

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels to the Bible and the Question of Revelation and Inspiration

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Archaeological discoveries made in the ancient Near East during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have revolutionized in many ways the study of the Scriptures and raised challenging new questions for interpreters. It is now impossible to study the OT without taking into consideration such findings. The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics and the ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, and Canaanite languages give us tools that make it possible to read texts written before Abram and in some cases texts composed during the lifetime of biblical writers. This wealth of material is very useful in providing historical and religious backgrounds for the interpretation of the Bible.

However, these discoveries reveal that there seems to have been a very close relation between the Israelite religious practices and the religious milieu of the ancient Near East. Consequently, the question of the uniqueness of the Israelite religion, as depicted in the OT, has become an extremely important one in scholarly circles. There are ancient Near Eastern parallels for most of the Israelite social and religious institutions and for many of its religious ideas. Those similarities become of critical importance when the question of the revelation and inspiration of the biblical text is raised.

Types of Similarities

We should expect to find many similarities between Israel and its neighbors. Linguistic similarities are unavoidable because the Hebrew language is a Semitic language closely related to other Northwest Semitic languages. For instance, it is well known that the word *ʾel* is used in the Canaanite literature as the proper name for the highest god, but in the Bible the Hebrew word *ʾel* is often used as a title for the Israelite God. This does not mean that the God of Israel is to be equated with the Canaanite *ʾel*. More interesting is the use of

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

similar phrases or titles to designate particular individuals or their functions. For instance, in Israel a prophet was at times called a “man of God” (e.g., 1 Kings 17:18, 24). An inscription on a Phoenician seal reads, “Belonging to Baal-yaton, the man of God, who depends on Melqart.” Melqart was the Baal of Tyre, and this man was his prophet.¹ Naram-Sin, son of Sargon (ca. 2200 BC), consulted his god and introduced the answer he received by saying, “The shining Morning Star spoke from heaven thus, . . .”² This same title is applied to Jesus in the NT (Rev 22:16). The Canaanite statement, “You will be numbered among those who have descended into the earth,” expresses the same concept found in Ps 88:4: “I am counted among those who go down to the pit.” This points to a common poetic way of referring to the tomb.

The relation between the gods and humans, particularly the king, is in some cases very similar to what we find in Israel. When the king was attacked by his powerful enemies he said:

I lifted up my hands to the lord of h[eave]n and the lord of heav[en] answered me. [And] the lord of heaven [spoke] to me [through] seers and through messengers. [And] the lord of heaven said [to me]: “Fear not for I have [made you] king, [and] I shall sta[nd] by you and I shall save you from all [these kings who] have set up siege against you!” [The lord of heaven] spoke thus to [me, and he put all these kings to flight (?)].³

That sounds like a passage from the OT, but it is not. It was written on a votive inscription by king Zakkur of Northern Syria and dated to 758 BC. Notice how many of its ideas are also found in the OT. One of the most important ones is that the god of Zakkur, like Yahweh, gives victory to the king over his enemies. It is not only that the Israelites and their neighbors share the idea of a warrior God; they also believe that God intervenes within history and fights on behalf of his king. Notice also that phrases like “to lift up the hands,” “lord of heaven,” and the title “seer” are common in the OT. Very important is the use of the prophetic formula “Fear not,” which is also found in the OT (Deut 20:3-4; Isa 41:13-14; 43:1-2; Jer 30:10-11).

The need for the king to rely on his god for victory is found in a hymn of Assurbanipal. He says, “Neither [. . . by] my [might] nor by the might of my bow, (But) by the st[rength and by the] might of my goddesses, did I cause the lands [disob]edient to me to submit to the yoke of Assur.”⁴ The Psalmist wrote, “I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you

¹E. Lipinski, “North Semitic Texts,” in *Near Eastern Religious Texts Related to the OT*, ed. Walter Beyerlin (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1978), 247.

²Benjamin R. Forester, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 1:267.

³Lipinski, “Semitic Texts,” 231.

⁴Forester, 2:719.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame” (44:6-7). The basic idea is the same in both texts.

According to the OT the *erem*, or wars of extermination, were ordered by God against some Canaanite cities. It is now known that pagan deities also ordered this type of war against the enemies of the king.⁵ It has been argued that this military practice was integrated into the Israelite religion “because the *erem* helped meet its need to bring order and security to a hostile and chaotic environment.”⁶

⁵ See Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical erem* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 218. The questions raised by the practice of the *erem* in the Bible are very complex, making it difficult to provide quick and comprehensive answers. However, there are several elements that we should take into consideration when seeking possible answers. When addressing this subject we should take into consideration the teachings of the Scripture concerning God, evil, human society, and war. Simplistic solutions are to be rejected (e.g., the OT view of God is different from the one of the NT; the biblical writer was using a pagan notion that is of very little value to us). The following arguments could be helpful when dealing with the problem of the *erem* in the OT.

1. *Time Frame*: The biblical text indicates that the extermination of the Canaanites was basically limited to the period of the conquest of the land. Several times God reminded the Israelites of that important fact and their responsibility, saying to them, “When you cross the Jordan into Canaan . . .” (Num 33:51); “When the Lord . . . brings you into the land you are entering to possess . . .” (Deut 7:1; 12:1; 18:9). This means that the Lord did not expect the *erem* to be a permanent characteristic of Israelite warfare. One gets the distinct impression that once the conquest was over, the Israelites were only to be involved in self-defense. Therefore, there is no biblical support for the practice of “holy war” today.

2. *Morally Justifiable*: Those who go to war intend to win at any cost, and this by itself makes the extermination of the enemy an intrinsic part of warfare. This was clearly the case in the ancient Near East. Interestingly, the Old Testament makes a special effort to demonstrate that God’s command to destroy the Canaanites was not an arbitrary command, nor was it controlled by the people’s expansionistic interests. God Himself provided the reason: The Canaanites were sacrificing their children to their gods, involved in sorcery and witchcraft, and consulting the spirits of the dead (Deut 18:10-12). Their moral and religious corruption had reached an intolerable level, beyond grace. This is what the Lord said to Abram hundreds of years before: “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen 15:16). By the time of the conquest their sins reached “full measure.” This indicates that God does pass judgment on the nations and on their commitment to moral values and proper religious practices (cf. Gen 18:20-33). God was executing judgment against sin and impenitent sinners in the land of Canaan, and the judgment was final.

A second reason is given for the exterminations of the enemies of the Israelites: If they remained in the land they would become instruments of corruption for His people (Deut 7:4). A holy people required a holy place to live in. This *erem* was God’s attempt to organize a new world order based on His principles of justice and love; a land in which peace and security would prevail. Anything that could threaten the divine intention was to be totally rejected.

3. *Israelites as Assistants*: It is the fact that God enlists the Israelites as His instruments in this type of war that raises moral and ethical concerns. Had He used the forces of nature, very few would feel that uncomfortable. But He used war. War is an unavoidable characteristic of a fallen, sinful world. By transforming the twelve tribes of Israel into a nation with political identity and by declaring Himself to be the King of Israel, God and His people were going to be involved in warfare. Their enemies would be other nations unwilling to recognize God’s moral claim on them and

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

In the ancient Near East the gods acted as judges. The idea that they sat on thrones to judge is a common one. In a prayer offered before performing a ritual of divination, the petitioner says, “O Shamash, lord of judgment. . . . come down to me that you may dine, that you may sit on the throne and render judgment!”⁷ The tablet is dated to ca. 2000-1500 BC.

The incomparability of Yahweh, the God of Israel, is emphasized very often in the OT. Isaiah writes, “To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? . . . I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning” (46:5, 9). In the Song of Moses and Miriam we read, “Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you?” (Exod 15:11). In a hymn to Gula, goddess of healing, she says, “I am sublime in heaven, I am queen in the netherworld, among the gods I have no peer, among the goddesses I have no equal.”⁸ In the great Hymn to Marduk we read, “Whatever the gods of all the inhabited world may have done, they cannot be like you, Lord! [] of the depth of knowledge, where is your equal?”⁹ Once more there are conceptual and linguistic similarities.¹⁰

God’s providential care for the world is expressed in a hymn to the Egyptian god Re (ca. 1365 BC) in language similar to what we find in the Psalms: [Re] “who creates the herbs that give life to the cattle, and the fruit trees for mankind. Who makes that on which the fishes in the river may live, and the birds under the heaven.”¹¹ Psalm 104:14, 25, 27: “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, bringing forth food from the earth. . . . There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time.” In the famous Egyptian hymn of Akhenaten to the god Aten (ca. 1365-1348), the king exclaims “How manifold are your works! They are hidden from the face (of man) . . .”¹² The Psalmist also exclaims, “How many are your works! In wisdom you made them all” (104:24). In spite of cultural differences, humans tend to think

willing to exterminate His people. Through the conquest of the land, the God of the theocracy trains His people for war in order for them to cooperate with Him in the fulfillment of His divine intentions for them and for the world (Judges 3:1-2).

We may not understand everything related to this topic, but there is one thing we know, namely, that God is a loving, kind, and just God. This biblical picture of God should be used in the discussion of a subject like the one under consideration. He is the One who in an act of love and justice will exterminate sin and impenitent sinners from our planet in order to create a peaceful and eternal kingdom.

⁷ Forester, 1:149.

⁸ Ibid., 2:494.

⁹ Ibid., 2:527.

¹⁰ In a polytheistic religion the superiority and incomparability of a particular deity should be interpreted in terms of the sphere over which he or she ruled. For instance, the god or goddess of war is incomparable in that particular role.

¹¹ Hellmut Brunner, “Egyptian Texts,” in Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts*, 14.

¹² Ibid., 18.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

and talk to and about God in similar ways because we all seem to share some basic universal and general perception of the work and nature of God. Therefore those religious expressions belong to the common human experience of G/god.

We also find stylistic elements that are similar to those found in the OT. For instance, the OT formula of lament and penitential prayers is also found in an Akkadian prayer to Ishtar (dated to the middle of the second millennium BC):

How long, O my Lady, are my enemies to look darkly upon me,
are they to plan evil things against me with lies and deception,
are my persecutors and those who envy me to rejoice over me?
How long, O my Lady . . . ?¹³

Compare that with Ps 13:1-2:

How long, O Lord, will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me? . . .
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Obviously, this was a common formula of lament used in the ancient Near East to express an impatient request in the form of a prayer.¹⁴

There are many more stylistic similarities between the Israelite literature and the ancient Near East, but most of the similarities are only formal, not substantive. In the case of the wisdom literature we find similar forms as well as similar teachings. Just a couple of examples. The Egyptian Teachings of Ani, from the 15th or 14th centuries, contains the following advice:

Be on your guard against a woman from abroad,
whom no one knows in the city.
. . . .
She is a deep water, the extent of which no one knows.
A woman whose husband is far away, says daily to you:
'I am polished (=pretty)!' when she has no witnesses.
She waits and sets a trap. A great crime—and death, when it is known.¹⁵

We can identify some significant similarities with Prov 7:19-27, but no one argues that Proverbs was copying from the Egyptian document. What is described in both texts is a common human experience. Closer parallels with Proverbs are found in the Teachings of Amenemope (ca. 1186-1070 BC). For instance,

Better is poverty from the hand of God
than riches in the storehouse;
better is bread, when the heart is satisfied,

¹³ Hartmut Schmokel, "Mesopotamian Texts," in Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts*, 110-11.

¹⁴ See H. Ringgren, "Matay," in *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9:102.

¹⁵ Brunner, 48.

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

than riches with sorrow.¹⁶

The content is very similar to what we find in Prov 17:1; and 15:17. Notice also that this particular type of proverb, called a “better proverb,” is very common in the Bible (e.g. Eccl 4). Israel and its neighbors seem to have used the same or similar literary forms to express their ideas.

Two social institutions deserve brief mention because both of them find parallels in the ancient Near East, namely kingship and the covenant. Such parallels should not surprise us, because the Israelites requested a king “such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam 8:5). Yet the Lord adapted and reformulated this institution on the basis of the covenant He made with Israel. The covenant was a common legal form in the ancient Near East, though used by the Israelites in a singular way. Many of the parallels are impressive and indicate that the biblical writers use expressions, practices, and images that are common in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context. It is therefore useful for the interpreter to get acquainted with those customs and practices, because they do help us gain a better understanding of some biblical passages.

Approaches to the Problem of Similarities

We have briefly touched on some of the significant types of similarities between Israel and the ancient Near East nations. Some consider the similarities to be so serious that they find it difficult to speak of the uniqueness of Israel. Two main approaches have been developed to deal with the problem.¹⁷ There are those who search for concepts and behaviors that are unique to Israel; like for instance the biblical idea of monotheism and the relation of Israel to that One God. Others argue that Israel and its contemporaries shared the same pool of ideas and behaviors and that distinctiveness is to be found in the way the Israelites reconfigured or patterned those ideas and behaviors. The role of revelation and inspiration is hardly ever touched in those discussions.¹⁸ The discussions

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ On this consult Peter Machinist, “The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel: An Essay,” in *Ah, Assyria . . . : Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, ed. M. Cogan and H. Tadmor (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), 197-200.

¹⁸ An exception is Helmer Ringgren. He argues, in support of the second position, that in the area of similarities between Israel and its neighbors “The important task of research . . . is to assess the Israelite use of foreign material and the reinterpretation it underwent in the framework of Yahwistic religion” [“The Impact of the Ancient Near East on Israelite Tradition,” in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, edited by Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), 45]. He raises the question of revelation and argues that in the OT God reveals Himself not only through His speaking but particularly through His acts in history. “It is conceivable, therefore, that pieces of Yahweh’s revelation are to be found also among those other peoples, or to put it differently, that elements of his revelation found their way into Israel through the faith of those other nations. If God is able to use the events of history to get across to his people, he might also be able to use the traditions of the people who took part in these events to make himself and his plans known to his people. Is it too bold to assume that ‘pagan’ thinking about God could contain sparks of truth?” (46). That elements of truth may be present among those who were not Israelites is not

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

are attempts to explain the origin of the Israelite religion from the perspective of sociology and the development of social institutions. But for those who consider the OT to be part of the biblical canon, it is impossible not to address the question of revelation in the context of the similarities between Israel and its neighbors.

It appears that the problem we confront is the one of developing a method that would allow us to deal properly with similarities and differences and that would acknowledge at the same time the specific character of each religion.¹⁹ Some scholars have been attempting to develop such methodology. They feel that the comparative method is indeed one of the most difficult disciplines because of its natural tendency to overemphasize similarities and its inherent danger of drawing conclusions unwarranted by the evidence. However, there are a couple of things that the evidence available to us indicates, and we must keep them in mind when dealing with the issue of similarities. First, we do know that Israel shared in many ways the ancient Near Eastern culture, but we also know, secondly, that Israel appears in the history and culture of the ancient Near East as an independent entity with its own character and identity.²⁰

The uniqueness of Israel in the context of the ancient Near East is not something modern scholars are addressing for the first time in the history of the religion of the Old Testament. The OT itself testifies to the singularity of the people of Israel in the ancient world. Peter Machinist lists 433 OT passages in which the distinctiveness of Israel is mentioned.²¹ The diversity of the passages indicates, according to him, that the issue of distinctiveness “seems to have been an established and not unpopular preoccupation in Israel well before the advent of the canonical organizers in the sixth century B.C.E.”²² It was because of their uniqueness that God was to use Israel to bless the nations of the earth (Gen 12:3). Therefore, the use of the comparative method should not ignore the biblical emphasis on the singularity of Israel.

Guidelines for the Study of Similarities

In an attempt to set limits to the comparative method, scholars have suggested some principles to be used by those who study the similarities between

to be denied, but the problem is how to identify the non-Israelite traditions through which God was revealing Himself to His people. The only control available would be the special revelation that God Himself gave to the Israelites. Therefore, we are back to the question of what is uniquely Israelite vis-a-vis the ancient Near East.

¹⁹ So Helmer Ringgren, “Israel’s Place Among the Religions of the Ancient Near East,” *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 23 (1972):1.

²⁰ This is acknowledged, perhaps in stronger terms, by Th. C. Vriezen, “The Study of the OT and the History of Religion,” *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 17 (1969):14-15.

²¹ Machinist, 203-204. Among the passages we find Gen 26:4; 34:14-17; Exod 19:5-6; 22:20; 23:32-33; 34:10; Lev 18:3-4; Deut 4:6-8; 2 Sam 7:22-24.

²² Machinist, 208.

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

Israel and the ancient Near East. We will mention some we have found particularly useful.

First, it has been considered of utmost importance to examine differences as well as similarities.²³ Otherwise we would easily misinterpret the similarities. In fact the question of the uniqueness of Israel would not arise if all we had were similarities. It is because there are differences and a biblical claim to distinctiveness that we have to raise the question of the nature of the similarities or parallels.

Second, study inter-biblical parallels before comparing the biblical text with extra-biblical materials.²⁴ If the biblical text provides other passages similar to the one discussed, it is more important to examine that parallel than to ignore it and look for ancient Near Eastern parallels to interpret the biblical text. For instance, the verb *kipper* (“to make atonement”) is often used in different ritual passages in the OT. But its Akkadian cognate, *kuppuru* (“to wipe off, cleanse”) is also used in different ritual acts. In order to ascertain the meaning of the verb in the Hebrew Bible, it is necessary to examine its ritual usage in the OT. Within that context *kipper* means to perform rites for the removal of sin and impurity. Sin and impurity are understood as violations of God’s moral and religious laws and constitute a barrier between God and the sinner that needs to be removed. This, as we shall see, is different from what we find in the Akkadian literature.

Third, when dealing with social phenomena it is necessary to study the function of a particular phenomenon within Israel itself before engaging in comparisons with parallel phenomena in other societies.²⁵ The nature and role of the king in Israelite society must be carefully analyzed before one decides to compare this social institution with ancient Near Eastern practices. Such study will reveal significant differences and will indicate that the Israelite system was in many ways unique, in spite of similarities with other systems.

Fourth, study the ancient Near Eastern parallel in an attempt to determine what was the meaning of the idea, behaviour, or institution within its own particular setting in life.²⁶ Interpreting a piece of literature or a social and cultic practice in isolation from its immediate cultural context could result in a distortion of the evidence. Therefore, it is indispensable to take into consideration all the evidence available on a particular phenomenon before comparing it with similar ones in any other culture. Let me give you a modern example. For instance, terms like “freedom” and “liberty” were used during the cold war in communist literature as well as in American literature. But in order to under-

²³ H. Frankfort, *The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 17.

²⁴ Shemaryahu Talmon, “The ‘Comparative Method’ in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems,” *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 29 (1978):356.

²⁵ Talmon, 356.

²⁶ Vriezen, 13; Ringgren, “Israel’s Place,” 1; Talmon, 356.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

stand the meaning attached to those terms it was necessary to have a clear understanding of the communist and American ideologies. The terms are the same, but they differ significantly within each culture. The use of the Akkadian verb *kuppuru* provides another example. When this verb is interpreted within the Babylonian understanding of ritual acts one realizes that it is not a significant parallel to the biblical *kipper*. In that religion what was wiped off or removed was not sin but evil in the form of disease produced by demonic powers. Through magic and incantations the individual sought to be free from his or her affliction. This is different from what we find in the OT, where God Himself, in an act of love, forgives sinners and removes their sin.

Fifth, comparisons should be made with religions with which Israel comes into contact or that belong to its general cultural and geographical context.²⁷ They would probably provide the best and more reliable parallels for analysis and discussion.

Critical Cases and the Question of Revelation and Inspiration

These guidelines could help students by providing proper parameters within which one could do comparative studies that will hopefully avoid the “parallelomania” so common among scholars in the last century and that led many to conclude that the Israelite religion was heavily influenced by the Babylonian religion²⁸ or the Ugaritic religion (Canaanite religion). But the guidelines do not address the relation between similarities and the revelation/inspiration of the biblical text. We intend to address that question by discussing several of the most important parallels between Israel and the ancient Near East. Here we will deal mainly with two specific areas: the law and the cultic practices. We will examine the nature of the parallels and their implications for the doctrine of revelation and inspiration.

Israelite Law

We possess today a significant amount of legal materials from the ancient Near East that could be used for comparative purpose and to better understand ancient legal practices.²⁹ From the Sumerian culture we have the Laws of Ur-

²⁷ Vriezen, 13.

²⁸ On Pan-Babylonianism see W. G. C. Gwaltney, Jr., “Pan-Babylonianism,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Haynes, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:233-34. He writes that the view that Babylonian culture dominated the ancient Fertile Crescent “arose around 1900 among German cuneiformists, who argued that all ancient cultures and religions with an astral mythology sprang from a common source: Babylon . . . Among the newly discovered documents were numerous religio-mythological writings suggesting that the Hebrew Bible reflected the ancient Israelite’s dependence on Babylonian culture, mythology, and religion” (233). He adds that eventually the theory “faltered because of its extravagant and unsubstantiated claims” (234). See also H. B. Huffmon, “Babel und Bibel,” *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, 1:92.

²⁹ The most recent translation of those legal materials is Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997).

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

Namma (from the city of Ur, ca. 2050 BC), the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar, fifth ruler of the First Dynasty of the city of Isin (ca. 1934-1924 BC), and several other small collections. From the Babylonians we have the Laws of Eshnunna (ca. 1700 BC), prepared by Dadusha, ruler of the kingdom of Eshnunna; the Laws of Hammurabi (ca. 1750 BC), prepared by Hammurabi, the sixth ruler of the First Dynasty of Babylon; and a collection of fifteen Neo-Babylonian Laws, dated to ca. 700 BC. From Assyria we have the Middle Assyrian Laws (ca. 1076 BC), and from the Hittite a collection of laws going back to the early Old Period (1650-1500 BC) which includes laws from the Middle and New Hittite periods (1500-1180 BC). There is a need for Adventist scholars to examine these laws and compare them with the biblical ones in order to deal with the issue of similarities and differences. Here we can only make some general comments.

We must acknowledge that the similarities between these legal materials and the biblical ones are indisputable. Take, for instance, the structure of the collections, particularly that of the Law of Hammurabi. It has a prologue in which the background of the law is given, followed by the collection of laws, closing with an epilogue.³⁰ The same structure has been identified in the case of the so called Book of the Covenant in Exod 20-23.³¹ Casuistic law (case laws; “if such and such happens, then . . .”) characterizes many of the collections, as is also the case in the biblical materials. We find in the Bible laws addressed by God to the Israelites, and often phrased as imperatives, called apodictic laws. It was believed that such laws were uniquely Israelite, but laws phrased in the apodictic style have been found among Israelites neighbors.³²

If we look at some specific laws we find a number of striking similarities.

Deut 24:7: “If a man is caught kidnapping one of his brother Israelites and treats him as a slave or sells him, the kidnapper must die.”

CH 14: “If a man should kidnap the young child of another man, he shall be killed.”

Mid. Assyrian A30: “If the father who presented the bridal gift so pleases, he shall take his daughter-in-law (i.e., the wife of his deceased son) and give her in marriage to his (second) son.”

Deut 25:5-10: “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, . . . Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her.”

Lev 18:7, 29: “Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relation with your mother. . . . Such persons must be cut off from their people.”

³⁰ W. J. Harrelson, “Law in the OT,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:79.

³¹ Shalom M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 36.

³² Samuel Greengus, “Law: Biblical and ANE Law,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:245.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

Hammurabi 157: "If a man, after his father's death, should lie with his mother, they shall burn them both." [In Hittite law it is not a sin for the son to have sex with her after the death of the father (HL 190).]

In the area of sexual prohibitions there are many similarities between biblical legislation and Hittite, Babylonian, and Assyrian laws. Interestingly, the biblical text states that the Egyptians and the Canaanites did not practice similar laws (Lev 18:3, 27-29), but does not say anything about Hittites, Babylonians, and Assyrians. Nevertheless, it is clear that "the Israelites were neither the first nor only people to honor such taboo."³³

One more example taken from Hammurabi 199: "If he destroys the eye of a citizen's slave, or breaks the bone of citizen's slave, he shall pay half of the purchasing price." Compare it with Exod 21:26: "If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye."

Samuel Greengus states, "The similarity between the Israelite and pagan laws is remarkable and unexpected. The language in which the respective laws were formulated is at times so close that questions have arisen as to the originality and independence of the Israelite legal traditions."³⁴

How then should one explain those similarities? What is uniquely Israelite in the biblical legal materials? A logical conclusion would be that the Israelites took over their body of legal materials from ancient Near Eastern legal traditions. The problem scholars face with that suggested solution is that there is no way to determine how that happened. One of them has concluded that "at this stage of knowledge . . . the actual mechanisms of cultural contact and transmission still remain elusive."³⁵

Other scholars have acknowledged the ancient Near Eastern influence on the Israelite legal tradition but have sought to demonstrate that there are some fundamental conceptual differences which make the Israelite system unique. For instance, the laws dealing with slaves are much more humanitarian in the Bible than in any other Near Eastern law. "Ancient Near Eastern law collections deal mostly with the slaves in relation to an injuring third party, thus emphasizing the slave's status as chattel. However, most biblical legislation focuses upon the relationship of slaves to their own master, thus emphasizing the slaves' humanity."³⁶ The clear tendency of the law of slavery in the Bible is "to humanize this

³³ Greengus, 246.

³⁴ Harrelson, 534.

³⁵ Greengus, 247.

³⁶ Barry Lee Eichler, "Slavery," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 959. K. A. Kitchen, "Slave," in *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. E. Douglas (England: InterVarsity, 1980), 3:1464, writes, "Even when the Hebrew law and custom on slaves shares in the common heritage of the ancient Semitic world, there is this unique care in God's name for these people who by status were not people, something absent from the law of the Babylon and Assyria."

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

institution” based on the belief that there is one Creator and that all human beings were made in the image and likeness of God. There was also the fact that Israel itself was in bondage in Egypt.³⁷

Specific characteristics of the Israelite law have been identified as pointing to its uniqueness. First, it has been argued that, over against ancient Near Eastern law, the Israelites view their law as originating in God Himself; He is considered the only legislator in Israel. In Mesopotamia the law was the embodiment of cosmic truth, and Shamash was its custodian but not its originator. It was the function of the king to establish justice in his realm, and it was he who expressed the cosmic truth in the form of law.³⁸ Among the Israelites the law was conceived as coming directly from God.

Second, in Israel, it is suggested, the law is an expression of God’s will, and therefore all crimes are considered a sin against Him and cannot be pardoned by a human agency.³⁹ All aspects of life are directly related, through the law, to the will of God. No distinction is made in the biblical legal materials between the moral, civil, and religious spheres of life. They are all considered an expression of the will of God.

Third, since it is God who personally gives the law to His people, they are directly responsible to Him and not to any individual or legislative body.⁴⁰ Every individual is now personally responsible to maintain justice in the land.

Fourth, biblical law is viewed as upholding the principle of the sacredness of human life and therefore as rejecting the death penalty for crimes against property.⁴¹ The basic principle is that human life is more valuable than property.

These principles are indeed useful and assist us in perceiving the uniqueness of the Israelite law within the ancient Near East. But they do not provide an answer to the question of the historical origin of biblical law. They simply describe the way the Israelites conceived of their law and how it was different from other legal collections. When dealing with the issue of the origin of the biblical law, the only information we have is the one provided by the biblical text itself. The text emphasizes the fact that it was God Himself who gave those laws to the Israelites. In fact, He appeared to them on Mount Sinai and they heard His voice as He gave them the Decalogue (Exod 19:16-19; 20:1-19). The people suggested that Moses be their mediator, and the Lord said to him, “Stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to

³⁷ Walter Zimmerli, “Slavery in the OT,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 829.

³⁸ Moshe Greenberg, “Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law,” in *Studies in Bible and Jewish Religion*, ed. Menahem Haran (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1960), 9.

³⁹ Paul, 37; and Greenberg, 12.

⁴⁰ Paul, 38.

⁴¹ Greenberg, 16-18.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess” (Deut 5:31; NIV).

To what extent should we take that information at face value? Should we interpret that emphasis on God as the originator of the law as a literary device whose purpose was to invest the law with authority? If it was a literary device, we do not have any precedent for it. First, in the ancient Near East the authority of the law was not grounded on its divine origin but on the authority of the king, who was also subjected to it. Second, in the Bible the law is located within and is part of a historical narrative. The text considers the giving of the law to Israel to be a historical event that took place on Mount Sinai after the people left from Egypt. The origin of the people of Israel, the moment at which the twelve tribes were constituted into a nation, and the giving of the law are inseparable. The historical moment is the same. Finally, the biblical text makes a special effort to establish the fact that it was God Himself who gave the law to His people. The Lord publicly proclaimed the Decalogue, and that event was witnessed by each Israelite. This is the only way the biblical text explains the origin of the law, and we should take it very seriously.

For a community of faith that acknowledges the divine origin of the Bible, solutions that tend to play down the plain meaning of the text become, to say the least, questionable. By assuming that perspective of faith with respect to the biblical text, the problem of the unquestionable similarities between biblical law and ancient Near Eastern law collections is accentuated. In searching for answers we must attempt to integrate as much as possible the archaeological evidence and the witness of the biblical text.

Let me suggest a way of dealing with the issue of similarities within the conceptual context of the Israelite law as a divine revelation. First, some of the similarities could possibly be explained by the simple fact that humans are social beings who seek to live in harmony in a context of social order. This requires a set of common social values expressed in norms and laws that will regulate the life of the social group. Social crimes do not vary much from culture to culture, and even the possible number of penalties to be inflicted are limited and therefore very similar. But since social values may vary, or at least the hierarchy of value may be different, we should expect to find significant similarities as well as some differences. Of course, we could also suggest that God, as Creator, provided for the human race a basic set of values and principles to regulate human behavior and that some of them have been preserved in all cultures. That would certainly explain many of the similarities.

Second, we should take into consideration the biblical tradition concerning Abram. It is a logical deduction to conclude that when he left Ur, in Mesopotamia, Abram left with the legal tradition of that area. He had been a citizen of that city, was aware of the laws regulating the different aspects of that society, and he lived by those laws. He was probably well acquainted with at least the Babylonian civil laws. Travelling throughout Palestine, he became acquainted

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

with the Canaanite and even the Egyptian legal traditions and possibly incorporated some of them into his own lifestyle.

Third, we should also take into consideration that according to the biblical text God made a covenant with Abram and gave him specific legal instructions (Gen 17). It is true that we do not have a record of that legal material, but it would have reflected values and principles compatible with the character of God which were to regulate the life of Abram and his descendants. Obviously this new legal material did not totally reject every aspect of the legal traditions known by Abram. Otherwise it would have been almost impossible for Abram to interact with people outside his household.

Fourth, we must acknowledge that the twelve tribes of Israel did not live in a legal vacuum before Sinai.⁴² The legal traditions of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were part of their legal heritage. Besides, they were acquainted at least with the Canaanite and Egyptian law systems. While in Egypt the Lord gave them laws regulating the Passover (Exod 12:1-30) and the consecration of the firstborn. Moses may have even initiated in Egypt a Sabbath reform (5:4-21; cf. 16:4-35). And after the Exodus, and before reaching Sinai, the Lord gave them some laws whose content is not stated in the text (15:25c-26).

Fifth, God did not uproot Israel from its cultural milieu by giving them a legal system totally and radically different from that of the surrounding nations. In order for the Israelites to be effective as God's instrument in blessing the nations of the earth, it was necessary for them to be similar and yet different from those nations. Israel was now a new nation brought into existence by the Lord in fulfillment to the promises He made to Abraham.

Finally, if we take seriously the biblical witness according to which the Israelite laws were given to them by the Lord, we would have to conclude that at Sinai *God gave Israel more than a peculiar legal frame of reference based on unique principles of social and religious values. He gave them also a legal system that incorporated some of their legal heritage from the ancient Near East that was compatible with the covenant He made with them as well as new legal demands.*⁴³ According to the biblical text the Israelite legal system was

⁴²W. J. Harrelson writes, "Legal and social customs reflected in the book of Genesis have appeared in a new light as a result of the recovery of compatible materials from the second millennium BC found in NW Mesopotamia. . . ."

"These indications of a common legal and social tradition between the ancestors of the Israelites and the peoples of NW Mesopotamia make clear that the period prior to Exodus was not without its laws and community regulations. The ancestors of the Israelites are not to be understood as wandering nomads without any sort of legal tradition apart from that which is suited to tribal life among such nomads. It is highly probable that in the pre-Mosaic era the tribal groups from which the community of Israel was to be formed had, therefore, a fairly well-developed system of legal procedures based on customs widely prevalent in the ancient Near East" (3:78).

⁴³It is generally acknowledged that the covenant God made with Israel uses the same literary form employed in the ancient Near Eastern covenants. K. A. Kitchen comment, "At least there can be little doubt that the early Hebrews thus used a set form which was common all over the

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

given to the people by God Himself. It did not come into existence through a long historical process that reached its climax after the exile from Babylon. Some of the common legal traditions were modified by the Lord, making them more humane and adapting them to the spirit and intention of the covenant He made with the Israelites. The final product was indeed unique to Israel. That probably was what Moses had in mind when he said to the people: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me. . . . Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deut 4:5-8).

Cultus: Sanctuary/Temple Services

We should expect to find some similarities between the Israelite cultus and ancient Near Eastern cultic practices. Belief in the existence of divine beings leads to worship, a worship place and system, and leaders or mediators of worship. Temples were very common in the ancient world, and we even know about sacrificial altars with four horns, like the one in the Israelite sanctuary. Evidence from Canaan shows that burnt sacrifices and peace offerings were offered to the deities.⁴⁴ Those two sacrifices were very common in the Israelite sanctuary/temple services. This suggests that the two languages "draw on a common heritage of sacrificial terms which have developed differently on each side."⁴⁵ In fact, however, when we place the particular terminology within the broad religious context of each religion, the differences are significant. The sacrificial system in the ancient Near East seemed to have had the fundamental purpose of feeding the gods or providing for their needs, while in the Bible that particular motivation is absent and rejected (Ps 50). Sacrifices were offered as an expression of devotion to God, joy and gratitude, and to make atonement for the repentant sinner. Since sacrifice has basically been a universal religious practice of humans beings, one could postulate a common origin for it and suggest that its real intent and meaning is preserved in the Scripture through divine revelation and inspiration.

Ancient Near East and used it in a unique way—to express the relation between a people and its sovereign God, their real Great King, something which was far beyond any merely political relationship between human rulers and other states" [*Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1966), 102].

⁴⁴ John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the OT* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 192; Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 8-20.

⁴⁵ Ringgren, 33.

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

In the Israelite cultus humans are described as being in constant need of cleansing before approaching God, suggesting that humans are by nature unclean and sinners. A similar idea is found in an old Akkadian invocation addressed to an anonymous god: “Who is there who has not sinned against his god, who has constantly obeyed the commandments? Every man who lives is sinful.”⁴⁶ Genesis 8:21 says, “Every inclination of his [man’s] heart is evil from childhood.” Apparently leprosy was viewed in both Israel and Assyria as something that prevented one from having access to the temple and from social interaction. In a vassal-treaty, dated to ca. 680 BC, during the time of Esahardon, we find the following curse: “May Sin, the light of heaven and earth, cover you with leprosy and so prevent you going in to god and kings; (then) wander like a wild ass or gazelle through the fields!”⁴⁷

Hittite texts indicate that the concept of holiness was known to them. “It is used, for example, if something is to be described as belonging exclusively to a deity, primarily its divine nature, and then perhaps the territory of a hostile city which has been destroyed and dedicated to a god, and which is not to be built again (like Jericho). It is also used of temples, cultic utensils, priests, sacrifices, festivals.”⁴⁸ This is somewhat similar to what we have in the OT, with the important difference that in the biblical cultus the concept of holiness plays a much more important role and is not just a cultic concept but carries a definite ethical content.

There are several parallels that deserve closer attention. The first one has to do with the building of the Israelite sanctuary. According to Exod 25:8-9, God showed Moses the model to be used in the construction of the tabernacle. The earthly was to be patterned after the heavenly; that is to say, the earthly sanctuary is a symbol of a transcendental reality. This idea belongs to the phenomenology of temples in the ancient Near East and in other parts of the world. Gudea, ruler of Sumer, had a dream in which was revealed to him the plan, inscribed on a tablet, for the temple for Ningursu, a warrior and fertility god.⁴⁹ The Babylonian creation account ascribes the construction of the temple of Marduk, the Esagila, in Babylon to the gods at the time of creation: “A likeness on earth of what he [Marduk] has wrought in heaven.”⁵⁰ In Egypt we find a similar idea in that historical temples were conceived as having had their mythological origin at the moment of creation. “That is to say, the actual physical sanctuary is conceived to be an extension and continuity of a mythical prototype. Not

⁴⁶ Schmokel, 108.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁸ Cord Kühne, “Hittite Texts,” in Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts*, 180 n. i.

⁴⁹ See John Lundquist, “What is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology,” in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God*, ed. H. F. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun, 1983), 211; and Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *God, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995), 138.

⁵⁰ E. A. Speiser, “Akkadian Myths and Epics: The Creation Epic,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the OT*, ed. James A. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), 68-69.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

only this, but the gods may specify the actual ground area of the sacred precinct and furnish the dimensions of the temple and its enclosure. For example, the temple of Re at Heliopolis was believed to have been planned by the god Thoth, the divine scribe and inventor of writing.”⁵¹

As pointed out already, this is found not only in the ancient Near East but also in other places of the world. In the building of an ancient Japanese shrine to the sun goddess, Amateraru, she herself “gave the oracle that determined the original wood structure, which has been regularly replaced as an exact replica.”⁵² Hindu temples are considered to be the visual expression of the cosmic force which creates innumerable forms; “it is a static model of the cosmos” or a manifestation of it.⁵³ In other words, the temple models or expresses a transcendental reality that belongs to the divine world. Even in Confucianism, in China, the temple is considered to be not just a building but is “symbolic of the perfect and rational order designed by Confucian morality.”⁵⁴

The idea that specific instructions for the building of earthly temples were given by the gods to humans and that therefore the building itself was a reflection of a transcendental reality seems to belong to the human religious consciousness and transcends cultural and regional boundaries. From that perspective it would be right to say that a temple is a part of our world “which shares most fully in the heavenly realm and must be fit for the god’s presence. It is, as it were, a little piece of heaven on earth, or at least it corresponds to the heavenly original as an earthly replica, a mirror of its model or a microcosm of the cosmos as a whole.”⁵⁵

Since the understanding of a temple as a manifestation of a transcendental heavenly reality appears to belong to those intuitive religious ideas which are part of the human religious consciousness, it should not be argued that Israel took the idea from the religions of the ancient Near East. According to the biblical text this idea was incorporated into the Israelite religion at a particular time and through a divine revelation. Hence, the basic correctness of the universal conviction is reaffirmed and at the same time divested from mythological associations and from any other conceptual aberration. In the process the biblical text establishes on solid ground the reality of a heavenly counterpart to the earthly dwelling of God and validates or legitimizes the significance of the earthly.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 202; H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University P, 1978), 269-71.

⁵² Harold W. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship* (Netherlands: Mouton, 1979), 28.

⁵³ Michael W. Meister, “Temple: Hindu Temples,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 13:368, 373.

⁵⁴ Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, “Temple: Confucian Temple Compounds,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 13:382.

⁵⁵ Turner, 26.

⁵⁶ A word would be in order concerning the architectural similarities between the Israelite temple and other ancient Near Eastern temples. It could hardly be denied that the architecture of

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

Another parallel that deserves attention is the ritual of the scapegoat in Lev 16. Once the cleansing of the sanctuary is finished, the sin and uncleanness of the Israelites are placed on the goat for Azazel and sent to the wilderness. Several ritual texts describing a similar rite have been found among the Hittites and Babylonians. This type of ritual is usually called an “elimination rite” whose purpose is to eliminate or remove from the community or the individual certain type of evil (impurity, pestilence, an infection, etc.). A few examples will illustrate the point.

The Hittite ritual of Pulisa prescribed a ritual to be performed when the king and his army, returning from war, were afflicted by a plague. The king was to select a man, a woman, a bull, and a ewe from the land of the enemy for the ritual. They were presented to the god or goddess who caused the plague. The king or his appointee, representing the army, transferred the plague to the victims, who were not only transporters of the evil but substitutes for the king and his army. The king prayed, “You, male God, be appeased with t[his de]corated man. But to the king, the [leaders], the ar[my, and the] land of Hatti, tur[n yourself fa]ithfully. [] But let this prisoner b[ear] the plague and carry (it) ba[ck into the land of the enemy.”⁵⁷

It was believed that one of the local deities sent the evil, and the purpose of the ritual was to return it to the land of the enemy, to the place it came from. The idea of the transfer of a collective evil to a place outside the camp is present in Lev 16, but not the idea of appeasing a deity. This is understandable because in the Israelite religion there is only one God. Azazel, as a demonic figure, does not need to be appeased but defeated. The goat for Azazel is not a substitute for

the temple of Solomon includes a number of architectural elements common at that time. Lawrence T. Geraty examined the available archaeological evidence and concluded that “while the Jerusalem temple fits into a definite cultural context, at the same time there are significant and crucial differences that made Solomon’s temple unique. Perhaps the most important distinction was in the way the temple functioned in Israelite theology; it was not God’s palace where His human servants supplied His physical needs, but it was the bearer of His name, and thus the focus of religious attention to which prayer was directed. The Jerusalem temple was an accommodation to the needs of His people. God guided its builders (1 Chr 28:11-12; et al), not in a cultural vacuum but among the current options, to choose an arrangement that already had some meaning but one which could be modified to teach Israel how and why she was different from her neighbors” [“The Jerusalem Temple of the Hebrew Bible in its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, edited by Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1981), 59]. The basic structure of Solomon’s temple was the same as the Mosaic tabernacle, and there is not an exact parallel to any of them. The one that comes closest is the general plan of the Tell Tainat temple in Northern Syria (it is a tripartite house). Concerning it Geraty wrote, “Tainat’s inner holy of holies is not square; its raised platform does not extend over the entire area of the room; and its columns are definitely within the portico (whereas Solomon’s may or may not be). Furthermore, inasmuch as it dates to the 9th cent B.C., one cannot prove that it was not influenced by Solomon’s temple, a logical assumption given Solomon’s fame and influence” (55).

⁵⁷ David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in the Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 46.

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

the high priest precisely because the idea of appeasement is absent from the text. Yes, there are some similarities, but when the ritual is placed within the conceptual context of each religion the differences are significant.

In another case a person is sick, and in order to remove the “evil sickness” a bowstring is attached to the hand and foot of the individual, then removed from him and attached to a mouse. The person in charge of the rite says, “I have taken away from you evil and I have put it on the mouse. Let this mouse take it to the high mountains, to the deep valleys (and) the distant ways.’ She lets the mouse go (saying): ‘Alawaimi, drive this (mouse) forth, and I will give to you a goat to eat.’”⁵⁸ The mouse is not a substitute but, like the biblical scapegoat, a means of transport used to remove the evil from the person by sending it away.

The best example from Babylon is found in the ritual for the purification of the temple. The officiating priest takes the carcass of a ram and “wipes the temple with the carcass of the ram. He recites the incantation for exorcizing the temple. He purifies the whole cella including its surrounding areas and then takes down the censer. The *mashmashushu* takes up the carcass of that ram and goes to the river, He sets his face westward and throws the carcass of that ram into the river.”⁵⁹ As in Lev 16 the context deals with the purification of the temple/sanctuary. In the process of cleansing it the evil is transferred to a dead animal whose carcass is thrown into the river. So, we have the ideas of cleansing the temple and transfer and removal of evil from it. But the similarities are mainly superficial.

In the Babylonian religion what contaminated the temples was not the sin or impurity of the people but demons. These demons posited a threat to the deity, and it was necessary once a year to remove them from the temple. This was done through the carcass of the ram. The demons got attached to the flesh of the animal and were returned to the underworld from where they came. In Babylonian mythology demons dwelt in the underworld and had access to the world of the living through rivers. By throwing the carcass into the river they were sent back to their place of origin. In Israel the temple was cleansed from the sin and uncleanness of the people and not from the threatening presence of demons. However, in both cases there is a removal of evil and its return to its place of origin.

It is obvious that God was employing a common ritual practice from the ancient Near East to convey a truth that was not expressed through the performance of the ritual itself in any other religion. In other words, God selected a ritual practice and invested it with a particular meaning that was foreign to it. God was mediating new knowledge using structures of knowledge already present. He condescended to use what was available to the Israelites in order

⁵⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 64.

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

to lead them beyond their cognitive limitations into a better understanding of His plan for them.

Conclusions

It is simply impossible to deny that there are significant parallels between the OT and ancient Near Eastern social institutions and religious and cultic practices. However, we must not exaggerate those similarities and then conclude that when the prophets were preserving for us the content of the Scriptures they were simply victims of their social and religious environment. The testimony of the Scripture itself is that God Himself was using that which was accessible to the prophets within their own cultural milieu to convey a special message to His people. Obviously, God did not remove the prophets from their own cultural context. God used common religious, cultic, and legal language but invested it with the meaning and message He wanted to communicate to His people. Therefore, it is important, in the study of the language, to give priority to the biblical text itself and then explore possible parallels.

Some of the parallels between Israel and ancient Near Eastern practices and beliefs suggest the possibility of a common origin. *Each religion expressed what was originally one basic practice or belief in a peculiar way introducing significant differences but preserving some similarities. In those cases, through divine revelation the practices or beliefs were divested of their pagan distortions in order to use them as a proper vehicle to communicate the divine message.*

Our study of ancient Near Eastern practices and their possible relationship to the biblical text suggests that in the OT God, through His work of revelation and inspiration, dealt with ancient pagan practices in different ways and that He used them for different purposes. Among the ways God dealt with them we find the following ones:

1. *Rejection and Condemnation of Pagan Ideas:* A large number of ancient Near Eastern practices were rejected by God in the OT. For instance, consulting the spirit of the dead was a common religious act, but in Israel God rejected it (Deut 18:10-11). We do not know the extent of the practice of child sacrifice in Canaan, but the God of Israel opposed it as a most serious sin, an offence against Himself resulting in the extermination of the individual (Lev 20:1). The list could be lengthened, but that is not necessary. It is clear that the prophets and the people of Israel were to some extent informed about the religion of the surrounding nations, and God Himself rejected most of their religious convictions.

2. *Polemics Against Pagan Ideas:* At times it was not sufficient for the Lord to forbid His people to follow the practices of the Canaanites. He used the prophets to engage in a polemic attack against some of the religious practices and beliefs of the neighbours of the Israelites. God gave a specific command against the worship of images, but since the temptation was too strong for His

Rodríguez: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

people, He showed in a polemic tone the absurdity of worshipping idols. Isaiah 46:6-7 provides a good example:

Some pour gold from their bags
and weigh out silver in the scales;
they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god,
and they bow down and worship it.
They lift it to their shoulders and carry it;
they set it up in its place, and there it stands.
From that spot it cannot move.
Though one cries out to it, it does not answer;
it cannot save him from troubles. (Cf. 44:9-20)

We can illustrate the same point by analyzing Hosea's attack against the Canaanite fertility cult. God revealed Himself through the prophet as the one who sent the rain, fertilized the land, and blessed His people. Israel is described as a woman who said, "I will go after my lovers, who give my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.' . . . She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold—which they used for Baal" (2:5, 8). Yahweh, and not Baal, is the One who out of His covenant love blesses the land, the animals, and His people. Therefore, there is no need for the people of Israel to practice fertility rituals.

3. *Adaptation of Social Practices:* We have already seen that God did not reject everything from the surrounding cultures. *Sometimes He took a religious, cultic or legal regulation or practice and redefined or re-configured it in order to communicate, in a reliable way, His will to His people, or in order simply to adapt it to the theocracy.* One of the best examples is kingship in Israel. While in Egypt the king was divine and in most of the ancient Near East he was placed very close to the divine or divinized after death, in Israel the king was the Servant of the Lord, a vassal of Yahweh, the true king of Israel. The ancient Near Eastern concept of the king was taken over, but it was redefined in order to make it compatible with the Israelite faith. In fact, with respect to Israel it would be better to talk about a monarchical theocracy than about a monarchy. God never surrendered His claim and authority as King of Israel. In some other cases God tolerated social evil practices but through legislation made them more humane (e.g., polygamy, divorce, slavery).

4. *Incorporation of Different Materials and Literary Techniques:* *At times God selected practices from the ancient Near East that were compatible with the values and principles of the covenant relationship He established with Israel.* In Proverbs we have a collection of proverbs that may have been written by a non-Israelite, but the biblical writer, under the inspiration of the Spirit, incorporated them into the book (Prov 30:1-33; cf. 31:1-9). *Literary techniques and forms used in Canaanite literature were also used by the prophets to express the message the Lord gave them.*

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society

By carefully studying each particular parallel we can determine which one of the previous four reactions to ancient Near Eastern practices is present in the biblical text. *The meaning of a biblical text is, then, determined by its own biblical context because it is only there that we are informed about the way God used the ancient Near Eastern background. By acknowledging that God was directly involved in the process of rejecting, polemicizing, adapting, reformulating, and incorporating some of the cultural, religious, cultic, and legal practices of the ancient Near East, we can honor the divine nature of Scripture and justify the need to submit to its authority.*

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