

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Memory, Meaning & Life

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

3-28-2012

2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Can a Biblical Inspired Writer Use Literary Sources?"

Angelika Kaiser

Andrews University, angelika@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml>

Recommended Citation

Kaiser, Angelika, "2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Can a Biblical Inspired Writer Use Literary Sources?"" (2012). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 109.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml/109>

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Memory, Meaning & Life by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Memory, Meaning & Faith

[Main](#)

[About](#)

[Archives](#)

March 28, 2012

2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Can a Biblical Inspired Writer Use Literary Sources?"



Presentation

Jiří Moskala* presented his research on the topic “Can a Biblical Inspired Writer Use Literary Sources?” The main points of his presentation are given below.

Introduction

After referring to various biblical passages that affirm the inspiration of the Scriptures ([2 Tim 3:15-17](#); [1 Thess 2:13](#); [2 Pet 1:21](#); etc.) the speaker posed the question if an inspired writer may use extra-biblical literary sources, or if he/she receives everything directly from God. Moskala admitted that he grew up with a view that was similar to the dictation theory of inspiration. Yet later he learned that the divine truth is actually expressed in human language under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; hence the Bible is a divine-human combination (incarnational theory of inspiration). The biblical prophets were children of their time, place, and culture, and their written works took the literary forms of their time (narratives, prose, poetry, songs, genealogies, parables, dialogues, etc.). Some of them accepted the thoughts and ideas of previous inspired prophets and the Bible provides quite a number of examples for that. The real question is whether a true prophet may borrow thoughts and material from non-inspired, non-biblical sources. In his presentation Moskala provided categories and examples from the Old Testament and New Testament for such literary borrowing.

Old Testament

1. Borrowing Key Vocabulary

The speaker mentioned that Solomon frequently uses the phrase “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3, 9, 14; etc.) which is an idiomatic expression in ancient Egyptian referring to the continuous cycle of the sun. Solomon uses this expression synonymously with the phrase “under heaven” (see Eccl 1:13; 2:3; etc.) in the sense of the “vanity of our present life” since it has its limits and is temporary. Further it is contrasted with the eternal life in relationship with God, namely the life “above the sun.”

2. Borrowing Literary Genre

Moskala stated that in the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon made use of an Egyptian literary genre called sebayt. It is a didactic work of wisdom where a king in his old age gives written instructions to his son in preparation for the difficulties of the life ahead.

3. Using Similar Concepts

The book of Proverbs strongly advises against associating with an immoral woman (Prov 2:16-20; etc.), counsels that are similar to the advise given in the *Babylonian Counsels on Wisdom*. One could expect that wisdom against prostitution belonged to the realm of common knowledge.

4. Using Similar Laws

While Moses is usually considered the great lawgiver, already long before him collections of laws were written, such as the Ur-Nammu Code, Lipit-Ishtar Code, the Code of Hammurabi, etc. To a certain extent these laws are similar to the ones given by God to Moses, particularly the casuistic style (if, when). There exist striking similarities between some biblical laws and the laws of Hammurabi. Moskala suggested that God helped Moses to formulate the laws by using forms familiar to people in the Ancient Near East (ANE) because God wanted to communicate his laws in an effective and understandable way.

5. Literary Feature – Structure of Biblical Covenants

The covenant is a dominant theme in the Old Testament and studies have shown that several biblical covenants follow the structures and patterns of the Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties. Moskala showed that the Decalogue contains some parts of these treaty patterns, and that the entire book of Deuteronomy follows that pattern. However, the speaker emphasized that although the literary structure is taken from these Hittite treaties, the content of the treaties/covenants in the Old Testament is new.

6. Literary Structures

Biblical authors often used one literary structure that was quite common in the Middle East literature, namely chiasms. They help the reader to memorize and remember the message of a specific text and to recognize the central point of a passage. Moskala showed two examples: (a) The entire book of Leviticus forms a chiasm with chap. 16 (Day of Atonement) in its center. (b) The Genesis creation account presents God in a manner without parallel in the ANE literature; its literary structure presents two sets of creation days standing parallel to each other (v. 2: earth is formless; days 1-3: form is given = light, firmament, dry land // v. 2: earth is empty; days 4-6: content is given = luminaries, inhabitants of water and sky, inhabitants of land) and the last day as the palace in time (form) filled with God's presence (content).

7. The Sanctuary and Its Services

Further Moskala turned the focus to the Israelite sanctuary and sacrificial system referring to its general similarities to pagan sanctuaries and sacrificial systems but he emphasized that a comparison between them revealed clear differences in the

details (absence of idols; east-to-west orientation [against sun worship]; typological substitutionary sacrifice vs. appeasing of the gods' anger; etc.). While both systems were handling blood, the ritual with the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement was without parallel among pagan sanctuaries.

8. Similar Rites or Ceremonies

(a) Tithe

While the biblical tithe system is apparently beginning with Abraham (Gen 14), the concept as such already existed in other ANE cultures (Sumer, Babylonian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Cretan, etc.). In these cultures it was usually used for state purposes whereas in the Bible it has a different, holy purpose.

(b) Circumcision

Another example that was mentioned by Moskala was the practice of circumcision which existed in Egypt already long before God gave this ordinance to Abraham as a sign of covenant. Yet although the basic practice is similar, the difference is in the details—age (puberty vs. 8 days old) and motivation.

9. Similarities with the Creation Story and the Flood Account

(a) Moses' Polemical Style

Since in the ANE there existed several ancient creation stories prior to the writing of Genesis 1-2, some scholars have claimed that the biblical creation account was influenced by, e.g., Babylonian mythology. Moskala argued that Moses wrote the true creation account under divine inspiration to correct the distortions found in the mythological accounts of creation. Moses obviously avoided certain terms (*bigger* and *lesser light* instead of *sun* and *moon*) that could convey wrong conceptions (the terms for sun and moon would refer also to a god of the sun and a god of the moon). Further, in the biblical account everything was created out of nothing rather than from defeated enemies. There is no struggle or war among the gods. The biblical creation account presents one God. It is a polemic against mythological stories and it is unique.

(b) Enuma Elish

Moskala explained the Enuma Elish creation account pointing out that creation out of a primordial conflict was a common motif in the ANE. Yet the Genesis creation account stands in stark contrast to it. Although such elements as the heavens, the earth, the sea/deep, and the sea "monsters" are mentioned, they do not represent fighting deities or a source of chaos.

(c) The Epic of Athrahasis

While there are some basic similarities between the biblical creation and flood account and the epic of Athrahasis, there are nevertheless many differences. Thus the biblical account does not present heaven, water, and earth as gods; humanity is not created from the blood of the rebellious leader of the junior gods. Further, the flood did not occur because the human population disturbed the rest of the deities but because of their wickedness and sinfulness. Therefore, Moskala stated, it would be unwarranted to speak of Moses' borrowing ideas or concepts from this epic.

(d) The Epic of Gilgamesh

The speaker recounted the story line of the Gilgamesh epic and concluded that its tone is totally different from the biblical flood story. The account in Gen 6:11-13 plays with the word *shachat* (corrupt, destroy), explaining that the flood was God's reaction against human society's total corruption and violence rather than a capricious act of an angry deity.

10. Literary Dependency

(a) Psalm 104

This chapter describes in a poetic way the seven days of creation and their functions. Scholars have pointed out strong parallels between verses 20-29 and the “Hymn of Aten,” an Egyptian hymn from the 14th century B.C. (during the monotheistic Amarna Revolution). The writer of Psalm 104 was obviously familiar with this hymn and used some of its imagery for both polemical and aesthetic purposes. The text speaks always about the Lord as the Creator God and never about the sun god Aten. If he borrowed some thoughts, then he thoroughly transformed the hymn into a monotheistic praise of the living God.

(b) Psalm 29

Moskala stated that this psalm, both in content and form, has numerous parallels in Ugaritic poetry. It is possible that David adapted such a poem about a thunderstorm (Baal or Hadad as the storm god) and transformed it into a powerful hymn of praise to the Lord God as the Creator of the “perfect storm”, the Flood. This God is presented as someone who has awesome power over nature.

(c) Proverbs 22:17–24:22

The speaker suggested that this text, also called the “Thirty Sayings of the Wise,” was influenced or depended on an Egyptian wisdom document (“The Instruction of Amenemope”) from the time of 1200 to 1081 B.C. Solomon reigned obviously afterwards (971-931 B.C.). Moskala showed several parallels between the two documents, suggesting that Solomon did not simply copy the thoughts of that Egyptian document but carefully selected material and adapted it for his own purposes. Names of Egyptian deities were eliminated and replaced by references to the Lord. Further, the content of the material was placed within the context of the Israelite covenant faith. Solomon adjusted the material to his own cultural setting.

(d) Song of Songs

The love songs in the book Songs of Songs may reflect some extra-biblical (common) love songs, especially of Egyptian love poetry. There are extensive parallels in themes, motives, terms of endearment, imagery, vocabulary, etc. However, there are also quite a number of differences which Moskala pointed out.

(e) The Book of Daniel

Dan 4 is the only chapter in the book of Daniel that was not written by the prophet. Nebuchadnezzar himself recounts his humiliation and miraculous healing by God. Another example in the book of Daniel is the idea of the four world empires in Dan 2 and 7. Already the Greek poet Hesiod in the 8th century B.C. mentions four ages of man, which are associated with four metals declining in value (golden age, silver age, bronze age, and iron age). Maybe Hesiod reflected a common tradition that is also seen in the book of Daniel.

New Testament

1. Luke 1:1-3

Luke explicitly mentioned in the beginning of his gospel that he did his own research and examined the evidence before he started to write. Moskala stated that the Holy Spirit guided Luke in his selection of suitable and reliable material.

2. Acts 17:28

Paul quoted from the Stoic Aratus of Cilicia (315-240 B.C.) but he replaced the pantheistic ideas with the concept that God is the Father of Jesus, the Creator, and that every one of us was created by him. Therefore Paul used his knowledge of the Greek literature for missiological purposes to connect with his pagan audience and point them to the divine message.

3. Several other texts

Due to time constraints Moskala quickly remarked on Jude 14-15, Rev 1:17-18, and Rev 6:9-11, mentioning that these passages also have parallels in non-biblical writings but that the biblical writers adapted the material for their own purposes.

Conclusion

Moskala concluded in saying that biblical writers did not live in isolation. They knew the literature of their time and they used extra-biblical material to communicate competently. They used contemporary structures, styles, concepts, and language for the same purpose. His study shows, he emphasized, that a verbal or dictation inspiration is untenable and indefensible. The Holy Spirit helped in choosing the right words and in presenting them in the most effective manner, thereby making use of different extra-biblical material. Yet the biblical writers did not give credit to the original sources or authors because that was not customary in ancient times. The final result was nevertheless regarded as a firm prophetic word (2 Pet 1:19-21).




*Jiri Moskala, BA, M.Th., Th.D., Ph.D, is professor of Old Testament exegesis and theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He joined the faculty in 1999. Prior to coming to Andrews, Moskala served in various capacities (ordained pastor, administrator, teacher, and principal) in the Czech Republic. He is a member of different theological societies and has authored or edited a number of articles and books in the Czech and English languages. In addition, he has participated in several archaeological expeditions in Tell Jalul, Jordan.

Posted by Angelika Kaiser on March 28, 2012 in Adventist Studies, Biblical Backgrounds, Church History, Ellen White Symposium, History of Interpretation, Philosophy of History | Permalink

Save to del.icio.us |

[Tweet](#)

Comments

 You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the comment feed for this post.

Verify your Comment

Previewing your Comment

Posted by: |

This is only a preview. Your comment has not yet been posted.

[Post](#)

[Edit](#)



Your comment could not be posted. Error type:

Your comment has been posted. Post another comment

The letters and numbers you entered did not match the image. Please try again.

As a final step before posting your comment, enter the letters and numbers you see in the image below. This prevents automated programs from posting comments.

Having trouble reading this image? [View an alternate.](#)



[Contact](#)

[Archives](#)

[Feeds](#)

[Powered by TypePad](#)

Copyright © 2010 Andrews University