

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS

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Introduction

In 1902, the noted Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch presented a series of lectures on comparative studies under the auspices of the German Oriental Society. Delitzsch's lectures, entitled "Babel und Bibel," claimed that the literature of the Bible was dependent on, and even borrowed from, the literature of Mesopotamia. He questioned the appropriateness of the traditional theological terminology used to describe the Bible (e.g., revelation, inspiration) in light of its now evident dependency.¹ Delitzsch's work spawned a movement called "Pan-Babylonianism," which argued that all world myths and Christian Scriptures (OT and NT) were simply versions of Babylonian mythology.² As the series developed, however, it became clear that the lecturer's motives were not entirely pure. His interest was to minimize the values of OT teaching so that it could be contrasted with that of the NT.³

The widespread interest in finding connections between the Bible and other ANE cultures has bred its own reaction in the warning raised by several scholars against exaggerating the importance of such similarities, a practice baptized with the name "parallelomania."⁴ Of particular concern has been the often tacit assumption that such parallels can be construed as evidence for a genetic connection between the cultures that share them. Despite such warnings, the pendulum of biblical studies has continued to swing back and forth with remarkable regularity over the generations, as initial archeological discoveries have led to enthusiastic claims of similarities with various biblical practices and the implied, if not always stated, conclusion that these constitute *the source* for the biblical practice in question. Only in the afterglow of more

¹For further discussion on the question of revelation and inspiration, see A. M. Rodríguez, "Ancient Near Eastern Parallels to the Bible and the Question of Revelation and Inspiration," *JATS* 12/1 (2001): 51-57.

²See M. W. Chavalas, "Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century of Tension," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible*, ed. M. W. Chavalas and K. L. Younger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 21-67, esp. 34.

³See H. B. Huffmon, "Babel und Bibel: The Encounter between Babylon and the Bible," in *Backgrounds for the Bible*, ed. M. P. O'Connor and D. N. Freedman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 125-136.

⁴S. Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1.

careful inspection has the questionable nature of these parallels become apparent.

Changing views about the biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, provide a vivid example of this process. Many of the supposed parallels turned out not to be parallel at all. Often Israelite practices had been read into the cuneiform texts rather than legitimately being found there. What valid parallels did exist turned out to have been widely practiced, often over a long period of time, rather than limited to any particular epoch, much less the early second millennium.⁵

Methodological maturity began to be displayed in the careful work of W. W. Hallo, who promoted a balanced method called the “contextual approach,” which seeks to identify and discuss both similarities (comparative) and differences (contrastive) that may be observed between the Bible and the texts from the ANE by looking for diachronic and synchronic variations.⁶ “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.’”⁷ This methodological corrective has exposed the dangers inherent in research that ignores either similarities or differences between the OT and the ANE.

Therefore, there are similarities between the ANE and the OT on historical, cultural, social, and religious backgrounds; but there are also differences on conceptual, functional, and theological backgrounds. J. M. Sasson has promoted some goals that should be set forth before making biblical connections: What are the differences in contexts? Are the texts in question of the same literary genre? Is etymological kinship always useful in helping to make comparisons?⁸ Our study is focused on several topics such as the gods, cosmogony and cosmology, and temples and rituals, and will investigate both similarities and differences between the OT and the ANE.

Methodological Principles of Comparative Study

A major methodological problem confronts anyone wishing to relate ANE texts to the OT.⁹ Control needs to be established over matters such as genre,

⁵F. E. Greenspahn, “Introduction,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 6-7.

⁶W. W. Hallo, “Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach,” in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. C. D. Evans, W. W. Hallo, and J. B. White, Theological Monograph Series 34 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 1-26.

⁷Chavalas, 43.

⁸J. M. Sasson, “Two Recent Works on Mari,” *AfO* 27 (1980): 129.

⁹See Rodríguez, 48-51, for discussion on the problem of similarities.

purpose, and religious and theological backgrounds. Unfortunately, there is evidence that scholars have tended to “biblicize ancient Near Eastern documents before they are compared with OT materials.”¹⁰ At the same time, the biblical documents are often interpreted mythologically.

Sasson has suggested that “it is imperative that the literature of each culture be appreciated on its own merits” before it is compared with the biblical texts.¹¹ Whenever we discuss the “relationship,” “connection,” “association,” “correspondence,” “parallelism,” “similarity,” and so on between them, as Kitchen notes, “it is necessary to deal individually and on its own merits with each possible or alleged case of relationship or borrowing by making a detailed comparison of the full available data from both the Old Testament and the Ancient Orient and by noting the results.”¹²

Over thirty-three years ago, S. Talmon published what has become a classic essay on the principles and problems of using the comparative method in biblical interpretation.¹³ He isolated four major principles:

(1) Proximity in time and place, that is, geographically and especially chronologically distant comparisons.

(2) The priority of inner biblical parallels, that is, analysis of a particular text comprehensively on its own merits, followed by a careful analysis of and comparisons between the various biblical texts of a topic *before* comparing them with other ANE texts of a topic.

(3) Correspondence of social function, that is, the need to treat societal phenomena by paying close attention to their function in the developing structure of the Israelite body politic *before* one engages in comparison with parallel phenomena in other ANE societies. With regard to texts in particular, the point is that if a certain (kind of) text has a specific function in a society, comparative work should see to it that the corresponding (kind of) text in the other society has a similar function in that society. This principle is actually a plea for paying due attention to the literary *Gattung* (genre) of the composition and its concomitant *Sitz im Leben* (setting of life), and using that as one of the major criteria for comparison with other compositions within its historical stream.

¹⁰J. M. Sasson, “On Relating ‘Religious’ Texts to the Old Testament,” *MAARAV* 3/2 (1982): 223.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 224.

¹²K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1966), 87-88.

¹³S. Talmon, “The ‘Comparative Method’ in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 381-419 [Reprinted by permission of E. J. Brill from *Supplements to VOT* 29 (1977): 320-56].

(4) The holistic approach to texts and comparisons, that is, the holistic approach always should be given preference over the atomistic. Similar elements in two different cultures should be compared under the control of their shared comparable function within their distinctive cultures. If a genre of text had a particular function in the civilization in which it was composed, then it is important that one compare it with the corresponding genre of text from another culture that fulfills the same function there.¹⁴

When we come to the matter of the relationship between Ugaritic literature and the OT, the comparison is basically between different genres of literature. As P. C. Craigie says,

Ugaritic has provided no prophetic poetry. It has left us no unambiguous examples of psalmody, with the exception of those passages which might be identified as originally hymnic, but have survived only through integration within different and larger literary forms (myth or legend), and it has no extensive examples of literary narrative prose. This observation is important, for it means that virtually all Hebrew-Ugaritic comparative studies involve the comparison of *different* literary forms.¹⁵

Now, more than twenty-five years later, the situation has not changed much. It has become almost customary in modern scholarship to hold, for example, that Habakkuk 3 was influenced by Canaanite poetry. It may be questioned, however, whether this argument pays due attention to the difference between the two literary genres. Therefore, what scholars have actually practiced when comparing Ugaritic texts and Habakkuk 3 is not really a comparison of two literary wholes from different cultures and religions, but an *ad hoc* comparison of several fragments of Ugaritic myths and a part of the OT prophetic literature.¹⁶

In studies comparing Ugaritic mythology and OT literature in general, too much emphasis has been put on similarity or the “fact” of sameness in form,¹⁷ and insufficient distinction has been made between the synchronic approach and the comparative-diachronic approach.

According to Walton, there are ten important principles that must be kept in mind when doing comparative studies:

1. Both similarities and differences must be considered.
2. Similarities may suggest a common cultural heritage or cognitive environment rather than borrowing.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵P. C. Craigie, “Ugarit and the Bible: Progress and Regress in 50 Years of Literary Study,” in *Ugarit in Retrospect: Fifty Years of Ugarit and Ugaritic*, ed. G. D. Young (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 107, emphasis original.

¹⁶See D. T. Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 148.

¹⁷Cf. A. Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 140, 24.

3. It is not uncommon to find similarities at the surface but differences at the conceptual level and *vice versa*.

4. All elements must be understood in their own context as accurately as possible before cross-cultural comparisons are made (i.e., careful background study must precede comparative study).

5. Proximity in time, geography, and spheres of cultural contact all increase the possibility of interaction leading to influence.

6. A case for literary borrowing requires identification of likely channels of transmission.

7. The significance of differences between two pieces of literature is minimized if the works are not of the same genre.

8. Similar functions may be performed by different genres in different cultures.

9. When literary or cultural elements are borrowed, they may in turn be transformed into something quite different by those who borrowed them.

10. A single culture will rarely be monolithic, either in a contemporary cross-section or in consideration of a passage of time.¹⁸

The areas in which comparison can take place are many and varied. Similarities of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax have all been enormously helpful in working out some of the obscure details of Hebrew. Religious and social institutions such as sacrifice, priesthood, temples, prophecy, kingship, and family structures can each be studied, comparing what is found in the ANE at large to what is attested in Israel. Similarities can help us to appreciate areas of continuity and influence, while differences are often traceable to theology.

Concepts and beliefs such as the origin of the cosmos, the structure of the cosmos, the origin and role of humanity, the existence of evil, the afterlife, and the retribution principle all have a basis for comparison. Each of the categories listed above depends on analyses of the pertinent literature. Nevertheless, the literature itself is yet another area in which similarities

¹⁸J. H. Walton, "Cultural Background of the Old Testament," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. D. S. Dockery, K. A. Mathews, and R. B. Sloan (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 256; idem, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 26-27; see also J. Tigay, "On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, ed. M. Cohen et al. (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 250-255. For discussion of these points of theory and others, see T. Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 30-36; K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 1-9; and W. W. Hallo, "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, ed. W. W. Hallo, B. W. Jones, and G. L. Mattingly, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies* 8 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 1-30.

and differences occur. Various genres were common to a number of Near Eastern cultures (e.g., wisdom, hymns, history, law). Often the very forms of the literature can be profitably compared (e.g., proverbs, treaties/covenants, casuistic law). Even literary devices may be shared by cultures and compared (e.g., certain metaphors, word pairs).

Finally, as Ringgren points out,

Comparative research in the Biblical field has often become a kind of “parallel hunting.” Once it has been established that a certain biblical expression or custom has a parallel outside the Bible, the whole problem is regarded as solved. It is not asked, whether or not the extra-Biblical element has the same place in life, the same function in the context of its own culture. The first question that should be asked in comparative research is that of the *Sitz im Leben* and the meaning of the extra-Biblical parallel adduced. It is not until this has been established that the parallel can be utilized to elucidate a Biblical fact.¹⁹

The Gods

Theogony/Ontology

When we compare the ANE ideas of theogony to the biblical portrayal of YHWH, the most obvious difference is seen in the absence of any theogony in the OT. The biblical text offers no indication that Israel considered YHWH as having an origin, and there are no other gods to bring into existence either by procreation or separation. Since the cosmos is not viewed as a manifestation of divine attributes, Israel’s cosmogony develops without any need of theogony.

The worship of YHWH was to be monotheistic and exclusivistic. Cities in the ANE often were filled with temples to various gods. Each of Babylon’s nine city gates was dedicated to a different god. Furthermore, the practitioners of the other religions often expended great effort either identifying their gods with the gods of other nations or demonstrating the subordination of other gods to their patron deity. Such god lists or stories of how YHWH had assumed the powers or duties of other deities would have been inconceivable to orthodox worshippers of YHWH. Israel’s God demanded more than a special place in their pantheons and hearts; he demanded their entire hearts, souls, and strength (Deut 6:5).²⁰

The OT portrays orthodox Yahwists as consistently and vehemently opposed to the worship of any gods alongside or in competition with

¹⁹H. Ringgren, “Israel’s Place Among the Religions of the Ancient Near East,” in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel*, VTSup 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 1, cited in Talmon, 402.

²⁰See D. I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, 1st ed. (Jackson, MI: Evangelical Theological Society, 1988), 67-68.

YHWH. The book of Deuteronomy is characterized by a harsh polemic against any compromise with foreigners lest they turn their hearts away from YHWH. The prophets follow in the tradition of Deuteronomy, denouncing the veneration of deities other than YHWH with the strongest language. Idolatrous practices are treated as spiritual harlotry (Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33), an abomination (Deut 13:14-15), detestable (Deut 29:16), foolishness (Isa 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 46:1-2; Jer 10:1-10), and utterly disgusting (Ezek 8:10 + 37 times in Ezekiel). According to the orthodox Yahwist, the God of Israel would brook no rivals. In this respect, the Hebrew view of Israel's relationship to its patron deity differed fundamentally from the perceptions of all the other nations around.²¹

Within the ANE context the words of Moses in Deut 4:5-8 were revolutionary. According to this text, the Israelites' knowledge of the will of their divine patron and their sense of his living presence among them were unique in their time. The Hebrew record of the self-disclosure of the God of Israel—who was at the same time the Lord of heaven and earth—by his mighty acts and by his revelation at Sinai, describes a unique moment in the history of the ANE.²²

The God of Israel was not the personification of the forces of nature and did not need the assistance of other gods or the participation of a king and his subjects in a divine struggle to maintain order in the universe, nor did he need to be tended or fed in temples. He is the transcendent one who created an inanimate universe of nature out of nothing and who continually maintains and controls it by his power. Oswalt states: "In many ways this is the profoundest insight of Hebrew religion. Whatever God is, he is not the world around us."²³

Furthermore, "Moses understood fully that unless the link between Creator and creation was broken, it would become impossible in any ultimate sense to maintain God's unity and exclusiveness, and his immunity to magic, all of which were central to the new faith."²⁴ Brichto notes that in the OT, nature is impersonal and the realm of ultimate power is personal, occupied by YHWH alone. In contrast, the ANE at large perceives nature as personal (the realm occupied by the gods) and the outside sphere of control attributes as impersonal.²⁵

²¹D. I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 69-70.

²²Ibid., 110-111.

²³J. N. Oswalt, "Golden Calves and the 'Bull of Jacob': The Impact on Israel of Its Religious Environment," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, ed. A. Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 13.

²⁴Ibid., 15.

²⁵H. C. Brichto, *The Names of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61.

Existing above and apart from nature, God has not kept hidden his character and will. The gods of the other peoples did not reveal their will in clear and certain terms. As Jacobsen describes *Enlil*, “Man can never be fully at ease with Enlil, can never know what he has in mind . . . In his wild moods of destructiveness he is unreachable, deaf to all appeals,”²⁶ and as Kramer explains, “The proper course for a Sumerian Job to pursue was not to argue and complain in the face of seemingly unjustifiable misfortune, but to plead and wail, lament and confess, his inevitable sins and failings. But will the gods give heed to him, a lone and not very effective mortal, even if he prostrates and humbles himself in heartfelt prayer? Probably not.”²⁷

Revolutionary, then, was Deut 4:6-8 in praise of the Mosaic law as “your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples” and of Israel’s secure relationship to the Lord. Unlike *Enlil*, God is characteristically one who has revealed “what he has in mind” and who hears our appeals. The other nations needed divination through such things as household deities and departed ancestors, to discover how to deal with situations in their lives. Furthermore, such supernatural assistance often demanded great human agony and physical pain, even bodily mutilation (cf. Deut 14:1; 1 Kgs 18:26-29).

The basis for differences in gaining divine access or attention is yet another area of divergence of Israel’s faith from that of her neighbors: the nature of the relationship between the people and their god/gods. The gods of the nations were said to have created the world for themselves; humankind was an afterthought, a necessary nuisance whose function was only to serve the gods. Aside from irritation, about the only emotional response we find from the gods toward their human creatures is an occasional sense of pity or remorse for their grievous situation. The OT, however, presents humankind as the “crown of creation” and the natural world as theirs to oversee and enjoy.

Also, Block has shown that the gods of the nations were primarily gods of the land and only secondarily gods of the people of the land. They had a kind of feudal relationship in which the gods were lords of the estate and the people, whose sole purpose was to tend the land, were their serfs. The religion of Israel was unique in understanding God’s relationship to his people as primary, formed before he provided them a land, and continuing after their sin resulted in the loss of that land (cf. Deut 32:9; 2 Kgs 17:26; Ezek 11:16).²⁸

YHWH had formed a people, bound them to each other and to himself by covenant, and pledged to shepherd them faithfully.²⁹ Biblical

²⁶T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 101-102.

²⁷S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 125-126.

²⁸Block, *The Gods of the Nations*, 1st ed., 7-23, 28, 60, 96-97.

²⁹See J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, TOTC (London: InterVarsity,

religion gives at the same time a higher view of humanity and a higher view of God—omnipotent, undivided, purposive, merciful, and uniformly righteous (Exod 34:6-7). Finally, while the worship of YHWH included ritual as an expression of dependent faith, loyalty, and obedience, that ritual was never to be an end in itself (cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Pss 40:6; 50:8-15; 51:16-17; Hos 6:4-6). There was to be an internal quality to the faith of Israel that was not found in the other religions. The other religions aimed at manipulating the gods into granting favors. Thus they were driven by ritual. But YHWH looked on the heart, and he abhorred ritual that did not arise from righteous devotion. From the beginning Israel was enjoined not only to love the Lord, but also to “rejoice before the Lord your God” (Deut 12:12, 18; cf. 14:26; 16:11, 14-15; 26:11; 27:7) and they would be judged because they did not “serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity” (Deut 28:47). Thus Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, singing to the Lord and declaring his glory among the nations day after day, “For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens” (1 Chron 16:26).

Cosmogony and Cosmology

The word “cosmogony” is derived from the Greek words *kosmos* (“order, ornament, the universe”) and *genesis* (“origin, generation”); it means the origin of the (ordered) world (or process). Cosmology is the ordering, or mental construction, of the world (or structure).³⁰ In the OT, the early chapters of Genesis contain much cosmogony and cosmology, but Psalms and Job also add cosmologic information. The main issues for comparison are the creation of the cosmos, the creation of humanity, and the flood.

Creation Accounts

The main information concerning ideas about creation in Mesopotamia come from the work entitled *Enuma Elish*. In actuality, what similarities exist are superficial and could well be incidental. The differences, on the other hand, are significant.³¹

1972), 98-99; see also J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, TOTC (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1974), 70.

³⁰For Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Israelite cosmogonic and cosmologic accounts, see N. Wyatt, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East*, Biblical Seminar 85 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 53-146.

³¹For a helpful summary, see W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” *JTS* 16 (1965): 287-300, cited in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 96-113.

(1) There is nothing lasting that is created by the deity (*Marduk*) in *Enuma Elish*. Instead, his activity of dominion involves the organization of the cosmos. In contrast, Genesis portrays YHWH as Creator as well as organizer.

(2) Elements of the cosmos are seen as coming into being in *Enuma Elish* by means of the birth of the god who is associated with that element of the cosmos (e.g., fresh water, sky). In this sense, cosmogony is expressed in terms of theogony (origin of the gods). This theological concept is countered quickly in Genesis with the words “In the beginning God.” There is no hint of theogonic mythology in the straightforward biblical narratives.

(3) A key difference is that creation (organization) in Mesopotamian (and Canaanite) texts takes place by means of, or in the aftermath of, conflict. Defeat of rebel forces or overcoming chaos opens the way for the deity to impose his order on the cosmos.³² The theological concept that appears in the Genesis creation account is an abiotic concept of the earth, that is, it describes an earth in which there is no life; it presents the absence of life—vegetable, animal, and human. That life then appears in the further verses of Genesis 1 by the *fiat* of God. In no case does Genesis describe a chaotic state of the earth as the result of mythical combats between the gods of the myths and legends of the ANE.³³

(4) Not only is the creation by divine *fiat* in Genesis unique in the ANE, the creation of light as the first creating act appears only in Genesis.³⁴ Sjöberg accepts that “there was hardly any influence from that Babylonian text on the Old Testament creation accounts.”³⁵ Hasel thinks rather that the creation account of Genesis 1 functions as an antimythological polemic regarding other cosmologies of the ANE (e.g., with the “sun,” the “moon”).³⁶

³²See J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and C. Kloos, *YHWH's Combat with the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

³³For a detailed study of God's history with the earth and life “in the beginning,” see R. Ouro, “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part I,” *AUSS* 36 (1998): 259-276; idem., “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part II,” *AUSS* 37 (1999): 39-53; idem., “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part III,” *AUSS* 38 (2000): 59-67.

³⁴See Lambert, *A New Look*, 96-109; idem., “Babylonien und Israel,” *TRE* 5 (1980): 71.

³⁵A. W. Sjöberg, “Eve and the Chameleon,” in *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G. W. Ahlström*, ed. W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 217.

³⁶G. F. Hasel, “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology,” *ETQ* 46 (1974): 81-102; see also idem., “The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis 1 in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels,” *AUSS* 10 (1972): 6.

(5) Lambert and Millard point out that “in all probability the Babylonians conceived of man as matter (‘clay’) activated by the addition of divine blood,” while, on the other hand, “the Hebrew account of creation in Gen 2 explains that God imparted ‘the breath of life’ into man, and so animation began. . . . No similar doctrine is known among the Babylonians or Sumerians.”³⁷

Gunkel establishes, “The difference between the Babylonian creation account and that of Genesis 1 is great; it could hardly be more pronounced. In the Babylonian account everything is wild and grotesque; it is barbaric, riotous poetry. In Genesis 1 everything is quietly solemn and elevated; it is expansive and occasionally somewhat pedantic prose. There the gods emerged in the course of things; here God is one and the same from the very beginning. In the Babylonian account there is the deity who slays the monster in heated combat and forms the world out of its corpse; in Genesis 1 there is God ‘who speaks and it is so.’”³⁸

According to Sjöberg, who recently reexamined Sumerian connections with regard to the “tree of life,” there is no evidence for such a tree in Mesopotamian myth and cult. He says, “The identification of different trees on Mesopotamian seals as a Tree of Life is a pure hypothesis, a product of pan-Babylonianism. . . . There is no Sumerian or Akkadian expression ‘Tree of life.’”³⁹

Egyptian creation accounts appear in several different versions featuring different gods. While the intermixing of theogony with cosmogony is again prominent, the Memphite theology portrays a creator god (*Ptah*) creating by means of the spoken word, as in Genesis.⁴⁰ In this sense, the Egyptian material provides for closer parallels than the Mesopotamian literature, though the differences remain substantial.

Humankind Creation Accounts

Similarities exist in the creation of human beings to the extent that clay or dust is used by the deity as the molding material with an additional divine ingredient provided as a catalyst. In the Mesopotamian accounts, it is most often the blood of a slain rebel deity that is mixed with the clay, as well as spit in *Atra-Hasis*. In the Egyptian Hermopolitan account, the tears of the creator-god are the active ingredient. The biblical account does not mix anything in,

³⁷W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 22.

³⁸H. Gunkel, “The Influence of Babylonian Mythology Upon the Biblical Creation Story,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B. W. Anderson, *Issues in Religion and Theology* 6 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 47.

³⁹Sjöberg, 221.

⁴⁰For further discussion, see J. Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 and Egyptian Cosmology,” *JANES* 15 (1983): 1-11.

but it is the breath of life from YHWH that animates the new creation. This breath of life also may be referred to in Egyptian wisdom in the *Instruction of Merikare*.⁴¹

The Genesis account portrays people as having been created in the image of God. Again, it is the Egyptian *Instruction of Merikare* that offers the closest parallel. There, people are stated to be the likenesses of Re and as having come forth from his body.⁴² The suggestions of similarity on this point in Akkadian texts are much more problematic and have not been convincing.

The principal difference in the area of cosmology concerns the purpose and function of humanity. In Mesopotamian literature, people were created to provide relief for the gods. The work of maintaining the civilization the gods had created had become too strenuous and led to social stratification in the divine realm. To resolve these problems, people were created as slave labor to do the work the gods had previously been obligated to do and, thus, to provide for the needs of the gods. It was the latter function from which humankind derived its dignity—the gods needed them—rather than from some high purpose for which they were destined. On that count they had been only an afterthought for the sake of convenience.

In contrast, the Israelites viewed people as central to the eternal plan of God. Everything else that had been created had been created with them in mind and to suit the specification that would most benefit them. God entrusted to them the care of his creation, but he himself was beyond needs they could provide. The life of toil and hardship was not what they were created for; they had brought it upon themselves by their disobedience. Inherent dignity is to be found in their lost estate and in the surviving image of God.

An additional difference could be found in the biblical claim that God initially created one pair from whom all others were descended. It is this factor that serves the theological purpose of transmitting the sin of the first couple to all of their descendants. In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, there is never an indication that only one or two were created. In some contexts seven pairs are mentioned, but usually it appears to be creation *en masse*.

Flood Accounts

While Egyptian and Canaanite sources are virtually silent regarding a massive flood in antiquity, Mesopotamian literature preserves accounts for us in a number of different pieces of literature. Similarities include a decision by the deity to ravage the earth by means of a flood, the warning of a particular

⁴¹For further discussion, see J. M. Plumley, “The Cosmology of Ancient Egypt,” in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. C. Blacker and M. Loewe (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 36.

⁴²Hoffmeier, 9-10.

individual and instructions to build a boat to provide for the deliverance of some, a flood of vast extent, grounding of the boat on a mountaintop, the sending of birds to determine whether rehabilitation is possible, the offering of a sacrifice by the survivors, and a subsequent blessing on the survivors bequeathed by the gods.

Differences would include the type of boat, the length of the flood, the people who were saved, the outcome for the hero, the reason for the flood, and the role of the gods. The latter is particularly noticeable as the gods are in constant tension with one another in the Mesopotamian accounts. As a matter of fact, the intention of the divine council was that none would survive the flood. It was only an act of treachery on the part of the god *Ea/Enki* that let the information slip out to the one who was eventually saved.

Though the similarities between the respective literatures are striking, the case for literary borrowing is hard to make. Many of the similarities are of the sort that could occur coincidentally, i.e., any story of a flood might be expected to have them. The Israelite author, however, never really heard the story in its Babylonian form, for it would have been totally incomprehensible to him. In the Babylonian accounts, although the flood is sent by the gods, the events are described from the human point of view; it is a tale of the experiences of human beings. The biblical story is but a chapter in a larger work, in which every episode is construed as a revelation by YHWH of his will together with its earthly consequences. The perspective of the biblical flood account is from the vantage point of the divine, and not that of man.⁴³ Cassuto in his commentary lists nineteen parallels and sixteen differences.⁴⁴ Kitchen, who, unlike Cassuto, had access to Lambert and Millard's 1969 *Atra-Hasis*, lists seven similarities and nine differences.

Similarities:

- (1) A divine decision is made to send a punishing flood.
- (2) One chosen man is told to save self, family, and creatures by building a boat.
- (3) A great flood destroys the rest of the people.
- (4) The boat grounds on a mountain.
- (5) Birds are sent forth to determine availability of habitable land.
- (6) The hero sacrifices to the deity.
- (7) Humankind is renewed upon the earth.⁴⁵

⁴³J. Finkelstein, "Bible and Babel: A Comparative Study of the Hebrew and Babylonian Religious Spirit," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 355-380, esp. 373-374, 376.

⁴⁴U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 16-23.

⁴⁵K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 28-29.

Differences:

(1) The Mesopotamian gods tire of the noisiness of humankind, while in Genesis God sees the corruption and universal wickedness of humankind.

(2) The Mesopotamian assembly of gods is at pains to conceal their flood plan entirely from humankind (this is not evident in Genesis at all).

(3) In the Mesopotamian epics, the saving of the hero is entirely by the deceit of one god; while in Genesis, God, from the first, tells Noah plainly that judgment is coming, and he alone has been judged faithful and so must build a boat.

(4) The size and type of craft in *Gilgamesh* is a vast cube, perhaps even a great floating ziggurat, while that in Genesis has far more the proportions of a real craft.

(5) The duration of the flood differs in the Mesopotamian and biblical accounts. *Atra-Hasīs* has seven days and seven nights of storm and tempest, as does the Sumerian version; *Gilgamesh* has six (or seven) days and nights, with subsidence of the waters beginning on the seventh day; none of the Mesopotamian narratives gives any idea of how long the floodwaters took to subside thereafter. In contrast, Genesis has an entirely consistent, more detailed time scale. After seven days of warning, the storm and floods rage for forty days, then the waters stay for 150 days before beginning to recede, and further intervals follow until the earth is dry one year and ten days from the time the cataclysm began (Gen 7:11; 8:14).

(6) In the Mesopotamian versions, the inhabitants of the boat also include, for example, a pilot and craftsmen; in Genesis, one finds only Noah and his immediate family.

(7) The details of sending out birds differ entirely in *Gilgamesh*, Berosus, and Gen 8:7ff.; this is lost in *Atra-Hasīs* (if ever it was present).

(8) The Mesopotamian hero leaves the boat of his own accord and then offers a sacrifice to win the acceptance of the gods. By contrast, Noah stays in the boat *until* God summons him forth and then presents what is virtually a sacrifice of thanksgiving, following which divine blessing is expressed without regret.

(9) Replenishment of the land or earth is partly through renewed divine activity in *Atra-Hasīs*, but simply and naturally through the survivors themselves in Genesis.⁴⁶

Temples and Rituals

There are similarities between the Israelite cultus and the ANE cultic practices. Temples were common in the ANE, and we even know about sacrificial altars like the one in the Israelite sanctuary. In Canaan, burnt sacrifices and peace

⁴⁶Ibid., 29-30.

offerings were offered to the deities.⁴⁷ These two sacrifices were very common in the Israelite sanctuary/temple rituals. However, when we place the specific terminology within the broad religious context of each religion, the differences are significant. Each religion expressed what was originally one basic practice or belief in a particular way, introducing significant differences but preserving some similarities. In the OT, through divine revelation, the Israelite cultus was divested of ANE distortions, *rejecting, polemicizing, adapting, redefining, and reformulating* some of the cultic practices of the ANE in order to use them as a proper vehicle to communicate the divine message to YHWH's people.⁴⁸

Temples

Talmon's second methodological principle is that "The interpretation of biblical features . . . with the help of inner-biblical parallels should always precede the comparison with extra-biblical materials."⁴⁹ For example, assuming that one has analyzed a particular text comprehensively on its own merits, one needs to do careful analysis of and comparisons between the various biblical accounts of temple building (see esp. Exodus 25–40, the tabernacle construction account; 1 Kgs 5:1[15]–8:66; 2 Chronicles 2–7; Ezekiel 40–48) *before* comparing them with other ANE temple-building texts, such as the Gudea Cylinders.

However, this is just as important for the nonbiblical comparative material. The Gudea Cylinders, for example, also need to be analyzed in comparison with other texts of their type from within their own immediate cultural and literary milieu. But there is one especially important difference. The Gudea Cylinders present the temple building and dedication process as essentially a step-by-step ritual process. Ritual actions and processes saturate the text and, in fact, structure it. This is not the case in the parallel biblical temple-building accounts. It requires a literary focus that pays attention to the peculiarities of this particular temple-building text. It is true that the dedication procedures for the tabernacle and temple in the OT involved elaborate ritual procedures, but that in no way compares with the obsessive concern for ritual guidance and confirmation in the Cylinders.

From the initial call to build the temple to the preparation of the construction area, the fashioning of the first brick, the design of the temple, the actual laying of the foundation, construction of the superstructure, the calling of Ningirsu (the patron deity of Lagash) and Baba (his consort) to occupy the temple, the staffing and furnishing of the temple on the divine

⁴⁷J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the OT* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 192; B. A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel*, SJLA 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 8-20.

⁴⁸See Rodríguez, 62-64.

⁴⁹Talmon, *Comparative Method*, 419.

level, the actual induction of Ningirsu and Baba into the temple, and the temple dedication feast of the gods—everything was permeated with ritual procedures. Thus Gudea had to pry the specific desires and plans for the temple out of the heart of the deity for whom the temple was to be built (i.e., Ningirsu, the patron deity of Lagash). There was no ready revelation as we have it in the OT (Exodus 25–40). This feature of the Gudea Cylinders has gone relatively unnoticed in the comparative discussion.⁵⁰

God showed Moses the model to be used in the building of the Israelite sanctuary (Exod 25:8-9). The earthly was to be patterned after the heavenly—that is, the earthly sanctuary is a symbol of a heavenly reality. This idea belongs to the phenomenology of temples in the ANE. The mentality in the ANE envisioned the earthly dwelling of the gods as corresponding structurally with their heavenly abode.⁵¹ Ideas such as these are also found in literature from Mesopotamia that compares temples to the heavens and the earth and gives them a cosmic location and function.⁵²

According to the biblical text, this idea was incorporated into the Israelite religion at a particular time and through a divine revelation. The conception of the temple is not noticeably different in Israel than it is in the ANE. The difference is in the God, not in the way the temple functions in relation to the God. The cycle of cosmic life is construed differently in Israel, since God's provision of food does not ultimately serve his own purposes by meeting his own needs.

Moreover, in contrast to the idolatrous cults, in which the deity was thought to indwell the image of himself or herself, Yahwism was a spiritual religion.⁵³ The temple in Jerusalem housed no image of YHWH; his presence was represented by his glory, the *kaḇôd*, which under normal circumstances rested above the sacred Ark of the Covenant inside the most holy place.⁵⁴

⁵⁰R. E. Averbeck, "Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method: Historiography and Temple Building," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible*, ed. M. W. Chavalas and K. L. Younger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 95-96, 118.

⁵¹"The notion of a heavenly model for temples, cult objects, and laws is universal in the ancient Near East" (J. C. Rylaarsdam, "The Book of Exodus," *IB* 1:1021). See also G. E. Wright, "The Temple in Palestine-Syria," *BAR* 15 (1975): 180; B. A. Levine, "The Descriptive Tabernacle Texts of the Pentateuch," *JAOS* 85 (1965): 307-318; R. J. Clifford, "The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting," *CBQ* 33 (1971): 221-227. These parallels do not show that Israel borrowed its theological ideas from the other ANE religions. Rather, they may go back to a common source.

⁵²See V. A. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and North-West Semitic Writings*, JSOTSup 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 335-337.

⁵³Cf. H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 66-71.

⁵⁴Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 297-302.

Hurowitz has shown that with necessary variations the tabernacle construction and erection account in Exodus 25–40 follows the general pattern of temple-construction accounts in the ANE: (1) the divine command to construct the tabernacle (Exod 24:15–31:18); (2) the transmission of the divine command to the people charged to implement it (Exod 34:29–35:19); (3) the collection of construction materials and enlistment of artisans (Exod 35:20–36:7); (4) the account of the actual construction of the tabernacle and its furniture (Exod 36:8–39:43); and (5) the final erection and dedication of the tabernacle (Exodus 40; cf. Leviticus 8).⁵⁵

In the ANE, the consecration of the temple is the moment in which the divinity affirms its sovereignty. In the same way, YHWH, by coming to dwell in the midst of Israel, affirms his sovereignty over the people of Israel and over the universe. Israel is the people of YHWH and of no other god. The consecration of the Tent of Meeting corresponds to the categorical affirmation of the first commandment of the law: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2-3, NKJV).⁵⁶

Investigation into some Mesopotamian accounts of dedication ceremonies shows that the events described in 1 Kings 8 on the dedication of Solomon’s temple derive from a common ANE pattern. The similarities lie in the essence of the ceremonies, the structure of the descriptions and numerous details (the participants in the festivities, the site of the festivities, the duration of the celebration, countless offerings, and sending the people home). The biblical account is divided clearly into three parts: (1) entry of the Ark and YHWH into the temple to the accompaniment of countless sacrifices (1 Kgs 8:1-11); (2) the king’s prayers (1 Kgs 8:12-61); and (3) the popular celebrations in the temple courtyard (1 Kgs 8:61-66). This three-stage celebration has parallels in the inscriptions of Sargon and Esarhaddon. It should be compared especially to the account of the dedication of Dur-Sharrukin found at the end of Sargon’s annals.⁵⁷

However, the descriptions of the buildings and vessels in 1 Kings 6–7 are different in nature from descriptions of buildings or vessels found in extrabiblical building accounts. The Mesopotamian building accounts describe the structures and furnishings in poetic but very general language. The Mesopotamian scribes emphasized mainly the valuable and rare materials—wood, precious stones, and metal—that were used in the buildings. Similarly, they often mention the high artistic level of the craftsmanship, stating

⁵⁵V. A. Hurowitz, “The Priestly Account of Building the Tabernacle,” *JAOS* 105 (1985): 21-30.

⁵⁶R. Ouro, *Old Testament Theology: The Canonical Key* (Zaragoza, Spain: Luser, 2008), 1:148.

⁵⁷Hurowitz, *I Have Built You*, 271, 273-277.

frequently that the buildings and vessels were beautiful, sophisticated, immensely overwhelming, striking, and superior in some way or another to their predecessors. All the characteristics of these descriptions mentioned here are totally lacking in the biblical descriptions. In contrast, the descriptions of buildings found in Kings, and, for that matter, in Exodus and Ezekiel, are striking in the exact details given, and especially the fact that dimensions are provided.

It is true that dimensions are not entirely absent in the Mesopotamian texts. As a matter of fact, certain Neo-Assyrian building accounts may even display a tendency toward providing them. Even so, the given dimensions are never sufficient to allow a reconstruction of the building. Dimensions of vessels or furnishings are never provided. In cases where the dimensions of buildings are stipulated, the information is limited to the external dimensions of the buildings (length, width, and height). In contrast to this, the information provided by the biblical descriptions seems to be intent on enabling the reader to visualize the building or object described.⁵⁸

Hurowitz concludes: “Therefore, even if the biblical and Mesopotamian descriptions share a tendency to mention the metals and wood used, it is clear that they are vastly different in nature and intent. The biblical descriptions totally lack the laudatory aspect, tending instead towards precision, tangibility and concreteness.”⁵⁹

On the other hand, Fretheim points out that the shift in the divine abode *from the mountain as dwelling place to tabernacle* in the midst of Israel is not only a spatial move, it is an important theological move. The language used for God’s presence on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:15-18) becomes the language for God’s tabernacle dwelling (40:34-38), enclosing the entire tabernacle account. God leaves the mountain (the typical abode for gods in the ANE), and comes to dwell among the people of God. God, who is not like the other gods, leaves the mountain of remoteness and places his ineffable majesty and tabernacle right in the *center* of a human community. No longer are the people, or their mediator, asked to “come up” to God; God “comes down” to them.⁶⁰

In the OT theological system, the concept of the holiness of time takes precedence over that of the holiness of space. Such a hierarchy of values is unique in the context of the ANE. The polar contrast between Israelite and extrabiblical concepts is vividly illustrated by the fact that the Mesopotamian creation epic—*Enuma Elish*—closes with the building of a temple to the god Marduk, that is, with the sanctification of space.⁶¹

⁵⁸Ibid., 244-246.

⁵⁹Ibid., 247.

⁶⁰T. E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 272-273.

⁶¹See *ANET*, 68-69.

In the biblical creation account, it is the sanctity of time—the Sabbath—that is first celebrated. The sanctity of space appears explicitly for the first time in Exodus. The Israelite tabernacle in the wilderness inherently exemplifies this principle, for by virtue of its mobility the ground on which it is assembled can possess no intrinsic or permanent sanctity. The locale of the sanctuary becomes sacred space only temporarily, and it loses that status the moment the tabernacle moves to another site.⁶²

Anything connected with sexual function was part of the physical world; it was categorized as common, not holy. Sex could never be brought into the sanctuary, for unlike the Canaanite worldview, sexual activity was not a way to enhance spirituality or commune with God.⁶³ In the religions of the ANE, sexual activity among worshipers was believed to activate the gods into fertilizing the soil with rain. This activity was often performed within the sacred precincts of the god's shrine. In Israelite religion, it would be an abomination to engage in sexual activity in the tabernacle precinct (Lev 15:31).⁶⁴

Finally, there are also significant similarities and differences between the OT and the ANE regarding the motif of divine abandonment of the temple:

(1) The repeated references to the evils being committed in Jerusalem emphasize that YHWH's abandonment of the temple is provoked by human action. YHWH declares his response in terms reminiscent of the extrabiblical accounts (Ezek 8:18; 9:10).

(2) YHWH leaves his temple of his own volition. Although the ANE accounts of divine abandonment generally create the impression that in a crisis the gods left their shrines voluntarily, underlying these accounts are enemy invasions and the spoliation of divine images. Since the temple contained no image of the deity, however, such spoliation with respect to YHWH is impossible. On the contrary, Ezekiel highlights YHWH's independence at each stage of his departure: (a) The *kābōd* rises from the cherub over the Ark of the covenant within the holy of holies and moves over to the threshold of the temple, filling the entire court with its emanating brightness (Ezek 9:3; 10:4); (b) a magnificent vehicle with total and absolute freedom of movement appears, bearing an object resembling a throne (10:1-13); (c) the *kābōd* moves from the threshold and rests above the vehicle (10:18); (d) the vehicle, bearing the *kābōd*, rises from the earth and pauses at the entrance of the east gate of the temple (10:19); (e) the *kābōd* departs from the midst of

⁶²See N. M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 214-215.

⁶³See J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Dallas: Word, 1992), 214.

⁶⁴See B. A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 207, n. 10; and Hartley, 210.

the city and stands over the mountain to the east (11:23). But the description of the vehicle bearing the throne, with its absolute freedom of movement and limitless maneuverability, sends a clear and unequivocal message: YHWH will not be transported like any other image from his dwelling place by any human monarch.⁶⁵

(3) The vision describes the disastrous effects that would attend the departure of the deity from the city. YHWH would turn upon his subjects, delivering them into the hands of strangers who would execute them with the sword (Ezek 11:7-11) within the border of Israel, which had, ironically, been viewed as sacrosanct. This description is reminiscent of extrabiblical texts in which divinities abandon their shrines and then turn on their subjects as if they were the enemy.

(4) Whereas extrabiblical texts tend to emphasize the deity's change of heart prior to his or her return to the shrine, Ezekiel emphasizes that by a divine act the subjects' hearts will be changed (11:18-21; cf. 36:16-32). Instead of having his subjects polish the exterior of a dirtied image, YHWH declares that he will cleanse his subjects of their iniquity from the inside out, giving them a new heart so they will walk in his ways, and so he may renew the covenant with them. Those who insist on going their own way he will reject.

(5) The links between Ezekiel's vision of YHWH's departure from the temple in chapters 8–11 and the extrabiblical accounts of divine abandonment suggest to the reader that the prophet's story cannot end with YHWH's exit from the land (11:22-23). The pattern of the Mesopotamian accounts leads one to expect the regathering of the people to their homeland, the appointment of a new king, the institution of peace and prosperity to the people, and the return of YHWH to his temple. Although Ezekiel is silent on these matters in this context, in long-range terms he does not disappoint. Indeed, these four elements represent major motifs in his restoration oracles, proclaimed after Jerusalem had fallen in 586 B.C. (33:21-22).⁶⁶

Rituals

In the ANE at large, the performance of the cult was central and foundational to religion; it was the people's principal responsibility and superseded the element of belief (the mental affirmation of doctrinal convictions). The shape of one's belief was less significant in the ANE. It was not belief that counted, but performance of the cult that was the essential expression of belief, but there was adherence to the covenant, which included cultic performance but was not dominated by it.⁶⁷ Assmann states: "The world of the deities of Egypt was not an object of belief, but rather of knowledge:

⁶⁵D. I. Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 90.

⁶⁶Block, *Gods of the Nations*, 2d ed., 140-143.

⁶⁷Walton, *ANE Thought*, 132.

knowledge of names, processes, actions, and events that were superimposed, in a manner that explained and made sense of, saved, transfigured, on the realm of manifestations in the cult and in nature.⁶⁸

On the other hand, according to Hallo, the cultic calendar of ancient Mesopotamia, like its civil calendar, was largely tied to the phases of the moon, and not at all to the week or a week; in Israel, the cultic calendar was only minimally connected to lunar phases, whereas the sabbatical cycle was all-important. The ancient Mesopotamian year was based on the month, and the worship of the moon went hand in hand with it. The Israelite year was based on the week, and remained independent of the month even when the luni-solar calendar was adopted from Babylonia. Moon worship flourished wherever Mesopotamian culture spread. But in Israel it failed to gain a foothold; the full moon was not worshiped, the quarters were not specially observed, and even the new moon was ultimately relegated to the status of a half-holiday. Here, then, lies one of the great contrasts between biblical Israel and its Near Eastern matrix: sabbatical cycles versus lunar calendars.⁶⁹

The sacrificial system in the ANE seemed to have had the fundamental purpose of feeding the gods or providing for their needs, while in the OT that particular purpose is absent and rejected (Ps 50:12-13). In the Israelite religion, it was not only inconceivable to associate concepts of eating and drinking in their material sense with the conception of divinity, but it applied even to a human being such as Moses when he drew near to the divine sphere so that “he neither ate bread nor drank water” (Exod 34:28, NKJV; Deut 9:9, 18). This stands in contrast to the standard daily practice in the ANE ritual cult in which the placing of bread and pouring out of libation before the cult statue of the deity was conceived to be feeding the deity.⁷⁰

Once the cleansing of the sanctuary is finished, in the ritual of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16, the sin and uncleanness of the Israelites are placed on the goat for Azazel, which is then sent to the wilderness. Several ritual texts describing a similar rite have been found among the Hittites and Babylonians. A number of Hittite rituals feature the transfer of evil to an animal that is then sent away.⁷¹ This type of ritual is called an *elimination rite*, whose purpose was to eliminate or remove from the community sin or impurity. There are

⁶⁸J. Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 94-95.

⁶⁹W. W. Hallo, “New Moons and Sabbaths: A Case-Study in the Contrastive Approach,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 315.

⁷⁰See R. E. Gane, “‘Bread of the Presence’ and Creator-in-Residence,” *VT* 42 (1992): 184-199.

⁷¹See D. P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature*, SBLDS 101 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 15-74.

some similarities, but when the ritual is placed within the conceptual context of each religion, the differences are significant.

In the Babylonian religion, what contaminated the temples was not the sin or impurity of the people, but rather demons. These demons posed 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 became attached to the flesh of the animal and were returned to the underworld from whence 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. Babylonians threw a slaughtered ram into the river and Israelites chased a goat into the wilderness. Mesopotamian rituals that transfer impurity often see the animal as a substitute for an individual—a substitute that will now become the object of demonic attack rather than the person. In the *Asakki Marsuti* ritual for fever, the goat that is the substitute for the sick man is sent out into the wilderness.⁷²

All of these differ significantly from Israelite rituals. In Israel, the temple was cleansed from the sin and uncleanness of the people and not from the threatening presence of demons—a concept totally absent from Israelite ritual. Additionally, the Israelite religion shows no intention of appeasing the anger of deity or demon, whereas this is the most common conception in the ANE rituals. However, in both cases there is a removal of evil and its return to its place of origin. God was employing a common ritual practice from the ANE and investing it with a very different meaning that was foreign to it to convey a biblical truth.⁷³

Yearly judgment of human fates by deities appears in Mesopotamian festival texts. Particularly striking parallels to the Israelite Day of Atonement are found in the Sumerian New Year celebration at the temple of the goddess Nanshe and the Babylonian New Year (Akitu) Festival of Spring,⁷⁴ which were believed to enact renewal of relationships between deities and their human subjects.⁷⁵

⁷²See J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1078.

⁷³See Rodríguez, 61.

⁷⁴The Nanshe Hymn is an Ur III period (ca. 2100-2000 B.C.) Sumerian text. It focuses on two New Year's Day celebrations at the temple of Nanshe, called Sirara, in the city of Nina. It is possible that the text was intended to be recited during the New Year celebration. The Nanshe Hymn does not indicate the season in which New Year's Day occurred.

⁷⁵M. Weinfeld, "Social and Cultic Institutions in the Priestly Source against Their Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies; Panel Sessions: Bible Studies and Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies/Perry Foundation for Biblical Research, 1983), 105-109, 116-117.

There are similarities between the Nanshe New Year Mesopotamian cult and the Israelite Day of Atonement, as prescribed in Leviticus 16 and 23:26-32. Renewal of yearly contracts at the Nanshe New Year is analogous to the yearly review that takes place on the Israelite Day of Atonement. Somewhat like the Day of Atonement, the Nanshe New Year includes the possibility that persons can be cleared, that is, restored/vindicated, to good and regular standing: “The ordeal river in the house of Nanshe clears a person (line 130).”⁷⁶

The Nanshe New Year, like the Israelite Day of Atonement, shows a connection between cult and theodicy in that it involves judgment of persons on the basis of loyalty that must be demonstrated by adherence to the deity’s personal standards.⁷⁷

Elsewhere in the OT, YHWH’s divine perception is made explicit. For example, “The Lord watches over the stranger; He gives courage to the orphan and widow, but makes the path of the wicked tortuous” (Ps 146:9; NJPSV). Notice the parallel with lines 20-24 of the Nanshe Hymn: “She knows the orphan, she knows the widow. She knows that person oppresses another. A mother for the orphan, Nanshe, a caretaker for the widow, finding a way for houses in debt, the lady shelters the abducted person, seeks a place for the weak.” Here the special powers of Nanshe enable her, like YHWH, to help the socially disadvantaged who would otherwise suffer injustice (cf. Psalm 82).

Both in Mesopotamia and in Israel, divine administration of justice is based on divine rule over a human community. Thus the scope of judgment covers a community that is defined in relation to a temple/sanctuary and its deity. Nanshe determines fates of people who receive food from her temple (line 96) because she rules them. Similarly, YHWH rules the Israelites from his place of enthronement in the sanctuary above the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; cf. Exod 25:22; Num 7:89). Therefore, he judges them. Psalm 9:8[7] makes the connection explicit: “But the Lord sits enthroned forever, he has established his throne for judgment” (NRSV).

According to Gane, there are also significant differences between the Nanshe New Year and the Israelite Day of Atonement:

(1) The judgment at Nanshe’s temple takes place on New Year’s Day. The Israelite Day of Atonement, on the other hand, is the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev 16:29).

(2) The cleaning of Nanshe’s house by sprinkling with water appears to be purification simply from ordinary dirt. There is no indication that this

⁷⁶W. Heimpel, “The Nanshe Hymn,” *JCS* 33 (1981): 67-69.

⁷⁷R. E. Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 358.

activity has a result such as the purgation of sin of YHWH's sanctuary on the Day of Atonement.

(3) The Nanshe Hymn explicitly describes divine justice. Leviticus, on the other hand, implies divine justice through YHWH's requirement that his sanctuary be cleansed from the sins of his people in order for him to continue residing among them (see Lev 16:16b).

(4) In Israel, wanton sinners are condemned before the Day of Atonement (Lev 20:3; Num 15:30-31; 19:13, 20). The Nanshe Hymn, however, does not provide evidence that contracts of offending temple dependents are revoked on days other than the New Year.

(5) The Sumerian hymn describes judicial investigation leading to verdicts that are reached through the testimony of witnesses. Leviticus 16 does not explicitly refer to judicial investigation.

(6) In the Nanshe Hymn, clearing from wrongdoing is through ordeal, and the text does not indicate whether the cleared person was actually guilty or was only suspected. The Day of Atonement procedure deals with actual guilt and involves rituals performed by the high priest, accompanied by self-denial and abstaining from work (Leviticus 16).

(7) Nanshe is assisted by other deities, such as Hendursaga and Nisaba. YHWH has no other deity to assist him.⁷⁸

On the other hand, there are similarities between the Babylonian ceremonies of Nisannu⁷⁹ and the Israelite Day of Atonement.⁸⁰ Like the Israelite Day of Atonement ceremonies, the Babylonian rituals of Nisannu involve cleansing temple precincts and divine judgment at a yearly time of renewal, during which the religious and social order is reaffirmed.⁸¹ Like the Israelite rituals, the Babylonian rites are of three types with regard to the ritual calendar: regular, festival, and special.⁸²

⁷⁸Ibid., 360-362.

⁷⁹Partially preserved Akkadian tablets prescribe the rituals of the Babylonian New Year (Akitu) Festival of Spring, which were to take place during the first eleven or twelve days of the month of Nisannu. The text relevant to Nisannu 2-5 was published in cuneiform, transliteration, and English translation by A. Sachs, G. Çairgan, M. Cohen, and J. Bidmead.

⁸⁰R. E. Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, Gorgias Dissertations 14, Religion 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004). Gane's dissertation includes the translation of the text relevant to day 5, along with detailed analysis of the rituals as activity systems (ibid., 199-243, 319-323).

⁸¹K. van der Toorn, "The Babylonian New Year Festival: New Insights from the Cuneiform Texts and Their Bearing on Old Testament Study," in *Congress Volume: Leuven, 1989*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 339; cf. 343-344.

⁸²R. E. Gane, "Schedules for Deities: Macrostructure of Israelite, Babylonian, and Hittite Sancta Purification Days," *AUSS* 36 (1998): 231-236, 239-244.

Milgrom has pointed out several similarities between the fifth day of the Akitu festival and the Day of Atonement: “On both occasions, (1) the temple is purged by rites that demand that the high priest rise before dawn (*m. Yoma* 1:7), bathe and dress in linen, employ a censer, and perform a sprinkling rite on the sanctuary; (2) the impurity is eliminated by means of slaughtered animals; (3) the participants are rendered impure; and (4) the king/high priest submits to a ritual of confession and penitence.”⁸³

Cleansing the Israelite sanctuary involves three stages, dealing with its three parts: inner sanctum, outer sanctum, and outer altar. Purifying the Babylonian temple precincts is also a three-stage process: cleansing of the great Esagila temple complex as a whole (lines 340-345), which includes the sanctuary of Marduk and his consort, and then two purifications of the smaller Ezida, the guest cella of Nabû (lines 345b-365, 366-384).⁸⁴

Gane summarizes some similarities between use of the Babylonian ram and that of the slain Israelite animals:

1. Ritual activities purge a sacred dwelling.
2. Animals function as ‘sponges’ to absorb evil nonmaterial entities that are not represented by any material symbols.
3. Animal ‘sponges’ are disposed of away from the sacred precincts—the Israelite animals by incineration and the Babylonian ram by throwing its head and body into the river.
4. Animals are regarded as units.⁸⁵

The king’s reconfirmation before Marduk involves a kind of judgment according to divine cultic and ethical standards. Such accountability for loyalty to the deity somewhat parallels the concern for loyalty on the Israelite Day of Atonement. In Babylon, it is the king who goes before the deity for judgment, just as the Israelite high priest represents his people before YHWH.

According to Gane, differences between the Israelite Day of Atonement and Babylonian ceremonies on the fifth day of the Akitu Festival of Spring include the following:

(1) The Day of Atonement takes place in the seventh month (Tishri), in the autumn. The Babylonian festival, on the other hand, is in Nissanu, the first month in the spring.

(2) The Babylonian festival lasts several days, but the Day of Atonement stands alone.

(3) The Babylonian day includes not only purification of the sacred precincts, but also a special reconfirmation of the king to prepare for his role on subsequent ritual days. Day of Atonement ceremonies, on the other hand, do not involve a human king.

⁸³Milgrom, 1068.

⁸⁴Gane, *Cult and Character*, 364-365.

⁸⁵Ibid., 367.

(4) Whereas plurality of deities and sacred locations were factors in the multiplication of Babylonian ritual activities, such plurality did not affect the Israelite Day of Atonement due to the monotheistic nature of the normative Israelite cult. YHWH fulfilled all divine roles that were divided among other deities in other ANE religions. “He alone was the King and Judge of the world.”⁸⁶

(5) The Day of Atonement is a climactic event within the Israelite cultic system, but the fifth day of the Akitu festival prepares for a climax that comes later in the festival.

(6) Whereas the Israelite sanctuary cleansing constitutes an enactment of theodicy, the Babylonian purification of temple precincts simply removes impurity in order to prepare for the roles of gods participating in the festival.

(7) Whereas the Babylonian cleansing of sacred precincts includes sprinkling water, in the Day of Atonement rituals it is blood that is sprinkled for the purification of the sanctuary. The blood rites familiar in the OT are not replicated in other ANE cultures.⁸⁷

(8) There are a number of differences between the Israelite purification-offering of purgation complex that purges the sanctuary and the Babylonian Kuppuru activities that contribute to purification of the Ezida. For example, whereas the former is a complex consisting of two individual rituals, the Kuppuru “rite” is only a subsystem of an individual ritual.⁸⁸

(9) Whereas the Heb. כָּפַר in ritual contexts represents the goal/meaning of activity, the Akk. *Kuppuru* denotes the physical activity itself: “wipe/rub” or “purify by wiping.”

(10) Evils removed by purification rituals are not the same. In Babylon, impurity comes from evil spirits, but there is no purification for sins committed by the Babylonian people. In Israel, on the other hand, impurities that affect the sanctuary come from human beings, and the impurities are purged from the sanctuary along with moral faults that the people have committed (Lev 16:16).⁸⁹ There are no incantations to exorcise demons.

⁸⁶J. C. de Moor, *New Year with Canaanites and Israelites* (Kampen: Kamper Cahiers, 1972), 1:29.

⁸⁷See T. Abusch, “Blood in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in *Emanuel: Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov*, ed. S. M. Paul et al., VTSup 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 675-684. G. Beckman indicates that among the Hittites the throat of the animal was slit with the blood being squirted toward the statue, and blood was used in purification ceremonies (“How Religion Was Done,” in *The Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. D. Snell [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], 349-350).

⁸⁸Cf. B. Sommer, “The Babylonian Akitu Festival: Rectifying the King or Renewing the Cosmos,” *JANES* 27 (2000): 92.

⁸⁹Cf. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 56, 103-105.

(11) The speech of the Babylonian king consists of self-righteous denial of his own wrongdoing (lines 422-428). He admits no need for moral cleansing. By contrast, the speech of the Israelite high priest over Azazel's goat (Lev 16:21) is a real confession, admitting the moral faults of the entire nation.⁹⁰ This is a crucial difference.

(12) Only the Babylonian king is “judged” on the fifth day of the Akitu festival, but all Israelites are explicitly in view on the Day of Atonement. There is no evidence that the Babylonian king represents his people, as does the Israelite high priest, in the sense that he performs purgation on their behalf. So, in spite of significant parallels, the fifth day of the Babylonian festival should not be regarded as a Babylonian “Day of Atonement.”

(13) Objects of purification differ. The Day of Atonement rituals are concerned with purgation of sacred precincts, sancta, and persons. The Babylonian purifications of Nisannu 5 deal only with sacred precincts.

(14) Whereas the Israelite high priest performs the sanctuary purification rituals and is apparently immune to defilement through the process, the Babylonian high priest cannot even look on the first phase of the Ezida's purgation without becoming impure (lines 364-365).

(15) Finally, severity of impurity resulting from ritual participation differs greatly. Israelite assistants who lead Azazel's goat into the wilderness and dispose of carcasses contract minor impurity that lasts only until they launder their clothes and bathe, after which they are permitted to reenter the camp (Lev 16:26, 28). Babylonian functionaries who participate in the *kuppuru* purification of the Ezida are much more severely affected. They must remain outside Babylon for the rest of the festival—that is, until the twelfth day of Nisannu (lines 361-363).⁹¹

Conclusion

Since the biblical text has a theological significance emerging from an ancient context, we should pay due attention to the ANE ideas, concepts, beliefs, and worldviews because they may then be necessary for discerning the meaning of the text. So the aid of comparative study might sometimes be needed to help with the meaning of the text. More important are the many occasions in which the core meaning of the text is misinterpreted for lack of assistance from the ANE. If we do not bring the information from the ancient cognitive environment to bear on the text, we will automatically impose the paradigms and models of our modern worldview, thus risking serious distortion of meaning.

To investigate Israelite theology in relation to any other ancient theology, *we must go beyond the simple identification of similarities and differences to articulate the*

⁹⁰Milgrom, 1069.

⁹¹Gane, *Cult and Character*, 370-374.

relationships on a conceptual, functional, and behavioral level. For example, it is one thing to say that both Israelites and Babylonians used rituals for transference of offense. It is another matter altogether to understand the conceptual, functional, and behavioral implication of those rituals and the role they played in the larger theology.

Similarities could exist because Israel adapted something from the ANE culture or literature or because they simply resonated with the culture. Differences could reflect the Israelites' rejection of an ANE perspective, in which a practice was either ignored or proscribed, or they might emerge in explicit Israelite polemics against the views of their neighbors, in which extended discourse drew out the distinction. In all such cases, the theology of the text may be nuanced or clarified by an understanding of the cultural context, whether it resonates with its environment or stands in sharp relief against it.

When it comes to the formulation of our modern theology based on the biblical text, we may logically conclude that without the guidance of background studies, we are bound to misinterpret the text at some points. Often the words the writer or speaker uses and the ideas he is trying to convey are rooted in the culture and therefore need the assistance of background studies. Thus comparative study offers an alternative, and arguably more accurate, interpretation of the text.