Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament

Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible

Second Edition

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Abbreviations

Biblical

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps(s).	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom.	Romans
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1 Pet.	1 Peter
2 Pet.	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

General

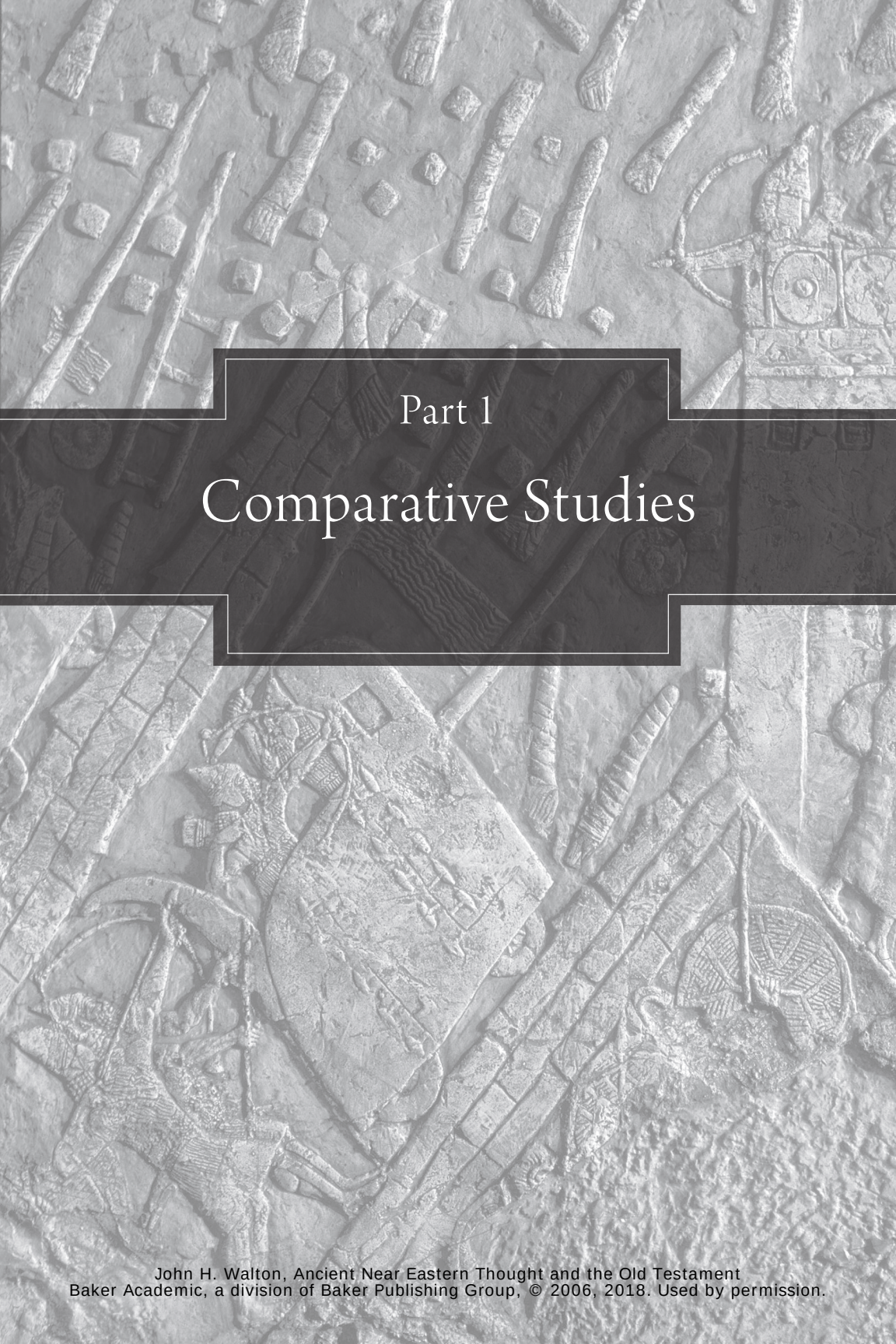
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by
Heb.	Hebrew
lit.	literally
no(s).	number(s)
repr.	reprint
trans.	translated by
vol(s).	volume(s)

Bibliographic

AAHL	J. M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*. SBLWAW 14. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
AEL	*Ancient Egyptian Literature*, M. Lichttheim. 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973–80
AfO	*Archiv für Orientforschung*
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. with supplement. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ARM	Archives royales de Mari
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
Bib	*Biblica*
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BM	B. Foster, *Before the Muses*. 3rd ed. Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005
BRev	*Biblical Review*
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BWL	W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1960
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAD	*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, ed. M. T. Roth et al. 21 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956–2010
CANE	*Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson. 4 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1995
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CC	Continental Commentaries
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament
COS	*The Context of Scripture*, ed. W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2016
DDD	*Dictionary of Demons and Deities*, ed. K. van der Toorn. 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1999
EI	*Eretz Israel*
ESK	H. Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings*. SBLWAW 20. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FDD	B. R. Foster, *From Distant Days*. Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1995
HDT	G. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*. SBLWAW 7. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1996

HM	H. A. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*. SBLWAW 2. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1990
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTO	T. Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once—Sumerian Poetry in Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
JANES	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JCS	*Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
JEOL	*Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Gezelschap/Genootschap "Ex oriente lux"*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JRitSt	*Journal of Ritual Studies*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplements
KAR	*Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts*, ed. E. Ebeling. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1915-23
LABS	*Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, ed. S. Parpola and J. Reade. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993
LCMAM	M. T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. SBLWAW 6. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995
LXX	Septuagint
MARI	*Mari: Annales de recherches interdisciplinaires*
MFM	S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*. Repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. W. A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OEAE	*Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. D. B. Redford. 3 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001
OEANE	*Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. E. M. Meyers. 4 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997
Or	*Orientalia*
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTP	V. H. Matthews and D. J. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*. 2nd ed. New York: Paulist Press, 1997
OtSt	*Oudtestamentische Studiën*

PPANE	M. Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*. SBLWAW 12. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003
RA	*Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*
RAI	Rencontre assyriologique internationale
RANE	B. T. Arnold and B. E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002
RB	*Revue biblique*
RIMA	Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods
RIME	Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAALT	State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
TCS	Texts from Cuneiform Sources
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck et al. Trans. D. E. Green et al. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
UBL	Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur
UNP	*Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. S. B. Parker. SBLWAW 9. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997
VAT	Vorderasiatische Abteilung Tontafel
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
YOS	Yale Oriental Series
ZA	*Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*



Part 1

Comparative Studies

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History and Methods

History

The rediscovery of Egypt began in earnest in the eighteenth century AD and of Mesopotamia in the mid-nineteenth century AD. With the decipherment of the ancient languages, the tens of thousands of texts that were being unearthed began to be translated and analyzed. Today the number of texts exceeds one million. In many cases the motives of the adventurers and scholars represented a strange combination of politics, interest in antiquities (or treasures), and biblical apologetics. Initial studies were inclined to be defensive of the Bible, even if such a stance required the dismissal or distortion of the cuneiform texts. The flurry of activity in connection with the relationship of these texts to the Bible had reached a critical mass of sorts by the turn of the twentieth century; and, consequently, widespread attention was attracted by the series of lectures presented in 1902 under the auspices of the German Oriental Society and attended by Kaiser Wilhelm II. What the Scopes trial was to the discussion of evolution, these lectures were to comparative studies. The lecturer was the noted Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch, son of the famous conservative biblical commentator, Franz Delitzsch.

Delitzsch's lectures, titled "Babel und Bibel," brought a more focused attention to the impact of Assyriology on the understanding of the Bible. More controversial, however, was his claim that the literature of the Bible was dependent on, and even borrowed from, the literature of the dominant culture represented in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. His contention was: "The Mesopotamian evidence shows us not just parallels to Old Testament

customs and ideas, but genuine evidence regarding their origin."[1] The logical conclusion would therefore be that the origin of the Old Testament was human, not divine, and that the Christian faith therefore had its roots in pagan mythology. Two more lectures elaborating on this thesis came over the next two years. In the second, more objectionable than the first, he questioned the appropriateness of the traditional theological terminology used to describe the Bible (e.g., revelation, inspiration) in light of its putatively evident dependence. As H. Huffmon observes, "Delitzsch had moved from Babylonia as interpreter and illustrator of the Old Testament to a general attack on the religious value of the Old Testament for the modern German."[2] At this time, many Assyriologists were people of faith, with the result that Delitzsch was criticized vehemently in their written responses to his lectures. Over the following decades, however, as Assyriology became increasingly secular and its scholars, if concerned with the Bible at all, had embraced the tenets of critical scholarship, Delitzsch's lectures became recognized as a watershed in comparative studies.

The result was a growing ideological divide between those who viewed comparative studies from a confessional standpoint, seeking to use Assyriology in their apologetics, and those who viewed it from a scientific or secular standpoint, seeing the Bible as a latecomer in world literature filled with what were little more than adaptations from the mythology of the ancient Near East. Critical scholars considered their opponents naive traditionalists. Confessional scholars considered their opponents godless heretics.[3] As evidence emerged that did not fit easily with a desire to vindicate the Bible, the critics became more strident, and many came to agree with Delitzsch's contention that "the Old Testament was no book of Christian religion and should be excluded from Christian theology."[4] In response, confessional scholars became more entrenched and defensive. The cycle of division drove its wedges deeper and deeper.

The space of over a century allows current scholars to recognize that Delitzsch's lectures were not motivated solely by a sense of scientific objectivity. He was a child of his culture as we all are, and his obvious nationalism can now be seen to have been encumbered with not only anti-Christian but also

1. M. T. Larsen, "The 'Babel/Bible' Controversy and Its Aftermath," *CANE* 1:95–106, quotation on 99.

2. H. B. Huffmon, "Babel und Bibel: The Encounter between Babylon and the Bible," in *The Bible and Its Traditions*, ed. M. P. O'Connor and D. N. Freedman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 309–20, quotation on 315.

3. There is no question that confessional scholars can use critical methodologies or that critical scholars may have confessional convictions. I am using the terms as generalizations to represent relative positions on a spectrum. They refer to those with a strong critical or confessional inclination.

4. Huffmon, "Babel und Bibel," 319.

anti-Semitic sentiment.[5] Huffmon summarizes the regression well: "In dealing with Assyriological matters, as Delitzsch did in his first two lectures, he combined scholarship with special pleading; in dealing with Old Testament materials, Delitzsch mixed learning with considerable naiveté; in dealing with the New Testament, or, more specifically Jesus, Delitzsch displayed naiveté and perfidy."[6]

Delitzsch's work spawned a movement, never widely popular but remarkable for its excesses, called "Pan-Babylonianism," which argued that all world myths and all Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testament alike) were simply versions of Babylonian mythology. For instance, the stories of Jesus in the Gospels were based on the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and the passion of Christ was based on Marduk mythology.[7]

Even as Assyriology and Egyptology (and also Hittitology) emerged as serious, autonomous, academic disciplines, the attention of many remained focused on the Bible. As discoveries of major archives followed one after another from the 1920s to the 1970s, each was greeted with initial excitement as scholars made great claims for the impact of the archive on the Bible. In most cases, time and more careful attention resulted in many, if not all, of the initial claims being rejected. Methodological maturity began to be displayed in the careful work of W. W. Hallo, who promoted a balanced approach called the "contextual approach," which seeks to identify and discuss both similarities and differences that can be observed between the Bible and the texts from the ancient Near East. "Hallo's goal, 'is not to find the key to every biblical phenomenon in some ancient Near Eastern precedent, but rather to silhouette the biblical text against its wider literary and cultural environment.' Thus we must not succumb either to 'parallelomania' or to 'parallelophobia.'"[8] It is Hallo's work that has provided the foundation for the following discussion of methodology.

Methodology

What Is Comparative Study?

Just as it would be foolish to think that all Europeans share the same culture, it would be a mistake to suppose that Babylonians, Hittites, Egyptians,

5. B. T. Arnold and D. B. Weisberg, "A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch's 'Babel und Bibel' Lectures," *JBL* 121 (2002): 441–57, esp. 442–43.

6. Huffmon, "Babel und Bibel," 319.

7. 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 Academic, 2002), 21–67, esp. 34.

8. Chavalas, "Assyriology and Biblical Studies," 43.

Israelites, and Sumerians all shared the same culture. There would even be noticeable differences between the second-millennium Babylonians of Hammurabi's time and the first-millennium Babylonians at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. More importantly, caution must be exercised when using both Egypt and the ancient Mesopotamian world for comparison. Egyptian culture is markedly different than others found in the rest of the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, there were some elements that many of the cultures of the ancient Near East held in common with Egyptians, and certainly many areas in which they shared more commonality with one another than they do with our modern culture.

Though we recognize distinct cultural differences across time and place, the commonalities warrant our attention. To think about how these ancient commonalities need to be differentiated from our modern ways of thinking, we can use the metaphor of a cultural river, where the currents represent ideas and conventional ways of thinking. Among the currents in our modern cultural context we would find fundamentals such as rights, privacy, freedom, capitalism, consumerism, democracy, individualism, globalism, social media, market economy, scientific naturalism, an expanding universe, empiricism, and natural laws, just to name a few. As familiar as these are to us, such ways of thinking were unknown in the ancient world. Conversely, the ancient cultural river had among their shared ideas currents that are totally foreign to us. Included in the list we would find fundamental concepts such as community identity, the comprehensive and ubiquitous control of the gods, the role of kingship, divination, the centrality of the temple, the mediatory role of images, and the reality of the spirit world and magic. It is not easy for us to grasp their shape or rationale, and we often find their expression in texts impenetrable.

In today's world people may find that they dislike some of the currents in our cultural river and wish to resist them. Such resistance is not easy, but even when we might occasionally succeed, we are still in the cultural river—even though we may be swimming upstream rather than floating comfortably on the currents.

This was also true in the ancient world. When we read the Old Testament, we may find reason to believe that the Israelites were supposed to resist some of the currents in their cultural river. Be that as it may (and the nuances are not always easy to work with), they remain in that ancient cultural river. We dare not allow ourselves to think that just because the Israelites believed themselves to be distinctive among their neighbors that they thought in the terms of our cultural river (including the dimensions of our theology). We need to read the Old Testament in the context of its own cultural river. We

cannot afford to read instinctively because that only results in reading the text through our own cultural lenses. No one reads the Bible free of cultural bias, but we seek to replace our cultural lenses with theirs. Sometimes the best we can do is recognize that we *have* cultural lenses and try to take them off even if we cannot reconstruct ancient lenses.

When we consider similarities and differences between the ancient cultural river and our own, we must be alert to the dangers of maintaining an elevated view of our own superiority or sophistication as a contrast to the naïveté or primitiveness of others. Identification of differences should not imply ancient inferiority. Our rationality may not be their rationality, but that does not mean that they were irrational.[9] Their ways of thinking should not be thought of as primitive or prehistorical. We seek to understand their texts and culture, not to make value judgments on them.

Ultimately the goal of *background* studies is to examine the literature and archaeology of the ancient Near East in order to reconstruct the behavior, beliefs, culture, values, and worldview of the people—that is, to explore the dimensions and nature of the ancient cultural river. These could alternatively be called *cultural* studies. *Comparative* studies constitutes a branch of cultural studies in that it attempts to draw data from different segments of the broader culture (in time and/or space) into juxtaposition with one another in order to assess what might be learned from one to enhance the understanding of another. The range of this understanding can include behavior and belief within the culture or the ways in which a culture is represented in art or literature. Within the literary category, areas for research include the larger issues of literary genre, the analysis of specific traditions and texts, and the use of individual metaphors, idioms, and words.

Development of Sound Methodology for Comparative Study

As one can infer from the history related at the beginning of the chapter, early practitioners were distracted from this larger task by curiosity or by axes to grind. Whether defending or critiquing the Bible or defending the ancient Near East, some scholars became enmeshed in using cultural and comparative studies as a means to a polemical end. As is often the case in polemics of any stripe, techniques such as selectivity and special pleading can create distortion. This polemical application resulted in the abuse of comparative studies from scholars at either end of the spectrum. Consequently some confessional

9. We may, for example, differentiate between analogical reasoning and empirical reasoning; they are different but they are both rational. See F. Rochberg, *Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 156–63.

scholars concluded that comparative studies posed a danger to the biblical text when they saw it wielded as a weapon of skepticism and unbelief. At the same time some critical scholars openly ridiculed what they saw as feeble attempts by apologists to use comparative studies to prove that the Bible was true.

It took some generations for correctives to be put in place that served to establish an appropriate methodology for background and comparative study, which will be introduced below. Even as these have been put into place over the last several decades, abuse and misunderstanding persist in pockets. These methodological correctives have exposed the dangers inherent in research that ignores either similarities or differences between the Bible and the ancient Near East.

One of the earliest and most significant correctives was the insistence that neither biblical studies nor ancient Near Eastern studies should be subordinated to the other. Both represent autonomous disciplines, though they can mutually benefit from cross-fertilization. Even as comparative studies are important for those seeking to understand the Bible, study of the ancient Near East is not merely a subservient field to biblical studies. Assyriology, Egyptology, and the like are disciplines in themselves and valid academic, cultural, and linguistic pursuits. Comparative study by Bible students is just one application of the findings from those fields.

Why Do Bible Students Need Comparative Study?

Cultural Dimension of Language and Literature

When I first began teaching in the early 1980s, I could refer in passing to "the incident at Kent State" and feel assured that students would know what I was talking about without further explanation. By the 1990s that was no longer the case. As another example, several years ago I could still refer to the "Berlin Wall" or to the "Iron Curtain" and assume that many students need no further elaboration. As years pass, however, such labels are less recognized. Effective communication requires a body of agreed-upon words, terms, and ideas.

Since communication requires a common ground of understanding, both speaker and audience must do what they can to enter that common ground. For the speaker this often requires accommodation to the audience. One uses words (representing ideas) that the audience will understand, thus, by definition, accommodating to the target audience.

When that common core of understanding exists, the author will not bother to explain him- or herself to the understanding audience against the chance that an uninformed person might be listening. This is where the work of

the audience comes in if they are not native to the language/culture matrix, because reaching this common ground may require seeking out additional information or explanation. If someone outside the language/culture matrix wants to take advantage of information that is communicated within the language/culture matrix, cultural education is required—the individual has to adapt to the unfamiliar language/culture matrix.

For example, twice every year in most of the United States and in many other places around the world we encounter the phenomenon known as "daylight savings time." If someone from another culture came to the United States and heard the phrase "daylight savings time," no study of the individual words would alert them to its meaning. They would need information that would enable them to adapt to the culture. These are issues that go beyond language to culture. In the same way, if we are going to comprehend communication that took place between members of an ancient culture, we are going to have to adjust our thinking to be able to sit in the circle of communication with the ancient audience. The Bible has plenty of examples like "Iron Curtain" and "daylight savings time" that are not explained, and we do not intrinsically understand. But in many cases the key to understanding can be found in other ancient Near Eastern literature.

When we study an ancient text, we cannot make words mean whatever we want them to or assume that they meant the same to the ancient audience that they do to a modern audience. Language itself is a cultural convention, and since the Bible and other ancient documents use language to communicate, they are bound to a culture. As interpreters, then, we must adapt to the language/culture matrix of the ancient world as we study the Old Testament. But as P. Michalowski has pointed out, "It is one thing to state banalities about 'the Other,' or about the inapplicability of western concepts to non-western modes of thought; it is something quite different actually to step outside one's frame of reference and attempt a proper analysis."[10] In fact, then, we need more than translation; we need people in the role of "cultural broker" who understand both cultures and negotiate meaning between them without subordinating one to the other.

This awareness of the integration of language and culture (and ultimately, worldview) moves us well beyond the sorts of research that were alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. Here we are no longer talking about trying to figure out whose religion is better, who was more ethical, who copied what

10. P. Michalowski, "Commemoration, Writing, and Genre in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *The Limits of Historiography*, ed. C. S. Kraus, Genre and Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts 56 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 69–90, quotation on 72.

literature from whom, or what should be considered Scripture and what should not. Methodology need not be tailored to detect literary borrowing or govern polemical agendas. When comparative studies are done at the cognitive environment level, trying to understand how people thought about themselves and their world, a broader methodology can be used.

Whatever cases might be made for literary dependence concerning one text or another, in this book we are going to give more attention to how the Israelites are embedded in the ancient world than to how one piece of literature might be indebted to another. This focus will make a difference in our methodology. For instance, when literary pieces are compared to consider the question of dependence, the burden of proof is appropriately on the researcher to consider the issues of propinquity and transmission—that is, would the peoples involved have come into contact with one another's literature, and is there a mechanism to transmit said literature from one culture to the other? Literary questions of genre, structure, and context will all be investigated as well as geographical, chronological, and ethnic dimensions.[11] When considering larger cultural concepts or worldviews, however, such demands will not be as stringent, though they cannot be ignored altogether. When we see evidence in the biblical text of a three-tiered cosmos, we have only to ask, "Does the concept of a three-tiered cosmos exist in the ancient Near East?" Once it is ascertained that it does, our task becomes to try to identify how Israel's perception of the cosmos might have been the same or different from what we find (ubiquitously) elsewhere. We need not figure out how Israel got such a concept or from whom they "borrowed" it. Borrowing is not the issue, so methodology does not have to address it. Likewise this need not concern whose ideas are derivative. There is simply common ground across the cognitive environment of the cultures of the ancient world.[12] These are currents in the cultural river and do not depend on transmission through literary sources.

The significant difference between borrowing from a particular piece of literature (indebtedness) and resonating with the larger culture that has itself been influenced by its literatures (embeddedness) must be taken into account

11. For example, J. Tigay's criteria in "On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. M. Cohen et al. (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 250–55.

12. I use the terminology of "cognitive environment," but other terminology could serve just as well and occurs in the literature; e.g., "intertextual echo" (Richard Hays), "shared stream of linguistic tradition" or "common *Wortfeld*" (Michael Fishbane), "cultural codes" (Daniel Boyarin), "patterns of meaning" (Hayden White), "matrix of associations" (Gershon Hepner), "common conceptual milieu" (J. Richard Middleton). These are conveniently presented with full bibliography by Middleton in *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 62–64.

in our analysis. As a modern example, when Americans speak of the philosophy of "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," they are resonating with an idea that has penetrated society rather than borrowing from the writings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who is traditionally identified with promoting that approach to life. Historically the philosophy of Epicurus has seeped into the culture and can therefore be reflected in statements today. The demands of propinquity are considerably relaxed. A cultural trail will not be as definable as a literary trail, nor will the tracking require the same criteria.

Given this backdrop, we can now introduce the discipline of "cognitive environment criticism" as a branch of critical scholarship. Critical scholarship as a whole represents an attempt to bring scientific rigor and thereby a putative objectivity to an interpretation of a text by recovering the historical, literary, and cultural world behind the text as a means to unravel the layers that have brought it to its current state. "Cognitive environment criticism" specifically focuses on the cultural element. It includes both background/cultural studies and comparative studies.

Cultural Dimension of Literary Genre

On the whole, it is now recognized that the determination of literary dependence is not as simple as once thought, nor should it be the dominant goal of either comparative studies or cognitive environment criticism. Rather, the careful observations of similarities and differences in pieces of literature help inform the study of both the Bible and the ancient Near East. For those who have an interest in understanding the Bible, it should be no surprise that this Israelite literature reflects not only the specific culture of the Israelites but many aspects of the larger culture identifiable across the ancient Near East. Even when a biblical text engages in polemic or offers critiques of the larger culture, to do so its authors must be aware of and interact with current thinking and literature. When we compare the literature of the ancient Near East with the Bible, we are ultimately trying to recover aspects of the ancient cognitive environment that may help us understand the Israelite perspective a little better. By catching a glimpse of how they thought about themselves and their world, we sometimes discover ways that the Israelites would have thought that differ totally from how we think.

Beyond the words and ideas of the literature itself, another area where we must be sensitive to cultural issues is in the way we understand literary genres. It should be no surprise that Old Testament genres need to be compared to genres in the larger culture of their world. Some genres operated differently in the ancient world than they do in our own culture, so we must

become familiar with the mechanics of the genres represented in the ancient Near East. Whether we are looking at wisdom literature, hymnic literature, historical literature, or legal literature, we find generous doses of both similarities and differences. Understanding the genre of a piece of literature is necessary if we desire to perceive the author's intentions. Since perceiving an author's communicative intentions is an essential ingredient to the theological and literary interpretation of a text, we recognize that understanding genre contributes to legitimate interpretation. Nevertheless, we will also have to recognize that some pieces of literature have no counterparts and therefore cannot be designated with a genre (they are sui generis). "Genre" can only be used to apply to a group of literary pieces.

Where similarities can be observed between the biblical and ancient Near Eastern genres, they help us to understand the genre parameters and characteristics as they existed in the ancient mind. For instance, it is important for us to explore what defined historical writing in the ancient world. How close was it to the journalistic approach of today that relies heavily on eyewitness accounts? How did genealogies function in Old Testament times? Were they compiled for the same purpose that we compile them for?

Occasionally comparisons within genres reveal very close similarities between the biblical and ancient Near Eastern literatures on the level of content. Such similarities do not negate the individuality of either. Even if the Hebrew Bible had the very same law or the very same proverb that was found in the ancient Near East, we may find uniqueness in how that law or proverb was understood or how it was nuanced by the literary context in which it was incorporated. At other times the Israelite version may not be noticeably different from the ancient Near Eastern example at any level.

Where there are differences it is important to understand the ancient Near Eastern genres because significant points in the biblical text may be made by means of contrast. For example, literature from Mesopotamia contains a couple of texts that recount the complaints of a righteous sufferer similar to what we find in the book of Job. The theology behind the book of Job, however, not only offers different explanations but even uses the mentality of the ancient Near East (represented in the arguments of Job's friends) as a foil. Job maintains his integrity precisely by not adopting the appeasement mentality recommended by his friends (Job 27:1–6) and representative of the ancient Near East. The book's message is accomplished in counterpoint. If we are unaware of the contrasts, we will miss some of the nuances. Throughout this book I will be presenting what can be understood about the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East and interspersing "Comparative Explorations" to consider specific similarities and differences found in Israel.

Cultural Dimension of Religious Practice

Another aspect of comparative study concerns comparative religion. One of the most consistent claims made within the biblical text concerns the distinctiveness of the Israelite religion. Yet at the same time the text does not hide the fact that the distinctions that were articulated in theory often did not translate into practice. Furthermore, the material culture often draws our attention to the similarities. Consequently, comparative study is helpful both for understanding the background religious practice to which the biblical ideal is contrasted and for understanding the syncretistic elements that were represented in common practice. Even when noticing the contrasts, however, comparative study will reveal many areas of continuity alongside the noted discontinuity. For instance, even though the biblical ideal is aniconic (no use of idols), the study of religious iconography can give understanding to objects like the ark of the covenant. As a second example, though the prophets decry the use of the high places, high places had a role even in legitimate worship in some periods.

Indeed, as much continuity as Christian theologians have developed between the religious ideas of preexilic Israel and those of Christianity, there is probably not as much common ground between them as there was between the religious ideas of Israel and the religious ideas of Babylon. When we think of Old Testament religious concepts such as ritual sacrifice, sanctuaries/sacred space, priests and their role, creation, the nature of sin, communication with deity, and many other areas, we realize that the Babylonians would have found Israelite practice much more comprehensible than we do.

Finally, though there would have been aspects of Canaanite or Babylonian religious practice (such as the ideology behind certain rituals) that were not understood clearly by the Israelites, they were well acquainted with the basic elements and ideals of their neighbors' beliefs. As H. W. F. Saggs has pointed out, for example, a man such as King Jehu of Israel must have been able to be fairly convincing as a Baal worshiper and well enough informed about the nuances of their religious practice to succeed in persuading all of the Baal worshipers to shed their weapons and come into the temple to be slaughtered (2 Kings 11:18–28). Saggs gives several other examples and makes his point persuasively.[13] We must not make a mistake in our assessment in either direction. Both similarities and differences must be observed, documented, and evaluated, not for the sake of critiquing but for the sake of understanding. Though some use comparative studies to contradict claims made in the biblical text, the data need not be so employed.

13. H. W. F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 12 (London: Athlone, 1978), 6–8.

Cultural Dimension of Theology

Including but expanding beyond religious practice is the construct termed theology. 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 relationships on a functional 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 function of those rituals and the role they played in the larger theology. Similarities could exist because Israel adapted something from ancient Near Eastern culture or literature or, as previously mentioned, because they simply resonated with the culture. Differences could reflect the Israelites' rejection of an ancient Near Eastern 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.[14]

I am not as convinced as some in comparative studies that the Old Testament regularly engages in polemics against the surrounding cultures and ideologies. Examples such as the caricature of images in Isaiah 44 and Jeremiah 10 demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible does indeed at times engage in polemics. The methodological question is the extent to which polemics can be used as an explanation in cases of tacit insinuation. Can choice of words ("great lights" in Gen. 1:16 instead of the words "sun" and "moon," whose cognates are also used as the names of the sun god and moon god) or the promotion of an alternative view (Yahweh riding on the clouds or chaos creatures under Yahweh's control) be construed as polemic? Polemics by means of insinuation depends on general recognition by the audience. The literature of the Old Testament never forthrightly refutes or undermines an ancient myth; it only lampoons or denies the power of the gods.

E. Frahm alternatively adopts the designation "counter-texts" to describe works in the ancient Near East that he concludes have been composed as reactions to earlier texts (e.g., *Erra and Ishum* as a reaction to *Enuma Elish*).[15] In that sense, they take their place in the reception history of the earlier work. The difference between this and polemics is in the intention: Is the writer trying to disprove his counterpart's claims (polemics) or simply presenting

14. I have carried out this sort of study in more depth in *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017).

15. E. Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 5 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 347–64.

his own alternate perspective (counter-texts)? In counter-texts, one form of reaction would be to reverse the plots of earlier works. Less obviously, "small but significant manipulations of older works were another way to adapt texts to the needs of a later era and produce new meanings."[16] In such a case the views can be meaningfully juxtaposed to interpretive advantage.

A third perspective understands similarities as reflecting an even lower threshold as a form of intertextuality. In this view, the biblical tradents or composers are broadly familiar with the literature of the ancient Near East and make faint allusions to it that echo its themes or content at the minimal end of the spectrum. Alternatively, at the maximal end, they are actually using the tropes or motifs of specific literature to craft a new work. In the latter case, there is no intention of parodying, arguing, or even countering the subject text. Examples can be found in the way that Ezekiel makes use of *Erra and Ishum*.[17]

A final model differs from the rest in that it does not require that specific pieces of literature were known by the Israelite scribes (whether they actually were or not). In this view what we know as literary traditions circulated around in informal ways and often in oral form. A diffusion model does not deny that whatever scribal schools there were in Israel may have had access to the literary works that comprised a scribal curriculum. It recognizes, however, that archival texts may not have been the most prominent forms in which the traditions circulated. One of the advantages of the diffusion model is that it can also account for many of the fundamental aspects of ancient culture that are evident in the Hebrew Bible but are not tied specifically to literary traditions, even though they may surface in one or several specific pieces.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive options. Theoretically we might find examples of each of them scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible. They share some common ground in that in all but the last option the Hebrew writer shows an awareness of the cognate literature. He is a protagonist in a conversation, whether engaged in borrowing and reworking, debate (polemic), reflection (counter-text), or casual intertextuality, or working from a general awareness of the way that ideas were framed or approached in the ancient world. Each understanding, therefore, requires the modern scholar to present evidence that the Hebrew writer would have plausibly been aware of either the specific piece of literature or the tradition, whichever the case may be.[18]

16. Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 345.

17. D. Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, OBO 104 (Switzerland: Universitätsverlag Freiburg; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991).

18. Adapted from J. Walton, "Biblical Polemics in Comparative Contexts," in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*, ed. J. Greer, J. Hilber, and J. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

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. A text can be thought of as a web of ideas linked by threads of writing. Each phrase and each word communicates by the ideas and thoughts that it will trigger in the mind of the reader or hearer. We can then speak of the potential meanings that words point to as gaps that need to be filled with (one hopes, appropriate) meaning by the audience. The writer or speaker assumes that those gaps will be filled in particular ways based on the common language and worldview shared with the audience. Interpreters of the Bible have the task of filling in those gaps, not with their own ideas (theological or otherwise) but with the ideas of the writer as those ideas can be understood. Often the words he uses and the ideas he is trying to convey are rooted in the culture and therefore need the assistance of background studies.[19] For example, the tower of Babel is described as being built "with its head in the heavens." Without the benefit of ancient Near Eastern backgrounds, early interpreters were inclined to provide the theological explanation that the builders were trying to build a structure that would allow them to launch an attack on the heavens. In other words, the tower was seen as a way for people to ascend to heaven. But background study has allowed modern interpreters to recognize that the tower is an expression used to describe the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, which were intended to serve as a bridge or portal between heaven and earth for the gods to use. Thus comparative study offers an alternative, and arguably more accurate, interpretation of the text.[20] In Genesis the tower should be viewed as providing a way for deity to descend. In conclusion, then, as our interpretation of the text requires us to fill in the gaps, we want to be careful to consider the option of filling those gaps from the cultural context before we leap to fill them with a theological significance coming out of our own experience or understanding.

Scope of Comparative Study

As we continue to think on the level of the common cognitive environment, we will have reason to expand the focus of our comparative studies.

The scholarly interest in comparative studies formerly focused on either individual features (e.g., flood accounts from both the Bible and the ancient

19. I am not here speaking of the sort of information that one could theoretically derive from cross-examining or even psychoanalyzing the writer. I simply refer to those elements that can be found to make sense against the backdrop of the culture.

20. See more complete discussion in "Comparative Exploration 5.2: The Tower of Babel," in chap. 5.

Near East feature birds sent out from an ark) or the literary preservation of traditions (e.g., creation accounts, vassal treaties), and many studies have been conducted with either apologetics (from confessional circles) or polemics (against confessional traditions) in mind. Those interested in the interpretation of the text have only more recently begun to recognize in addition the importance of comparative studies that focus on conceptual issues conducted with illumination of the cultural dynamics and worldview behind the text in mind.

> 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.[21]

Conclusions

Principles of Comparative Study

Ten important principles 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.
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 contexts 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.

21. H. 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; quoted in S. Talmon, "The Comparative Method in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. E. Greenspahn, Essential Papers on Jewish Studies (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 402.

7. The significance of differences between two pieces of literature is minimized if the works do not represent 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.[22]

Goals of Cognitive Environment Criticism

I would contend, then, that students should undertake cognitive environment criticism with four goals in mind:

1. Students may study the *history* of the ancient Near East as a means of recovering knowledge of the events that shaped the lives of people in the ancient world.
2. Students may study *archaeology* as a means of recovering the lifestyle reflected in the material culture of the ancient world.
3. Students may study the *literature* of the ancient Near East as a means of penetrating the cognitive environment of the people who inhabited the ancient world that Israel shared.
4. Students may study the *language* of the ancient Near East as a means of gaining additional insight into the semantics, lexicography, idioms, and metaphors used in Hebrew.

These goals then each contribute to comparative studies and will help us understand the Old Testament better.

22. J. Walton, "Cultural Background of the Old Testament," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. D. Dockery, K. Mathews, and R. Sloan (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 256. See also Tigay, "On Evaluating Claims," 250–55.