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Chapter One

Discovering Genesis
“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” So the book of Genesis itself famously begins, by addressing three important questions: Did the universe begin? Are we living in a creation, or something else? Who created? We realize immediately that the scale of this story is going to be large, and that the questions it tries to answer are going to be enormous.

Why do we encounter the world as an ordered place in which life flourishes? Where do human beings fit into the story? How are we to live? Why is there evil in the world, and why is there suffering? How does God act in creation to rescue it from evil and suffering? How do Abraham and Sarah and their immediate descendants fit into that plan? They are mostly the kinds of questions that human beings have always asked about the nature of reality, and still do – and not a few, in the course of the centuries that have intervened between the composition of Genesis and the present moment, have found the answers that the book has offered them compelling. This is no doubt why Genesis is still so widely read, when so much other ancient literature is not.

In my recently-published Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception, not only explore further how Genesis presents its questions and answers, but also the different ways in which Bible-readers through time have engaged with them – how they have “received” this book. I begin with two chapters (two and three) devoted to “strategies for reading” Genesis, tracking the reception-history of the book from its earliest examples (prior to AD 476) down to the present. The earliest readers of Genesis, both Jews and Christians, read the book as Scripture. Many of them were interested in what we might call nowadays a “literal” or “historical” meaning – the meaning that we might imagine, after reading the text, the original author intended to communicate.

Yet because both sets of readers understood the Pentateuch as comprising a unified,
self-consistent, and divinely communicated text that revealed truth and exhorted virtue, they were also much inclined – especially where coherence was under threat, either within Scripture or between Scripture and other recognized guides as to what should be believed and practiced – to move beyond the literal sense to other levels of meaning.

Mediaeval readers of Genesis followed and developed these different lines of interpretation. With the rise of modernity, however – influenced on the Christian side by the Protestant Reformation – we find a growing commitment to the literal (historical) sense alone, and the rise of numerous influential reading “methods” designed to bring scientific precision to the task (source, form, redaction, and rhetorical criticism). In due course these methods have been both supplemented and challenged in by others, such as structuralism and poststructuralism, and narrative, social-scientific, feminist, and canonical criticism.

People have been reading the book of Genesis for a very long time, and in all sorts of ways. The question that arises for those who stand now at the far end of this long line of readers is, how ought we to read it? In chapter four I offer an explicit proposal. It begins with the suggestion that if the history of the reading of Genesis has taught us anything, it is that the literal sense of the text is of primary importance in understanding what the book has to say, and that this literal sense is intrinsically bound up with the historical, social, and religious context in which it first came to be. Therefore, we must attempt to locate Genesis in its time and place. Chapter four is devoted, therefore, to reading the book in the context of the period of ancient history in which it likely arrived at its final form: the sixth century BC, or shortly thereafter. What was “the world of Genesis” that the text both implies and also addresses, and how is the message of Genesis clarified when
we understand that context?

These larger-scale inquiries into the interpretation of Genesis both historically and in the present completed, in the remainder of Discovering Genesis I examine in turn each of the “acts” of the Genesis drama, offering a close reading of the text, highlighting key interpretative issues, and weaving in (selectively) consideration of how that part of Genesis has been read historically. One feature in particular about this section of my book that will appeal to scholars and lay-readers alike is the frequent description of how the reception-history of Genesis is reflected in culture at large – in art, and music, and literature, and architecture.

Pondering the beauty of the world as first created by God in chapter five, for example, I note the way in which a particular emphasis in the early interpretive literature on the original beauty of the human form is developed in much later art in the West – for example, in Albrecht Dürer’s *Adam and Eve* (1504), in which the primal couple appear in nearly symmetrical, idealized poses. In chapter six, I discuss the way in which Christian tradition finds a two-fold victory of Christ over evil in Genesis 3:15, and how this is referenced again and again in later literature – perhaps most famously in *Paradise Lost* by the English Puritan writer John Milton (1667). In chapter nine, discussing Abraham’s encounter in Genesis 18 with three mysterious strangers, I note how in the Christian East these three were often represented artistically as a prefiguration of the Trinity (most famously in the fifteenth century icon of the Russian artist Andrei Rublev, c. 1360-1430), although Augustine in the West understood them as angels – as did the Jewish artist Marc Chagall in his *Abraham and the Three Angels* (1966).
Chapter ten tracks the evolution of the interpretation of the Jacob story as concerning “insiders” and “outsiders” through allegorical drama like the twelfth-century *Ordo de Ysaac et Rebecca et Filiis Eorum* (Esau as the Jews and Jacob as the Christians), and literature like Nicholas Udall’s *The Historie of Jacob and Esau* (1557–58: Jacob as the righteous Protestant and Esau as the pagan Roman Catholic). All such texts build on earlier Jewish and Christian reading that “clean up” the portrait of Jacob in the biblical text, making Jacob simply a saint and Esau simply a sinner. It is only with the Enlightenment that we see a general shift away from regarding Jacob in such a favorable light.

Arguably, no part of Genesis has inspired more subsequent cultural activity than the Joseph story (discussed in my chapter eleven), which as late as the middle of the twentieth century was still capable of filling three of Thomas Mann’s four large volumes on *Joseph and his Brothers*. Joseph has also inspired at least one great oratorio (Handel’s Joseph and his Brethren, 1743), and a considerable amount of art – including paintings of the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar’s wife by both Tintoretto (1555) and Rembrandt (1655).
Even though it is Judah who emerges in Genesis 37-50 as the more important of the two brothers, inheriting Joseph’s dream and becoming the one to whom all the other brothers bow down, in the reception-history of these chapters there is no question about who comes out on top – the one to whom the cultural and intellectual “sun and moon and eleven stars” defer (Gen. 37:9). It is clearly Joseph.

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Chapter Two

Sumerian Art and Modern Art from Gudea to Miró
Artists always turn to their predecessors for inspiration. The impact of Mesopotamia on Modern Art was as significant as it was unexpected. But it was a case of artists being inspired by “art” that had been created thousands of years earlier and for completely different purposes.

The ‘Golden Age’ of archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia came from the 1920s until the end of World War II, when Iraq and Syria gained their independence from Britain and France. During this period Sumerian and Akkadian artworks and texts became increasingly well known as information spread widely through both scientific and popular publications, academic conferences, and temporary exhibitions.

Publicity surrounding Mesopotamian art aimed in part to counter the impact of Egyptian finds, such as those made by Howard Carter in the tomb of Tutankhamun, and to promote the idea of so-called Sumerian, which is to say non-Semitic, “art” as the origin of Western art, whose history had developed along both Biblical and Greco-Roman lines.
Earlier, Assyrian and Babylonian “art” had a major impact on the West from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, as a result of biblical knowledge and progressive Western penetration into the Ottoman Empire. Stolid and monumental Assyrian and Babylonian sculpture and reliefs were the Biblical world come to life. But Sumerian and Akkadian cultures were something completely different.
The spread of Sumerian and Akkadian art took many forms. There were, for example, the fine black and white photographs by the well-known Argentinian photographer Horacio Coppola, who produced a monograph on Mesopotamian art for the French journal *Cahiers d’Art*, published in 1935. Exquisite photographs of Sumerian worshipper sculptures in the monographs by famed art historian Henri Frankfort quickly gained status as canonical textbooks. There were also documentaries and plaster-cast copies that attempted to draw a parallel between “primitive” Sumerian-Akkadian art and that of Greece and Rome.

Artists were already fascinated by the first “primitive arts” to reach the West, thanks to colonial conquests. They were attracted to works whose forms, expressions, and compositions were different from the classical canon but not to the extent of seeming strange, even if some scholars initially judged them as clumsy. Writers such as Georges Bataille defended primitive art as a manifestation of the magic and sacred, at a great remove from the intention of Modern Western art, which had no instrumental goals. Thus allowed Sumerian-Akkadian “art” was allowed to become part of the history and origins of Western art.
The majority of these artists were Surrealists. However, they were not all interested in Sumerian-Akkadian art for the same reasons, nor captivated by the same type of works. A number of modern works were created in response to newly discovered Mesopotamian artefacts. These works, in turn, helped lead to a new way of looking at statuary and texts originally thought of as inferior to those of Greek and Roman cultures – then considered the summit of art. This perspective, however, deflected the magical-religious meanings of Mesopotamian sculpture and emphasising their “artistic” condition, comparable with that of any Western culture, presenting them not as magic fetishes but as works “of art” — in spite of the condescending attitude implied by such a change of status.

We may define at least four different groups of modern approaches to Sumerian images and texts:

**The figure** (shape and expressivity): Sumerian-Akkadian statuary — magical-religious, sacred and funerary in character, created to be unseen by human eyes, were markers of the limits between the visible and invisible worlds. These works were interpreted for formal or expressive reasons by a series of Modern artists. For example, in 1935 the British sculptor Henry Moore wrote one of the first positive articles on Mesopotamian art and created a number of works showing that influence, as did another British sculptor, Barbara Hepworth. The Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti visited the Louvre many times to see the seated sculpture of the Ur III king Gudea. He drew Gudea repeatedly and even owned a plaster replica.

During the early 1950s the Dutch-American painter and sculptor Willem de Kooning’s contemplation of a Sumerian worshipper statue at the Metropolitan Museum of Art ignited the well-known series of paintings and drawings called Women. And the Catalan artist Joan Miró’s infatuation with Sumerian art influenced some of his early 1960s sculptures, something unnoticed until recently, in spite of many books on Mesopotamia in his library.

**Composition**: the distribution of figures and engravings on the surface of Sumerian and Akkadian cylinder seals and their lack of compositional limits influenced several artists, such as American sculptor David Smith in his well-known Medals for Dishonor series and other small bronze plaques. Cylinder seals also influence the German painter and designer Willi Baumeister, who collected Mesopotamian artifacts, particularly at the end of the 1930s, as a new way of expressing reality, particularly in terms of the interaction between figures and space.
Writing: ‘Oriental’ calligraphy, Egyptian hieroglyphs and cuneiform signs were judged to be primordial forms of writing. They were also capable of healing the rift between languages and writing systems so as to achieve a universal written language that would limit the difference, or the rupture, between things and the words used to designate them.

The pictographic origins of certain cuneiform signs was perceived, by the Belgian painter Henri Michaux, for instance, as the inscription or imprint of the essential features of things. The enigmatic character of cuneiform writing — and the difficulty of the Sumerian language — helped create the perception that cuneiform writing was both the veiled expression of hidden truths and a veto to their understanding. Several centuries earlier Egyptian hieroglyphs had been similarly regarded as the repositories of mystical knowledge.
The myth: Mesopotamian myths are mostly known from very late written versions recovered from first millennium BCE. Despite this, they have been considered as the first myths, the first reflections on the human condition and on man’s place in the world between the dead and the gods.

During the Second World War, a number of artists, like Baumeister, sought answers to the violence in Mesopotamian myths and in Genesis. Two myths were prevalent: the construction of the Tower of Babel in the Bible, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, known since the end of the nineteenth century. For architects Bruno Taut and Le Corbusier, the tower of Babel, without its aura of accursedness, was considered as a model of infinite, but at the same time, ordered growth. The city of Babylon, freed from its Biblical demonization was also considered, via Herodotus’ accounts, as one of history’s first metropolitan cities. These were influential visions of utopian urbanism.

Sumerian items have not lost their appeal as a source of inspiration for contemporary artists such as the Palestinian Maliheh Afnan who draws enigmatic writings inspired by cuneiform signs. But most who are interested in Mesopotamian iconography, as the French artist Cyprien Gaillard, use it to denounce the fragile or lost condition, due to wars, greed or abandonment, of sites and symbols in most Near Eastern countries.

*Pedro Azara is an architect, curator, and professor of aesthetics at the ETSAB School of Architecture in Barcelona. The relation between Sumerian art and Modern art has been treated in an exhibition From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics, co-curated with Jennifer Y. Chi, with professor Marc Marín as assistant curator. It will also be the theme of an upcoming exhibition Sumer and the Modern Paradigm at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona (Spain), on display from 26th Oct. 2017-27th Jan. 2018.*
Chapter Three

The Land Before the Kingdom of Israel: Asking New Questions of Old Data
Biblical traditions famously hold that ancient Israel was set apart from among the nations, representing a unique social and political entity in the ancient world. First and foremost, Israel is regarded as a monotheistic community, called to worship the God who delivered its people from Egypt and provided them with a code of social ethics that countered the slavery they faced there. United by a common tribal identity and the history of a bucolic way of life, Israel was prepared to establish an egalitarian community in the southern Levant that stood in direct opposition to the hierarchical polities of their polytheistic Canaanite counterparts who inhabited the land.

In spite of the overwhelming number of biblical claims to the contrary, most modern scholars affirm continuity between so-called Canaanite religion and Israelite religion, concluding that they developed out of the same “cosmic pool.” Building on these insights, The Land before the Kingdom of Israel explores points of continuity between the social and political structures of the Canaanites and those of populations that came to be identified with Israel, demonstrating that some emerged from the same “sociopolitical pool” as well.

While this parallel seems straightforward, the path is complicated. In addition to the influence that the Bible has in shaping perceptions of Israel, there are traditions in the history of scholarship
that continue to influence conventional wisdom regarding the social and political structures of the ancient Near East. For instance, some appraisals of ancient Near Eastern polities continue to be influenced by Herodotus’ evaluation of the Persian wars, which he cast as a conflict between Greek democracy and “oriental despotism.” Earlier Sumerian and Babylonian literary traditions often drew a sharp contrast between pastoralists and “culturally advanced” urban populations. Though such traditions reflect the biases of literate, urban societies, many studies continue to regard these two categories of people as opposing sectors of society that remained socially and politically distinct.

Longstanding assumptions – both biblical and non-biblical – have directly influenced the way in which ancient data such as the Late Bronze Age Amarna letters, have been interpreted. As a result of this circularity, many descriptions of the Levant create a picture of critical social dichotomies, including sedentary vs. non-sedentary, state vs. tribe, and hierarchical vs. egalitarian. Ultimately, these distinctions support and are supported by later biblical traditions that set Israel in opposition to Canaan, and have resulted in the common belief that early Israel represented a unique ethnic identity associated with a particular way of life.

My study rereads the ancient data through the lens of contemporary interdisciplinary methods. Broadly speaking, these methods ask questions about the nature of social power, different types of political organization, and the relationship between “tribe” and
“state.” The outcome is an alternative understanding of the Late Bronze Age Levantine landscape that changes our conception of pre-monarchic Israel.

The Amarna letters comprise diplomatic correspondence between Amenhotep III and various entities in the Levant in the mid-14th century BCE, as well as with major powers such as Babylonia and Assyria. Their evidence indicates a wide spectrum of political organization existed. At one end were entities represented by the political voice and actions of individual leaders, or kings. At the other end were cities or regions where corporate bodies or assemblies, such as the “sons of Tunip” and “the city of Irqata and its elders,” exercised political authority. Finally, there were political entities falling somewhere in the middle, like Gubla (Byblos) where a leading official and the citizens of Gubla appear to have shared authority.

There was also a range of political organization at play in the region. While many polities, like the northern coastal city of Ugarit, were centralized under the authority of a king, others were also coalitions that included cities, centralized lands, and even populations not identified with a particular urban center, most notably the ‘apiru. Though they retained local autonomy and identities under the authority of their respective kings and/or collective representative bodies, they often operated in concert, frequently for the purpose of confronting a common enemy. There were benefits to maintaining this type of organization, but the pressure of external forces – including pressure from the warring Egyptian and Hittite empires - and the actions of individual figures resulted in some regions, including the land of Amurru on the northern Levantine coast, being centralized under the leadership of a single person.

Observations such as these open the door for evaluating the biblical data in new ways. To be sure, many scholars have questioned the validity of using the Bible for reconstructing the early history of Israel. This is largely based on the mostly correct contention
that it reflects the ideological and theological concerns of exilic and post-exilic Judean authors, editors, and redactors. There are, however, several striking points of continuity between some biblical accounts of Israel’s formative stages and the sociopolitical landscape of the Late Bronze Age Levant. Some are so foreign to what the Bible as a whole promotes regarding the pre-monarchic period that they reflect an alternate political reality that Judean scribes could not have fabricated.

A prime example of this is the Biblical depiction of Shechem in Judges 9, an entity that played a prominent role in the central hill country of the Southern Levant before and during the Israelite period. The core of the text revolves around an urban-centered population with both a collective governing body and a king, Abimelek and the citizens of Shechem.

While Shechem’s collective governance corresponds to early Israel’s “egalitarian” heritage, its urban setting and its monarchy are inexplicable, particularly since the story is set before the formation of the monarchy. Consequently, many scholars have regarded it as a Canaanite story that was somehow integrated into Judah’s sacred text. If, however, Israel is viewed as a variegated political entity, similar to those known in the decentralized lands of the Late Bronze Age, these features can be explained. As the heir to this political heritage, we would expect Israel to consist of a variety of independent political entities, urban-centered and not, organized according to a variety of political structures, including a collective, a king, or both. These entities, and some of their stories, were integrated into the new Israelite polity and narrative of Judah.

Reevaluating the social and political landscape of the Late Bronze Age Levant
provides a fresh understanding of Israel’s origins and nature. Rather than a distinct ethnic group founded upon a unique set of social and political principles, some of its constituents emerged out of the sociopolitical milieu of the Late Bronze Age. It also sheds light on the process of centralization that occurred with the formation of the monarchy. As with their Late Bronze Age predecessors, David and Solomon employed strategies to create a national identity to cut across and reduce the impact of the decentralized identities that constituted Israel before the monarchy. Indeed, one of the greatest tools used in this process was religion, which is reflected in the construction of the temple in Jerusalem and the attribution of new divine characteristics to Yahweh. As Israel’s rejection of Rehoboam at Shechem in 1 Kings 12 demonstrates, however, though David and Solomon’s policies were temporarily successful, the struggle between the forces of decentralization and centralization – between the forces of the king and the collective – continued as it had long before the rise of the Kingdom of Israel.

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Chapter Four

The VALUE project: Video Games and Archaeology at Leiden University
What do video games have to do with archaeology? The worlds of Grand Theft Auto, Super Mario Bros., or Tetris seem a far cry from anything archaeologists usually work on. But both involve imagining and visualizing worlds populated by humans, with human behavior and culture (and sometimes with mutated humans, aliens, the undead, and giant gorillas throwing barrels).

VALUE (Videogames and Archaeology at Leiden University) began two and a half years ago. One of our many goals is to show the great potential video games have for archaeology in terms of public outreach, heritage preservation, and education, but also for actual research.

To achieve this, we began by mapping our faculty’s interest in video games through a survey. It turned out that a large number of archaeology students and staff members at Leiden played video games. The survey also noted that while the inclusion of history and historical facts in video games was enjoyable, people often found it trivial. In addition, many people were intrigued by the idea of our project and expressed interest in participating in activities related to archaeology and video games.

We began to raise academic awareness on the topic of video games and archaeology, as well as showcase its vast possibilities. One of the core things we do is to shoot and host an online ‘let’s play’ show called ‘Streaming the Past’ which is live-streamed once a month and then made available on YouTube. In every show, we choose one or
two video games and a relevant archaeological theme, such as violence and human nature, colonialism, or collapse, and discuss how these are incorporated, intentionally or not, in popular video games such *Assassin’s Creed, Civilization* and many more.

We also take this live-stream into the main hall of our faculty where students and staff members can sit and watch, but more importantly play and discuss together with us. A year ago, on the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, we decided to do a stream about heritage under threat and the potential of video games for heritage re-construction, awareness and education. We decided to play *Minecraft*, one of the most-played video games of the last couple of years. In *Minecraft*, you get to build literally anything you want from blocks. We prepared a platform, laid out a number of plans from the temple of Bel and invited some scholars to briefly talk about the history of the temple and its importance as cultural heritage.

Within the two hours of the stream a group of roughly 40 people took the controller and we managed to playfully reconstruct the temple of Baal, all the while discussing issues of heritage under threat, the archaeology of Palmyra and more. The audience consisted of scholars as well as students and children. It was amazing to see how everyone engaged in the building process, checking plans and discussing how we should approach the construction of the temple or what we can do about its destruction. At the end of the day, everyone felt like they had both learned something new and engaged in an entertaining activity. We also posted an in-depth report.

Results from the VALUE survey at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University.
Above: Screenshot of the platform prepared for the temple of Bel in Minecraft.
Below: Photo showing the plans prepared for the Minecraft reconstruction of the temple.
(Vincent Vandemeulebroucke)
Last April we decided to take it a step further and hosted a two-day conference on video games and archaeology, aiming to bring together contributors from around the world. Our goal was to create an open forum to which people from different disciplines, archaeologists, computers scientists, game-developers, and students, could come together and discuss how we can work together. Archaeologists, and academics in general don’t often interact with game developers and there is a large gap in terms of communication. Through our initiative, we wanted to create a bridge, a way of communication and common understanding among these groups in a way that would be beneficial for both.

The *Interactive Pasts* conference was a great success, with 22 presentations, 3 workshops and more than 110 participants. The conference was also streamed

Click here to view a video of the finalized temple.

Right: The Interactive Pasts conference in numbers.
online and you can still watch all the talks on our YouTube channel. Another outcome of the conference is the book The Interactive Past that will be published in spring 2017, and, as the result of a successful Kickstarter crowd-funding campaign, will also be published as an Open Access volume.

Over these two years our experience has shown that the potential for video games and archaeology is huge and is happening all around us. There is a small but emerging field of scholars around the world who are dedicating more and more time to this research. New technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality are also generating a lot of discussion about how we could incorporate them in archaeology. Instead of producing static two and three dimensional models of monuments or sites, video games can create a much more engaging setting in which people can actually interact with material culture. In that lies the advantage of using video games both for education and outreach as well as for archaeological research.
Interactivity is something missing from most traditional research but can be extremely valuable, especially for archaeology. A great example is agent based modeling, mathematical simulations of individuals and organizations that follow simple behavioral rules, that is quickly becoming a standard method in computational archaeology. But instead of using theories to create models, game-based simulations give archaeologists the ability to test hypotheses from the bottom-up, in a setting with thousands of players who engage and interact with the environment in different, more human (that is, unpredictable) ways than a line of code run by a computer would. Furthermore, reconstructing archaeological sites in a video game setting gives different people the opportunity to re-excavate it or re-interpret it by actually interacting with the site and each other.

Archaeologists also have a lot contribute to the development of video games. With our knowledge of history and material culture we can assist developers to create more authentic, interesting, and accurate video games. Additionally, with our experience in preserving material culture we can assist in the study and preservation of older video games that, as technology advances, are becoming hard to find or are no longer playable. Archaeologists have even been called on to [excavate video games](#); a New Mexico landfill in which hundreds of thousands of old video game cartridges were buried was excavated, and the excavation then became part of a new video game!
There is great potential in the intersection between video games and archaeology. If you are interested in the topic or have ideas please don’t hesitate to contact us, at VALUE. We value (pun intended!) open discussion of and open access to creative ideas and playful thinking more than anything!

Aris Politopoulos is a Ph.D. student in Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Leiden. The VALUE Project includes Angus Mol, Csilla Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, Krijn Boom and Vincent Vandemeulebroucke. You can find them on facebook, twitter or their website.

For Further Reading


Streaming the Past YouTube channel.
Alex Joffe is the editor of the *Ancient Near East Today*. The publication features contributions from diverse academics, a forum featuring debates of current developments from the field, and links to news and resources. The ANE Today covers the entire Near East, and each issue presents discussions ranging from the state of biblical archaeology to archaeology after the Arab Spring.

Cynthia Rufo is ASOR’s Archivist and Website Manager.
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