginnings of Libraries* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1963), 143.

the palaces.¹⁹ In fact, the *hartumei mitzraim* (magicians of Egypt) of Genesis 41:8 and Exodus 7:11, may have been priests of the temple library²⁰ or librarians whose powers extended beyond merely that of writing and cataloging records.

It was the “House of Life” (*pr ‘nkh*) that was usually recognized as the temple library in Egypt.²¹ Though the purpose of this building is debatable, it has been documented in Egyptian texts as an archive of birth, marriage and death records;²² a place where hymns of worship were written and stored;²³ a place of ritual;²⁴ a school for scribes and priests;²⁵ and a house for learning the sciences and medicine.²⁶ This latest example is worth noting because other types of Egyptian temples were also associated with medicine such as the “Hall of Rolls” in Heliopolis, the temple of Ptah in Memphis, the temple of Horus at Edfu, and the largest collection, the temple of Thoth at Hermopolis.²⁷

Other records, not necessarily referring to the “House of Life” note that temples in Egypt housed collections of scriptures, rituals, hymns, and incantations. These collections also contained works of drama (such as the Drama of Osiris), literature and the sciences.²⁸ These temples also played the role of school to the scribal students. Sometimes the temples became communities in and of themselves, employing many people of varying professions

¹⁹ Ibid., 142–43. Richardson also notes that it is the priest who usually houses the records in most primitive society.

²⁰ Alan H. Gardiner, “The House of Life” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 24 (1938), 164–165.

²¹ John M. Lundquist, *The Temple: Meeting Place of Heaven and Earth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 25.

²² Gardiner, 175.

²³ Ibid., 172.

²⁴ Ibid., 174. On page 175 Gardiner notes that the scribes of the “House of Life” were even accused of sorcery.

²⁵ Ibid., 159.

²⁶ Ibid., 158.

²⁷ Harris, 29–31.

²⁸ Ibid., 29.

to keep them running.²⁹ In addition to their religious role, temples also housed secular records, like the annals of Thutmose's Syrian war which were deposited in the Amon temple at Karnak.³⁰

These temples also included a component of knowledge unavailable to most people. In Denderah, only the prophets could enter the secret temple library.³¹ Elsewhere an Egyptian record commands, "open the heart to no strangers concerning it—a true secret of the House of Life."³² The esoteric teachings found in the temple libraries were long sought after by the Pharaohs of Egypt. Rameses IV spent a considerable amount of time in the House of Life at Abydos, where he finally discovered the mysterious forms of Osiris.³³ Menjahotpe, in his Abydere Stela from Cairo, proclaimed that he was the "master of the secrets of the House of Life."³⁴ Neferhotep also spent his time in the Heliopolis temple examining the "rolls of the house of Osiris."³⁵ The secret knowledge has led some scholars to hypothesize that the central shrine of the Egyptian temples contained a chest full of sacred texts.³⁶

The temple library was an important structure to the culture of Egypt. Richardson claims that by the time of the Exodus there were probably libraries in all the Egyptian temples and palaces.³⁷ The temple libraries and archives in Egypt were more than just a place to store records, but quite truly a vital part of the life of ancient Egypt. The libraries were places of sacredness which often

²⁹ Such as in Abu Simbel, *ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ Ernest Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 83-84.

³¹ Ernest C. Richardson, *Some Old Egyptian Librarians* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1911), 70.

³² Gardiner, 164.

³³ Lundquist, 25.

³⁴ Gardiner, 160.

³⁵ Ernest C. Richardson, *Biblical Libraries* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1963), 62-63.

³⁶ Richardson, *Egyptian Librarians*, 73.

³⁷ Richardson, *Biblical Libraries*, 70.

supported a priestly class and its rituals. Egyptian temples were also occasionally linked with state record keeping. These temple libraries of pre-Hellenistic Egypt most surely laid the foundation for other great Egyptian libraries and schools, e.g., Alexandria.

Israel

Israel's greatest collection of sacred texts, the Hebrew Bible, has also been the most studied and adhered to. It is, in a sense, Israel's mobile temple library. But the primary texts that led to the formation of the Bible are not available. In fact, Dearman succinctly notes that:

unlike several other civilizations of the ancient Near East, no substantial library, major royal archives, or large monumental inscriptions have been discovered from any period of the monarchy in ancient Israel.³⁸

Taking this into consideration, it has also been noted in the Bible and the Talmud that the temple contained a library. The chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah may have been housed in the temple (1 Kings 14:19, 29; 15:7, 23, 31). Hilkiah the high priest found scrolls in the temple, though how many and the nature of which is not clear (2 Kings 22:8–10). The centerpiece of the Holy of Holies was, in fact, a chest that contained the decalogue.³⁹ The Talmud even records the temple court as holding books.⁴⁰ There were also archives on the temple mount near the Akra fortress that held genealogies, marriage lists, and royal

³⁸ J. Andrew Dearman, "On Record-Keeping and the Preservation of Documents in Ancient Israel (1000–587 B.C.E.)," *Libraries and Culture* 24 (Summer 1989), 344.

³⁹ This may have been in imitation of similar practices in Egypt. See Richardson, *Egyptian Libraries*, 73.

⁴⁰ Mishnah: *Moed Qatan* 3:4, *Kelim* 15:6; Babylonian Talmud: *Baba Batra* 14b; Talmud Yerushalaim: *Sheqalim* 4:2.

correspondences.⁴¹ In addition, a Tannaitic listing in Baba Bathra 14b has led some to conjecture that there was an organized cataloging system for the biblical library.⁴²

Though the records are scarce, often having been destroyed by invading armies, it is obvious that Israel, at least to a small extent, also maintained temple libraries. Though the large volumes of manuscripts and records do not remain, the most holy of the Israelite sacred libraries has been preserved as the Bible.

Conclusion

The temple library has been a major component of ancient Near Eastern society, from Egypt, to Mesopotamia and even to Israel. In these temple libraries writing was developed. Here sacred documents were created, copied, and preserved by scribe-priests. In the library scientific and literary documents were studied and stored. Archival documents were preserved and even dedicated to the gods in the libraries. The temple libraries were the centers where the kings submitted their highest civil achievements for preservation. The library was a type of Mecca that drew many to study the mysteries of the gods. Here business transactions were made, authorized and recorded. It is no wonder that the need for sacred libraries continued through Christian monasteries, Islamic mosques, and Jewish synagogues. The temple was the center of the community, and the library was the center of the temple. The temple libraries of the ancient Near East were more than mere repositories—they were man's source for wisdom and knowledge of the sacred and profane.

⁴¹ Haran, 56.

⁴² Nahum M. Sarna discusses this hypothesis in great detail in *Ancient Libraries and the Ordering of the Biblical Books: a Lecture Presented at the Library of Congress, March 6, 1989* (Washington D. C.: Library of Congress, 1989).