Though a millennium separates the Ebla Archives (23rd century) from early Israel, and although North Syria is quite a distance from the Hebrew Kingdoms, there was nonetheless a cultural continuum linking them. It is best to start our discussion with specific data.

Isa. xxvi 20 admonishes us to avoid a dangerous demon named Ḥaby:

lēk ’ammī bō’ bahādārēkā āśgōr dēlātekā baʾādekā ḥābi kin’at-reqe’ ‑ad‑yaʾābor -zāʾam, which we may paraphrase “take cover behind locked doors until the menace of Ḥaby passes”.

Hab. iii 4 (wenogah kāʾor tihyeh qarnayim miyyādō lō wēšām ḥebyōn ʿuzzōh) mentions this demon with the suffix -ōn added to his name: Ḥebyon. The verse tells us that he has horns which conveys the double meaning of “light” (ʾōr) and “strength” (ʾōz). His baleful character is spelled out in the following verse (iii 5): ʾpānāw yēlek dāber wēyēsē rēsep ʾraglāw “Pestilence walks before him, while Catastrophe goes forth at his feet.”

Prior to the Hebrew prophets of Iron-Age Israel, Ḥaby is described in the Late Bronze Age tablets of Ugarit thus: Ḥby b’il qrmn w ḡnb “Ḥaby, possessor of horns and a tail”, anticipating the familiar iconography of Satan. We can now trace Ḥaby, in the reduplicated form of his name, back to the Ebla tablets of the Early Bronze Age, in which he is described as Ḥabhaby with the horns of the moon and the tail(s) of the sun.

What happened to the name Ḥabhaby/Ḥaby? The name of such a feared and potent force might be expected to appear in more than two passages of the Bible. What may have happened is that his name was so feared that it was avoided. ḥassātān “The Satan” and ὁ διάβολος “The Devil” both have the definite article, strongly suggesting that “The Satan” and “The Devil” are epithets of Ḥabhaby/Ḥaby, that gained currency to avoid the real and terrifying name of the demon.

In the Ebla tablets, I-li-lu is called “the Father of the Gods”.¹ It is a common feature in the history of religions that the deities of the older system are debased into demons in the new system. Ḥilil (written Ill) is

a minor deity at Ugarit² and is debased to the common noun meaning "a non-god, lifeless idol" in Hebrew (אֱלִיל, plural אֱלִילִים).

³AK corresponds to two Eblaite deities in the bilinguals; to wit, ša-du-um and ri-ba-nu. ³Ša-du-um suggests šadday, while Ri-ba-nu = Aramaic rabbān and Hebrew ribbôn, both referring to God in Jewish liturgy. šadday is biblical, while rabbān/ribbôn is post-biblical. It will be recalled that Ugaritic terminology sometimes resurfaces in post-biblical Hebrew, skipping over the biblical corpus. Such is Ugaritic mlg "a kind of dowry" = rabbinic melōg, but absent in the OT. Now we have Eblaite terms, absent in the OT, but resurfacing in post-biblical Hebrew. One of the contributing explanations of this phenomenon is the fact that the OT is only a fragment of what Hebrew expressed in biblical times. The large number of hapax legomena in the OT implies that many ancient Hebrew words by chance do not appear at all in the OT.

The so-called waw conversive is a vanishing survival in Hebrew, for while it is exceedingly common in early narrative OT prose, it becomes rarer in the later prose books, and it disappears (in all but OT quotations) in the Mishna. The phenomenon occurs (with varying frequency) in Phoenician, Moabite, Ugaritic, the Deir ⁴Alla Balaam texts, etc., and now it is attested in Eblaite. The so-called conjunction wa prefixed to the verb must head the sentence or phrase in this construction. It can serve as the regular narrative tense. Thus wa-NAM-KU EN "the ruler said" is the same construction as wayyōmer hammelek. We can now trace this construction back to the 23rd century at Ebla.⁴

Ebla must be viewed as an intellectual center with a scribal academy in the network of the Cuneiform World. Such academies used the same text-books (sign-lists, vocabularies, etc.) and even had some student and faculty interchange. One tablet mentions the return of scribal students from Mari to Ebla. And an Ebla mathematician had moved there from Kish.⁵ In different periods, there were cuneiform academies not only in the Mesopotamian homeland but also in Anatolia, Elam, Syria and even Egypt. The academies not only taught the art of writing, but covered all the then-known arts and sciences. A list of gods is not our idea of a theological treatise, but such lists were doubtless accompanied by oral comments. The same goes for lists of plants, animals, fish, stars and so forth.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 21-2.