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March 02, 2011

John Walton on the Contextual Approach to Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies

By Roy Gane (Old Testament Department SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)

Even as Assyriology and Egyptology (and also Hittitology) emerged as serious, autonomous, academic disciplines, the attention of many remained focused on the Bible. As discoveries of major archives followed one after another from the 1920s to the 1970s, each was greeted with initial excitement as scholars made great claims for the impact of the archive on the Bible. In most cases, time and more careful attention resulted in many, if not all, of the initial claims being rejected. Methodological maturity began to be displayed in the careful work of W. W. Hallo, who promoted a balanced approach called the “contextual approach,” which seeks to identify and discuss both similarities and differences that can be observed between the Bible and the texts from the ancient Near East. “Hallo’s goal, ‘is not to find the key to every biblical phenomenon in some ancient Near Eastern precedent, but rather to silhouette the biblical text against its wider literary and cultural environment.’ Thus we must not succumb either to ‘parallelomania’ or to ‘parallelophobia.’” It is Hallo’s work that has provided the foundation for the following discussion of methodology.

(John H. Walton, [Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible](#) [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 17-18).

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on March 02, 2011 in [Quotable](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Certainly the Seminary should teach Hebrew thought, which must include the ability to read and understand Hebrew writings in the context of time and circumstances. However, the vast majority of its graduates will enter the ministry as pastors. As such, their role is not so much conversation, or debate with their peers, but feeding, reassuring, and guiding their flock.

In that context, New Testament thought is to the point: particularly, the Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John. The emerging church as it closed the first century and was about to enter the second was embattled for several sides. The eternal questions: “Where did I come from? Why am I here? What happens to me when I die?” were up close and personal.

Thus these Scriptures are replete with assurances of a Creator/Redeemer God. Furthermore, His ministry clearly demonstrated the controlling power of His “Word” to heal, to bring forth life, and to save.

The Three Angel’s Messages are of a Creator/Redeemer God. A God Who is so intimately acquainted as not only to know the hairs of each person’s head but the circumstances of each person’s life from birth and before.

Wouldn’t it be wise to preach the judgment in term of having a Friend in court? A Friend who has such intimate knowledge, concern, and love for each soul?

As a father with three great grandchildren, I find great comfort to be found “safe in the arms of Jesus”, my Maker and my Redeemer.

The New Testament writers shared that belief in the most positive declarative sense. Let us spread the Word!

Posted by: Tom Zwemer | [March 09, 2011 at 12:04 PM](#)

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