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Biblical Theology and the Ancient Near East: A Symposium on Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*

How to interpret the OT correctly in light of its Ancient Near Eastern context remains a live and pressing question in both the academy and church. A spate of publications and controversies in the last five years has demonstrated the potency of this issue, playing out on numerous fronts, including the doctrines of Scripture (on which, see the relevant articles in *Themelios* 34) and creation. Jeffrey Niehaus's recent publication *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2008) generates fresh angles on this topic, not least because of the way it combines study of the ANE context, broader biblical theology, and a theology of culture, all from a robustly evangelical confession. Because of the importance of the wider debate and the stimulating arguments set forth by Niehaus, we present this symposium of review articles on his publication. They include a review by an OT scholar, Stephen Dempster, by a systematician, William Edgar, and a response by Niehaus. On a topic that has at times generated more heat than light, we hope that this exchange may model a probing, respectful, confessional seeking of greater insight into and submission to Scripture.

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A Member of the Family or a Stranger? A Review Article of Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*[1]

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1. Introduction

We cannot overstate how important knowing the context is for understanding the significance of any communication, whether that is a simple word, sentence, paragraph, larger text, sign, photograph, or cultural cue. This is axiomatic for interpreting an ancient document like the Bible. Yet it is not so easy since context can mean many things. What context? The social context? The psychological context? The cultural context? The economic and political context? The historical context? The literary context? The full range of possible answers is staggering, which indicates how difficult it is to answer the question. The state of the problem in biblical studies is well known, as the increased knowledge in many areas has created many specialists in various fields in the ancient world as well as the Bible. Frequently, a perceptual iron curtain hangs between the world of evangelical biblical scholars and scholars of the ancient near east. The former world sees Israel as a stranger to the family of the ancient world; the latter sees Israel as simply one member of that family, and to view it any differently would be to violate a core principle of the scientific historical method.[2] Thus there can be in one world parallelophobia and in the other parallelomania.[3] Part of the Christian's commitment to Scripture is to maintain simultaneously both views in tension: Israel is a member of the same family; Israel has become a stranger. God has spoken into a specific world and communicates to that world. Therefore, the study

[1] Jeffrey Jay Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008). This essay updates a paper presented at the Biblical Theology section of the Evangelical Theological Society, New Orleans, 2009. Page references that occur parenthetically in the body of this essay are to Niehaus's book. I would like to thank Charles Halton, Ted Newell, and Peter Gentry for their helpful criticisms.

[2] Both points of view can be seen in Frank Cross's remark about the project of Yehezkel Kaufmann in his magisterial work on the religion of Israel (Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* [trans. Moshe Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], 2): "More serious the religion of Israel has been conceived as a unique and isolated phenomenon, radically or wholly discontinuous with its environment. . . . Kaufmann's insistence that Israelite religion was 'absolutely different from anything the pagan world ever knew violates fundamental postulates of scientific historical method'" (Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], viii).

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

of context is indispensable for understanding the resulting message.[4]

The recent spate of books by evangelical scholars that address this tension shows not only the importance of context for understanding the Bible but also illustrates some of the dangers fraught in the hermeneutical enterprise.[5] When the tension is resolved in favor of either the ancient near east or the biblical text, a critical dimension of meaning is lost. This can be compared to either overemphasizing the humanity or the deity of Christ, which led respectively to either the Ebionite or Docetic heresies. To take just one example of interpretation, sometimes scholars can overemphasize the ancient near eastern background of a biblical text and obscure its foreground. In the story of the theophany to Elijah in 1 Kgs 19, Frank Cross and Leah Bronner observe a polemic against Baal and the language of storm theophany,[6] while Brevard Childs sees a polemic against Elijah,[7] who is decidedly not like Moses and has no business being up on the sacred mountain. The background of Canaanite mythology colors the former analysis while the more comprehensive biblical literary context informs Childs's understanding. Childs makes an important point that the burgeoning information about the historical context needs to be carefully evaluated before it is automatically appropriated since uncritical acceptance can lead to hermeneutical distortion.[8] This frequently happens in the renditions of biblical stories in popular culture. For example in the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the message of the biblical story becomes lost in all the special effects. It is transformed from a message of covenant faithfulness into a can-do philosophy of positive thinking expressed in one of its theme songs, "Any Dream will Do."[9]

Knowledge of these concerns—the importance of context and also its dangers, the tension between context and text—makes a recent book by Jeffrey Niehaus a work that will capture the interest of many in the evangelical world. This book claims essentially that a thorough awareness of the context of the ancient world can virtually revolutionize our understanding of the Bible by shedding light on not only rare biblical words and strange cultural cues but also the basic theological framework of the biblical message. This book is appropriately titled *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology.*

That the ancient near east abounds with parallels that help clarify the meaning of the biblical text is one of the main arguments of Niehaus's thesis. His book is a rich treasure trove of these parallels that he has mined from ancient near eastern sources. This is old news, of course, since many scholars have found and explained such parallels. But Niehaus seeks to probe beneath the surface of these parallels

[4] This, of course, does not eliminate the need for the role of the Holy Spirit, the history of interpretation, and other crucial factors necessary for understanding the ancient text.

[5] See, e.g., these significant books: Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the OT*; Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*; John N. Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

[6] Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 194; Leila Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

[7] Brevard S. Childs, "On Reading the Elijah Narratives," *Int* 34 (1980): 135.

[8] John Sailhamer (*The Meaning of the Pentateuch* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2009], 19–20) makes a similar point in his recent monograph on the Pentateuch. He states that the meaning of the Pentateuch can be compared to a Rembrandt painting. We understand the painting by studying the painting itself, *not other matter*.

[9] I owe this example to systematic theologian Stan Fowler. Childs makes the same point about the movie version of the Ten Commandments ("On Reading," 129–30).

and find their deep structure. To switch the metaphor, Niehaus intends to discover the grammar of ancient near eastern thought. What he discovers is that it is fundamentally the same as that found in the Bible. This ancient theological grammar provides an independent corroboration for the biblical-theological structure of the Bible. This theological grammar demands a theological explanation.

Niehaus begins by stressing his Christian bias. Thus his interest is truth as found in biblical revelation, but also in other forms such as mythology and science (14–33). As for scientific method, he focuses on the comparative method in contrast to the experimental. This method compares the facts discovered with other known facts in order to better understand them. He proceeds to describe two ways the comparative method functions in biblical studies: (1) to classify biblical material into categories of myth and legend and (2) to understand pagan myths and legends according to biblical truth. He rejects the first option since it rejects the Bible's claims about its own authority. But having accepted the biblical claims, he believes that there is much that can be found useful if one travels down the second road.

Before starting his journey, however, Niehaus briefly describes the method of those who venture down the first road. They fall into two categories: Universalists and Cultural Derivationists. The first group proposes some universal aspect of human nature to account for the similarities with myths and legends and the biblical material. Scholars in this camp include the eminent folklorist Sir James Frazer among others. They assume universal processes in the human mind that therefore produce similar results in widely different cultures. The second group believes that the Bible derives its similar material from its proximate surrounding cultures. Scholars from this perspective include Hermann Gunkel and others who have sought to demonstrate the influence of distinctive ancient near eastern mythologies and legends on the biblical record.

Niehaus then forges ahead on his own road (28–33). He sets up three categories of similarities: (1) ancient near eastern and biblical parallels derived from major events affecting everyone such as creation and the flood (accurately preserved in the Bible but distorted in the ancient world); (2) common literary and linguistic conventions such as poetic word pairs and international treaty forms; and (3) specifically religious acts and events that are virtually mirror images of each other in the Bible and the ancient world. It is particularly the third group of parallels that capture the attention of the author. It is here where the theological grammar is discovered. These parallels are not a

> random selection . . . found in Sumer, Egypt, Hatti, Babylon and Assyria. Rather we propose that a shared theological structure of ideas existed in the ancient near East, a structure that finds its most complete and true form in the Old and New Testaments. (30)
>
> This structure was not only prevalent in the ANE. It applies in one sense or another to the whole concept of biblical revelation, from the first Adam to the second. It is the theological backbone of the whole Bible—truth in the Bible but darkened forms in paganism—somewhat blurred as we move from the ancient near east whereas modern western cultures have abandoned it altogether in favor of alternate, secular worldviews. (32–33)

Niehaus concludes,

> God allowed concepts that are true of him and his ways to appear in the realm of common grace . . . the purpose was to make such ideas somewhat familiar to God's

> people so that, when he actually broke into the historical plane and acted, his acts would be recognizable against their cultural background (30).[10]

Thus common grace laid the theological foundation preveniently among the cultures of the ancient world, preparing them for when God's truth arrives. If this view is true, it corroborates the structure that Niehaus determines to be the basic biblical-theological substructure of the Bible, an extremely valuable insight. He makes another case at the same time, more strongly at the end of the book, that the dim recollection of this structure in the ancient world is due to demonic deception. Personally I think this stands in somewhat of a tension with his view of common grace, but before evaluating the thesis of this book, the evidence should be summarized.

2. Tracing the Argument

The theological structure of ancient religion can be reduced to the following scheme: God chooses a king or a prophet to represent him and to bring about his kingdom in the world through warfare. A covenant is made with the king's people, and a city is built in which a temple is erected so that God or the gods can dwell with the people. In its most complete form, the conceptual sequence contains another idea: "the royal kingdom work is understood to be an act of divine creation or re-creation" (33, 172–76).

Niehaus proceeds to present the evidence, usually considering the ancient near east evidence first. There are chapters on each of the main elements in the theological grammar along with some additional ones. An initial chapter is devoted to the motif of the divine and royal shepherd throughout the ancient world, followed by respective chapters on covenant and conquest, city, temple, and image, and two chapters expanding on the covenantal consequences of disobedience and obedience. Subsequent chapters deal with recreation and restoration of creation and also summarize the conceptual substructure and its implications.

The first chapter traces throughout the ancient near east the theme of the god as shepherd and his king as representative. Literary and iconic evidence abounds to make this point, and its prominence in the Bible needs no repeating. Common grace accounts for the similarity in the ancient world. God the great ruler appointed human beings to rule the earth and this is refracted through the ubiquity of human kingship representing the divine (34–55).

A second chapter dealing with covenant and conquest describes the relationship that existed between the god/gods and the king in a particular land, which was expressed in laws given for the people to obey: "a god makes a covenant with a monarch and for a people . . . the covenant includes two major features: the god commands or imparts laws that the monarch must implement for his people and the god commands wars of conquest that will bring foreign peoples under the god's dominion" (56).

[10] See also Niehaus's comments toward the end of the book: "God in his providential care for humanity has allowed such theological parallels to become manifest over centuries so that truth would appear even in darkened and polytheistic forms. Truth in such forms could have no saving power. But it did prepare a matrix of thought, a background of theological understanding, so that even when God truly appeared and did such things as the pagans had claimed for their gods—instituting covenant, giving laws, commanding conquest, and extending his kingdom, even by signs and wonders—his revelation would come to a people who had some theological preparation for it. In this way God was glorified by even the distortions of pagan religions, for even in the darkness the pagans retained or obtained common grace reflections of his truth" (181).

The laws function as Torah indicating that the "people of the gods should live as the gods would have them do" (82).

A third chapter on city, temple, and image describes the significance of this important triad in the ancient near east: "The city . . . because it imaged a heavenly city. The temple . . . because it reflected a heavenly temple. The image . . . because it embodied the gods in the earthly temple and city" (83). Niehaus marshals evidence from throughout the ancient world to show the import of these concepts. The reverse side of this situation is that major defeats of ancient near eastern armies require a theological explanation. The gods of the defeated nations had abandoned their temples and cities (116–37).

A final chapter describes the destruction and salvation of covenantal households and shows parallels between the biblical and ancient near eastern ideas (138–65). It is not immediately apparent why this chapter is here, but I assume it is to show that the divine abandonment leads to the breakdown of human solidarity at the macro-level (war) and at the micro-level (the family). This is because of a strong belief in covenantal justice in the ancient world. Thus, nation rises up against nation, and family members fight among each other. Consequently, in Egypt rebellion at the political and domestic family level leads to internecine strife. Niehaus concludes,

> These ideas articulated in a fallen and darkened form in annals and other accounts, appear in a revealed and purer form in the OT. The same truths appear more fully revealed in the NT. There the antipathy between Satan's house and the household of God is most evident. Those who belong to Christ are the household of faith. They are children of a second Adam, whose blood speaks better things than the blood of Abel. They are vassals of a new and better covenant. And their Great King and Father is God. (165)

The next chapter briefly summarizes the previous evidence indicating that "all of these themes were essential parts of covenantal relationships between gods and humans in the ancient world and find their true counterparts in biblical revelation."[11] A concluding chapter recaps the three possible sources of parallels between the ancient world and the Bible—the mutual recollection of major events, the mutual use of linguistic and literary forms current in the ancient world, and "finally the activity of deceiving, demonic spirits (producing parallels between supposed acts of pagan gods and the acts as they appear in the Bible)" (177).

He then anticipates another possible way of considering the data, namely, the biblical authors are simply borrowing common cultural forms and idioms that would be familiar to their audiences. Niehaus rejects this accommodation since it implies that the parallels are not real but are simply adapted to make relevant points. Niehaus prefers his view "because it is consistent with the claims" made by the biblical writers and the speakers themselves and it is rooted in the revealed truth of Scripture and the "distorted

[11] Niehaus then explores one final theme that appears most clearly only in Egypt: restoration, both of the individual and the cosmos. He presents evidence of the resurrection of the Pharaoh, which is not true for individual Egyptians. Similarly, it is the Pharaoh's job on earth to restore all things so that the rule of Maat would be completely established. The Pharaoh is the incarnate son of Ra and thus has been entrusted with this task of restoration. Then Niehaus proceeds to sketch out complete paradigms in Egypt and the New Testament to show their correlation. "As Ra worked through Pharaoh, so God works through his incarnate son to advance his kingdom by warfare, establish a covenant with his former enemies and establish a temple, which is both the church and the individual believers in it, for divine service. So what the Egyptians claimed for Pharaoh and what the Bible says of the Son now also can be true for all believers" (174–75).

truth in the ancient Near East" (178). As a final "parade" example he juxtaposes the divine inspiration for the Davidic temple for Yahweh and the temple of Thutmosis III for Amon. The execution of the plans is detailed and contains remarkable parallels. Any accommodative understanding that denies the essential reality of both parallels does not do justice to the data. David either got guidance from God by the hand of the Lord upon him or he did not. But what about Thutmosis III? It would be most bizarre if by coincidence an Egyptian who predated David by centuries made essentially the same claim for divine guidance to build and furnish a temple. The claim of Thutmosis III is the result of demonic influence. Here Niehaus relies on passages from the NT that indicate demonic influence in false religion. Thus, demonic inspiration should be considered as the cause for the sort of parallels considered, including the major paradigm in its pagan articulations (178–81).

3. Evaluation

3.1. Strengths

I deeply appreciate many of the parallels, which show clearly that the Bible is part of the world in which it was born. Niehaus has gone through many sources throughout the ancient near east in many different settings to show the similarities that exist between the biblical texts and their ancient near eastern setting. Israel was definitely a member of the ancient near eastern family. I think this is very helpful. I remember the time when I first realized that Gen 1 spoke into a context that presumed an ancient near eastern cosmology, and it helped me understand for the first time why the waters were separated from the waters (Gen 1:6–8), why the sun and moon were called respectively the "the great light" and "the lesser light" (Gen 1:16). Perhaps such knowledge would have prevented Galileo's inquisition.[12] Knowledge of ancient culture can solve many interpretive problems.

I also appreciate the spiritual dimension in the book, a willingness to go where some of the evidence led. How else does one explain some of this data? It insists on a spiritual interpretation. Sometimes I have pointed out to my students that if the biblical view of reality is true there is necessarily a dark spiritual dimension to life that works under the radar of postmodern western culture but nevertheless has practical relevance for biblical interpretation. For example, the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel were not fools (1 Kgs 18:19–46). They had engaged in their rituals of self-mutilation before, and they had seen a supernatural power act in response. Neither was Elijah a fool, and neither did he avail himself of gasoline and flint to make his point. One supernatural power acted that day because it was in control. But the text seems to assume that there were other supernatural forces.

The vast majority of historical-critical scholars are reductionist in discounting the world of the demonic. Some of Rudolf Bultmann's famous "electric light bulb speech" at the Society for Protestant Theology (June 1, 1941) is worth citing again: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."[13] It was during one of those most ironic moments in

[12] See, e.g., Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemical Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *EQ* 46 (1974): 81–102.

[13] A fuller quotation is as follows (Rudolf Bultmann, "The New Testament and Mythology," in *Kergyma and Myth* [ed. H. W. Bartsch; trans. R. H. Fuller; New York: Harper, 1961], 5): "Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in *spirits, whether good or evil.* We know that the stars are physical bodies whose motions are controlled by the laws of the universe, and not demonic beings which enslave

history when one month later (July 1941) the order was delivered to Reinhard Heydrich to implement a final—and dare I say, demonic—solution for the Jewish "problem." A country that produced some of the most demonic acts in history also produced a theology that discounted the world of the demonic.[14]

Another commendable quality of the book is its willingness to see the Bible as a coherent unity. It is an assumption, of course, but Niehaus's structure accounts for a remarkably vast section of scripture, providing it with a coherent and logical outline, a logic that clearly has extra-biblical relevance.

3.2. Weaknesses

But a few lingering concerns make me cautious about this book. First, this may be my own intellectual difficulty, but I was left wondering how common grace and demonic inspiration work together. A number of times the author describes the ancient world parallels as being due to God's common grace and yet also due to the influence of evil spirits. As the book proceeds, the reader finds much more of the latter and less of the former. Is it the case that the parallels are part of the common grace of natural revelation that comes through to everyone and yet is distorted because of demonic spirits operating within the culture so that only darkened parallels remain? The basic ideas then of divine representative, conquest, covenant, city, temple, and image would then be distorted in the various cultures by specific demonic beings. I would just like to see this clarified. And if this natural revelation is common grace, then why is it limited to the ancient near east because it is not really found anywhere else?

Second, I wonder if it is so easy to demarcate the parallels into three categories: common events, literary and linguistic parallels, and spiritual activity of the gods. I think that spiritual activity governed all these parallels to some degrees. Thus, the account of the flood in the ancient world would have to be concluded as the work of demonic spirits since it gives a different divine interpretation of what happened, and the legal and treaty forms resonate with the guidance of the gods as well. Similarly there

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mankind to their service. Any influence they may have over human life must be explicable in terms of the ordinary laws of nature; it cannot in any way be attributed to their malevolence. Sickness and the cure of disease are likewise attributable to natural causation; they are not the result of demonic activity or of evil spells. (It may of course be argued that there are people alive today whose confidence in the traditional scientific view of the world has been shaken, and others who are primitive enough to qualify for an age of mythical thought. And there are also many varieties of superstition. But when belief in spirits and miracles has degenerated into superstition, it has become something entirely different from what it was when it was genuine faith. The various impressions and speculations which influence credulous people here and there are of little importance, nor does it matter to what extent cheap slogans have spread an atmosphere inimical to science. What matters is the world view which men imbibe from their environment, and it is science which determines that view of the world through the school, the press, the wireless, the cinema, and all the other fruits of technical progress.) The *miracles of the New Testament* have ceased to be miraculous, and to defend their historicity by recourse to nervous disorders or hypnotic effects only serves to underline the fact. And if we are still left with certain physiological and psychological phenomena which we can only assign to mysterious and enigmatic causes, we are still assigning them to causes, and thus far are trying to make them scientifically intelligible. Even occultism pretends to be a science. . . . It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."

[14] Note Justice Robert H. Jackson's comments at the beginning of the Nuremburg War Trials: "What makes this inquest significant is that these prisoners represent sinister influences that will lurk in the world long after their bodies have returned to dust" ("International Military Tribunal: Opening Address for the United States of America," *Department of State Bulletin* 13:335 [1945]: 850–51). See also Robert E. Conot, *Justice at Nuremberg* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), xii.

is mention that the biblical writers would not have just "couched things in terms familiar to them from their contemporary thought world" (177). I can think of a number of examples that involve spiritual activity where precisely these things happened. The psalms sometimes use clear mythological imagery to attribute to Yahweh the conquest of creation (Pss 29:10; 65:6–7; 74:13–14; 89:9–11; 93:1–5; cf. Hab 3). This imagery assumes a shared understanding, and it polemically makes the point that it is Yahweh—not the gods of order—who conquers the forces of chaos. It is no less rooted in truth even if it is couched in "contemporary" terms.

Third, there are problems with some of the parallels. The author could have been more methodologically rigorous in his comparisons. The idea of a covenant between the kings and their gods is a case in point. It is presupposed in his discussion, but there is precious little explicit evidence of "extant covenant documents between a god and his people" as the author admits (57). But it is a stretch to move from explicit divine commands to covenants, which are quite different. Many times commands can exist without assuming a prior covenantal context. Similarly his discussion of the king as shepherd could be much more nuanced. There are different periods in Egyptian history where this metaphor is more relevant than others. The ruler in the Old Kingdom is more of a distant, elusive figure than the more human shepherd kings from other periods.[15] A more systematic account of the religious beliefs of antiquity would be necessary to prove some points. A lot of generalizations are made based on evidence gathered from various periods. It would be also worth interacting with recent scholarship on ancient near eastern religion.[16]

Similarly in his discussion of the biblical evidence there is sometimes an indiscriminate movement back and forth from the NT to the OT and vice-versa depending on the parallel. Thus, a leap of the imagination is required to move from 2000 BC to the time of Christ and from wars of conquest to the spread of the gospel:

> Ra commands the monarch to build his "great house," Pharaoh does build the god's temple but Atum also builds it and its magnitude shows the extent of the kingdom the god has caused Pharaoh to conquer. The latest and final form of this theology sees God working through Jesus, and building his temple, the church. God has caused Jesus to conquer broadly by the spread of the gospel so that his kingdom (also the church) is broad—indeed global—in scope. (90)

There are connections here, but frequently in his haste to make comparisons the author skips immense temporal gaps.

Some of Niehaus's examples are also due to "covenantal overkill": the trembling Philippian jailer asking for salvation is compared to a rebellious vassal in the ancient near east (140); the comparison of the Hittite ritual in which the blood of a slain goat is smeared on an altar to the covenant of Moses (61); Samson's destruction of the lion like a goat as possible evidence of his status as a royal shepherd (52); the

[15] W. Stiebing, Jr., *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* (New York: Longman, 2003), 149.

[16] Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Jean Bottero, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Daniel C. Snell, ed., *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007). It would also be worth interacting with an important older article that addresses many of the same religious concerns of the ancient world but with more of a reductionist approach: Morton Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 71 (1952): 135–47.

linguistic parallel of *nîr* in the biblical and Assyrian texts and the conclusion that the Hebrew meaning probably means "yoke" like its Assyrian cognate because it occurs in a political context (79–80).[17]

Finally, as concerns the main point of the similar theological substructure—the grammar—it is striking that it never produced in the ancient near east a narrative similar to that of the Bible. To be sure there are parts and fragments but no sense of the whole. There are pieces of the puzzle, but no attempt has been made to put it all together. Perhaps this is a significant point. Israel was a member of the ancient near eastern family but also a stranger. Gerhard von Rad thought that this observation was striking:

> This ability to deal with extensive complexes of connected history and not just episodes must be regarded as one of the most momentous advances in man's understanding of himself, since its effects upon the development of the whole of the west are incalculable.[18]

But caution at the same time must be exercised. Perhaps the only reason that at least some of the pieces of the ancient near eastern puzzle match up in the sequence that Niehaus desires is that he has the picture on the "box cover" of the Bible.

Why did no ancient near eastern worldview develop the resources to produce such a sequence? That is an interesting question, and it might be something that Niehaus wants to consider in his forthcoming biblical theology. If this substructure truly existed, it may be that the worldviews of the ancient near east were so plagued by what John Oswalt calls "continuity" that they could not transcend the cycle of nature and develop an interest in history. Moreover, since there was not one divine will but a plethora, the intellectual and spiritual resources for producing an overarching coherent sequence just did not exist. It is interesting that N. T. Wright had to modify his standard worldview paradigm to be able to capture accurately the Jewish worldview in his study of NT origins. He had to add an eschatological and historical component.[19]

In this book Niehaus has done some important programmatic work, which requires more systematic and rigorous analysis of the evidence. I look forward to reading his forthcoming biblical theology where he will address these concerns. Despite my criticisms, it is clear that Niehaus is on to something. At the least, he has shown the choice is not between Israel as a member of the ancient near eastern family versus Israel as total stranger. Both are true. When Abram embarked down that dusty Mesopotamian

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[17] In the Assyrian texts the word *nîr* means "yoke," and in the biblical text it is usually translated "lamp" or "light." A number of texts state that despite divine judgment the Lord leaves David with a "lamp" in Jerusalem, stressing the continuity of the Davidic dynasty (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr 21:7). I find it problematic to translate "yoke" here, which is symbolic of royal rule, simply based on the Assyrian. Although it is plausible in some texts to read *nîr* this way in the biblical text, when all the contexts are considered in which the word occurs in the Bible, it is perfectly natural to read the word as "light." For example, in the Messianic context in 2 Sam 21:17, David is called "the lamp of Israel which should not be extinguished" (cf. 1 Sam 3:3). In the other passages dealing with the Davidic dynasty, *nîr* should be read from this perspective and not another "foreign" context.

[18] G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:50; cited in Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths*, 143.

[19] N. T. Wright adds a fifth worldview question to account for the distinctive ideas of Judaism: What time is it? (*Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 138n41, 443–74).

road toward that destination whose location only God knew, he was leaving the family.[20] But by leaving the family he was going to show the rest of the family how to go truly home.[21]

[20] See, e.g., Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Anchor Books/Nan A Talese, 1999), 63. In my judgment, Martin Noth correctly assessed one of the main goals of an OT history: “Making this clear [the difference between Israel and its neighbors] must be one of the main tasks of a presentation of the history of Israel” [*A History of Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 2], cited in Hans Walter Wolff, “The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament,” in *Essays in Old Testament Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westermann; trans. James Luther Mays; Atlanta: John Knox, 1963), 167n19.

[21] Note the comment by Hans Walter Wolff: “As a community from among the Jews and the Gentiles, the church is a stranger among the peoples just as the old Israel was in its environment, and only as the stranger who is called does it become a blessing to the world” (“The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament,” 173).

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Parallels, Real or Imagined? A Review Article of Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*

— William Edgar —

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When I came to Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia as a young student in the 1960s, two things struck me. First, under the portrait of one of the founding fathers, the biblical scholar Robert Dick Wilson, was a simple epithet: "I have not shirked the difficult questions." Wilson was one of the most accomplished biblical scholars of his day. He made lasting contributions to the linguistic questions surrounding the OT. He was a sharp opponent of what was then called the higher criticism of the Bible, which used rationalist and naturalist assumptions to investigate the Scripture, often finding it to be inaccurate in its historical claims, and thus substituting more plausible, rational schemes than simply divine inspiration, to explain the text we hold in our hand. Wilson was not afraid to look into the many questions raised by higher criticism. Usually they were legitimate ones, and often they were indeed difficult. But he always was able to answer, "I have come to the conviction that no man knows enough to attack the veracity of the Old Testament. Every time when anyone has been able to get together enough documentary 'proofs' to undertake an investigation, the biblical facts in the original text have victoriously met the test."

The second item that came to my attention as I sat in classes was the way my professors were not limited by their specialties or the department they officially taught under. Edmund P. Clowney, professor of Practical Theology, was one of the best biblical theologians on the planet. John Murray, in Systematics, taught us more about exegesis than some of the biblical researchers. We probably learned more about practical theology from church historian D. Clair Davis than from the practical theology professors. Professor of Old Testament E. J. Young was as good a systematician as any. Meredith Kline, the OT scholar, taught us about biblical ethics. The point is that specialization in one field did not preclude expertise in another. Especially striking was the ease with which theologians handled biblical studies, and, of course, the reverse: the way Bible scholars were at home with theology. This was in part because Westminster was (and is) a confessional institution, wherein each instructor is required to subscribe *ex animo* to the Westminster Standards. But it was also because in that world of yesteryear there was far less isolation into little boxes where outsiders are not welcomed because of their presumed lack of expertise in a particular area.

Surely today one of the "difficult questions" not to be shirked is that of the humanity of Scripture. And surely an evangelical view where historians, systematicians, and exegetes converge to give us a consensus about divine inspiration in relation to the humanity of Scripture is something we long for. Yet in the larger world of biblical studies, evangelical views are considered obscurantist at best. The reason for that is not simply scholars honestly facing hard questions, nor their respect for specialization. The

deeper reason is philosophical. For well over two hundred years mainstream biblical scholarship has dichotomized two kinds of history: salvation history (theology) and observable history (facts). This dichotomy stems ultimately from an exalted view of human reason.

We can conveniently date the beginning of this split with Johann Philipp Gabler's 1787 inaugural lecture at Altdorf, in which he proclaimed there was a fundamental difference between biblical theology and dogmatic theology. Gabler in effect launched the discipline of biblical theology, which he saw as a historical discipline, which is different from dogma.[1] His intention was, typical of the Enlightenment, for biblical theology to prepare for dogmatics, which was based on ideas arrived at through human reason.

Subsequent developments played this out in different ways, but always two principles contrasted: the historical and the systematic. Space prohibits properly rehearsing even the highlights of this juxtaposition down through the decades.[2] In the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, critical scholarship highlighted the differences between the world of Israel or of the primitive church, and ours. It was deemed impossible to take the text we have in our hands at face value. There had to be background checks that inevitably revealed that the Bible was the product of a culture and history foreign to our usual understanding of the way the text was generated.

Since those early days, many players have contributed to this way of understanding the Bible. And they have done so with different kinds of emphases. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), for example, became the outstanding proponent of the "history of religions school," in which traditions behind the biblical text and an identifiable *Sitz im Leben* were posited, proving that the faith and piety of the biblical writers was markedly different from our own. For Gunkel, doctrine was not the heart and soul of religion, but piety.[3] Although ostensibly in reaction to this sort of more liberal approach, Karl Barth (1886–1968) in his own way displayed affinities for this dichotomy between biblical data and theology. In his famous commentary on Romans, right in the preface, he explains that the historical-critical method is a necessary preamble to the "venerable doctrine of inspiration." Although he is anxious to arrive at an inspired Word, history is not to be discarded, he says, even though it might reveal errors or contradictions in the Bible. These errors are not so significant because the historical Scripture is only a lens through which to see the "spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit."[4] Today, with highly detailed investigations into the Ancient Near East as well as Second Temple Judaism, it has become more and more challenging to accept the evangelical position, which insists that history and theology must converge if we can trust the message of the Scripture.

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[1] *Oratio de justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*, repr. in *Opuscula Academica II* (Ulmae: n.p., 1831), 179–94. Those of us in conservative evangelical circles would claim that "biblical theology" in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos had very different origins and very different philosophical commitments.

[2] Such histories abound. One that is still valuable, though twenty years old, is Henning Graf Reventlow, "Early History and the New Beginnings," in *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (London: SCM, 1985), 1–43.

[3] See, for example, Hermann Gunkel, "Ziele und methoden der Erklärung des Alten Testaments," *Monatschrift für kirchliche Praxis* 4 (1904): 46. In this he is heavily influenced by Ernst Troeltsch, although without the latter's radical secularism.

[4] Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 1.

Added to the investigation of the historical background of the Bible are developments in the physical sciences. They suggest a very different cosmology from that of the biblical writers. As a result of assumptions about an ancient earth and the veracity of macro-evolution, biblical scholars, including some evangelicals, have decided that the worldview of the ancient writers is simply "premodern," obviating the need to reconcile it with modern cosmology. For many, then, the gap between biblical history and dogmatic verities has become nearly unbridgeable. Is it possible to find a way to accept the historiographies, or even the cosmologies of the biblical authors in order to harvest a true and reliable theology?

Be it said that counterpoints to the critical school from more conservatively committed scholars, though minoritarian, have not been entirely lacking. Even in the nineteenth century, researchers such as E. W. Hengstenberg (1802–69) offered a vigorous defense of the historic Christian position. In strong opposition to the critical views of Gesenius and Wellhausen, he proposed exegetical methods strongly committed to the unity of the biblical text and the analogy of Scripture, while at the same time fully cognizant of the challenges involved.[5]

On the side of Reformed theology, the towering figures of Herman Bavinck and B. B. Warfield weighed in as defenders of orthodoxy but with full attention to exegetical and historical considerations. Bavinck wrote eloquent pages in the first volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics* defending the inspiration of Scripture and its compatibility with the data derived from textual and historical study. Noting the attacks made on the traditional doctrine of inspiration, he does warn against "closing one's eyes to the serious objections that careful Bible research derives from the facts it discovers and can advance against the self-testimony of Scripture."[6] But an honest scientific procedure should lead to a corroboration of the highest view of the integrity of the Bible.

Warfield's strong defense of the inspiration of Scripture, including its inerrancy, did not preclude his acknowledging the role of the human agents of Scripture. He often stressed their importance and discussed the way that the different modes of revelation interacted with human agency, and he could not be compressed into one unilateral gesture, or a Docetic approach.[7] And he even accepted, at least to some extent, the analogy of inscripturation with Christ's incarnation.[8] Still, because Scripture is divinely inspired, this means, among other things, that in interpreting it we should seek for unifying elements that betray this divine authorship. When we read a passage but cannot successfully harmonize it with the rest (the analogy of Scripture), this should never call into question the inspiration of Scripture, but only our inability to see how particular passages fit into the whole.[9]

[5] His masterpiece is undoubtedly *Christologie des Alten Testaments* (1829–35; 2nd ed., 1854–57; trans. R Keith; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1835–39), also in Clark's *Foreign Theological Library*, by T. Meyer and J. Martin (1854–58).

[6] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena* (1896; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 420.

[7] See his "The Biblical idea of Revelation," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), 71–102.

[8] Ibid., 162. Warfield notes that the incarnational analogy is helpful as a general reminder that divine and human factors can work together, but pressed too far the analogy leads to unreasonable conclusions, such as believing there is a hypostatic union between the divine and the human in Scripture, clearly not the case. See Paul Wells, "The Doctrine of Scripture: Only a Human Problem," in *Reforming or Conforming? Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* (ed. G. L. W. Johnson and R. N. Gleason; Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 38–40.

[9] "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Nutley: Presbyterian &

To be sure, not all of the counterpoints to the excesses of the critical approach are from an evangelical viewpoint. Some came out of Neo-Orthodox theology. Consider, for example, John Bright, who accepted the possibility of errors in the Bible, but still regretted the denigration of Scripture implied in the critical view.[10] Many Jewish scholars likewise have objected to the anti-Semitic implications of critical scholarship.[11]

In the present generation these minority voices are still being aired. More than ever, evangelicals are wrestling to decide how to relate the historical and cultural backgrounds of Scripture to the final text and then to a solid theology. Unless they simply hide away from the issue of background and context, biblical scholars, however committed to the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, cannot shirk the difficult questions.[12] Important studies have come out helping guide us into the field of text and context. Yet the field is fraught with dangers.[13]

Among scholars concerned to lead us, few are more competent than Jeffrey J. Niehaus, whose recent book is under consideration here. He has managed fully to acknowledge the significant parallels between the world of the Ancient Near East (ANE) and the Bible, while at the same time defending the truth of God's revelation. He has not shirked the difficult questions, nor has he sunk down into overspecialization. Instead, he has demonstrated that inspiration is not incompatible with being situated in the local context in which the Bible was produced.

The bulk of the book is devoted to showing the parallels between themes in the ANE and biblical revelation. As such it is a fascinating account of some of the major topics in common between the two worlds. One learns a great deal about such themes as God and the royal shepherd; covenant and conquest; city, temple, image; city and temple (abandoned and restored); the covenantal household (destruction and salvation); and the restoration of all things. Many of the strongest parallels to the OT are from Egypt, but also from Babylon, Sumer, and Assyria. All of the themes that emerge for his comparative work are important. Let me mention just two of them more specifically.

First, he explains the idea of conquest with a view to establishing justice on the earth. In Egypt, for example we have the rule of *Ma'at*, the just order the gods wished to establish on earth through the

Reformed, 1948), 219–20. Much later, at Westminster Seminary, the pursuit of harmonization as the only way to observe the unity of Scripture was somewhat modified by Raymond Dillard, who suggested that apparently discrepant historical narratives could be due to authorial choice of historiography to fit the purposes in view, rather than simply a different set of emphases. See his "Harmonization: A Help and a Hindrance," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate* (ed. Harvie M. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 163.

[10] See, for example, his *A History of Israel* (1959; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

[11] For example, Cyrus Gordon, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (1953; repr., New York: Norton, 1998).

[12] I realize there are those who would make a sharp distinction between infallibility and inerrancy in an effort to avoid holding Scripture to a standard that is not appropriate. See, for example, Andrew T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007). Among other claims, McGowan says that "inerrancy" is more of an American issue, rather than a European one, a debatable assertion at best. For our purposes this argument is not important.

[13] A recent controversy at Westminster Seminary over Peter Enns' book, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), has served to highlight the problem. An attempt to clarify exegetical techniques of the biblical writers in the light of the surrounding cultural and historical context, supporters found the book within the bounds of the subscription vows required of Westminster Seminary professors, whereas critics did not. For obvious reasons I do not wish to make comments here on the virtues or deficiencies in this book.

Pharaoh. And we have the Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi*, whereby Shamash deposits his code of justice and covenant in the Esagila temple. The parallels with God's purposes at Sinai cannot be missed.

Second, we learn of the significant parallels between temple-building in Egypt and Old Babylonia with their view that the earthly replicated the heavenly, and the Bible's view of the temple as God's dwelling place. Niehaus eventually notes the extraordinary fact, not paralleled anywhere, that God will reside in the believers' hearts through his Holy Spirit (114). In both cases our author concludes with the uniqueness of biblical revelation as it culminates in Jesus Christ. The study is rich and suggestive, page after page.

So, then, what is to be done with these parallels? Negatively, how do we avoid the sort of historicizing we encounter in Gabler and Gunkel? Positively, how may we account for these parallels? Niehaus's basic premise for the study is simple, deceptively simple. Because there is truth, we can begin with a divine perspective. God has an objective way of looking at the phenomena, which in turn allows us to discover what they are through careful science. A comparative method thus emerges by which the unknown is enlightened by the known. When we proceed in such a manner, we will find numerous parallels between the two worlds. These should neither surprise nor embarrass us, but be expected. And they should instruct us, even inspire us. Put in my own words, all truth is God's truth.

Niehaus defends his view by comparing the two possible ways to apply such a comparative method (15ff.). One is to fit biblical material into the larger categories of myth and legend. The second is to fit pagan myths and legends into biblical truth. He opts unashamedly for the latter, bowing to "the Bible's claims about its own historicity." Those who opt for the former view, he explains, fall into two categories, the universal and the derivative. According to the universal method, espoused by people such as J. G. Frazier of *The Golden Bough* (1890), Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, it is possible to classify every human myth into an overall scheme. All of them reflect human need, and in human history we observe a progress from magic to religion to science.[14]

The derivative method, espoused by luminaries such as Hermann Gunkel and Friedrich Delitzsch, states that there is an actual historical dependence of one group of traditions or writing upon another. Both Gunkel and Delitzsch decided that the OT accounts derived from extra-biblical sources. Delitzsch, not to be confused with his father, Franz Delitzsch, believed that the OT contained very poor adaptations of Sumerian culture.[15] But how did the ancient cultures influence one another? Take, for example, the creation account (Gen 1:1–2:3) or the flood account (Gen 7–9), which have parallels in Babylonian narratives, such as *Enuma Elish* and *Gilgamesh*. It could be that the Babylonian stories were dependent on the Hebrew ones. Or the Hebrew stories derived from the Babylonian. Or perhaps both Babylonian and Hebrew derived from a common source (21).

Much of biblical scholarship has attempted to wrestle with these possibilities. The older critical schools used a kind of evolutionary (or diffusionist) scheme according to which one local culture, say, Egyptian or Babylonian, developed strong cultural traits that then made their way into others, including the Hebrew people. Because the OT was largely edited in the period of exile and the people of Israel were weary, the resulting product was considered to lack some of the vitality of their sources. The

[14] This approach is common to many views. One can think of Claude Lévi-Strauss in his numerous works, including *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Penguin, 1992). See also the venerable Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1987).

[15] His view is in fact anti-Semitic. See his *Babel and Bible* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1903).

other approach, somewhat less evolutionist, posits an independent invention scheme, which states that human beings, made of the same psychology, respond similarly to their circumstances.

Niehaus agrees strongly that there are real parallels, but ultimately rejects both the universal and the derivative approaches because they assume the Bible is entirely dependent on factors other than inspiration. He opts instead for the second overall method that seeks to fit the pagan stories and those from the ANE into the biblical framework. Although he does not give any deeper philosophical or theological reasons for his own approach, he states three working assumptions for it: (1) the OT preserves "true and accurate" accounts of major events, including the creation and flood; (2) because of general revelation, the OT uses literary and legal forms current in the ANE serving as vehicles of God's special revelation; and (3) parallels exist between the ANE and the OT because of God's common grace.

Along the way, Niehaus states, perhaps surprisingly, that one of the sources for OT parallels to the ANE is the "activity of deceiving, demonic spirits" (177, 179). He does not develop this idea in much detail because, as he notes, the Bible does not either. But he states it nevertheless. However, in fact, there is a much more positive reason for the presence of the parallels under consideration. God's overall rationale for these parallels, some coming before, some after the biblical themes, is to help prepare his people for the extraordinary intrusion of divine revelation into history. As he puts it, "the purpose was to make such ideas somewhat familiar to God's people so that, when he actually broke into the historical plane and acted, his acts would be recognizable against their cultural background." He adds, "God's revelation was so dynamic and (in his holiness) so challenging (cf. Exod. 20:18–19; Deut 18:16) that a background preparation for at least some aspects of that revelation was necessary for his people" (30).

In my judgment this approach is an excellent first step. It is enormously helpful to face these numerous parallels between the ANE and the Bible, and, rather than being embarrassed by them, to show how they relate to God's purposes, culminating in Jesus Christ. The book presents a real feast of themes and events that tie the ANE to biblical revelation. Yet I wish a second step had been taken. It is true enough that by his general revelation and common grace God makes ready a people for his special revelation. But is this because he would then "break into the historical plane"? I worry about the Kantian implications of this view, which sharply contrasts a "noumenal" realm from the "phenomenal." Of course, this is the last thing Niehaus intends. But would it not be better to state that both general and special revelation work together, not against the backdrop of history, but within the very fabric of history? Otherwise, do we not fall into the "derivative" approach unwittingly?

Furthermore, I think certain questions need to be raised about the parallels themselves. Niehaus does not interact much with skeptics of parallelism. For example, he makes no mention of Noel K. Weeks, who has written eloquently about how to understand the affinities between some of the ancient cultures.[16] He asks, just to take one example, how legitimate are the discoveries of parallels between Egyptian parity treaties and OT covenant treaties of conquest. Weeks does not deny any connection at all, but questions whether the Egyptian model is significantly similar to that of Semitic people.[17] To begin with, the evidence for such documents is itself tenuous. But even in the documents we may have, from the Hittites and from the Amarna letters, there is no reference to treaties at all. Nor do they speak of a "father" and "son" relationship between the Pharaoh and his vassal, except in a problematic letter

[16] See, for example, Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships* (JSTOTSup 407; London: T&T Clark, 2004).

[17] Ibid., 99ff.

(#44). Yet some biblical scholars have rather easily assumed that Semites and Egyptians were living in the same universe.

The deeper question raised by this kind of challenge, one that Weeks raises, is that of philosophical or theological assumptions. On the diffusionist supposition, many scholars, including a few evangelicals, see strong ties between the Mesopotamian outlook and various biblical accounts. This is claimed, for example, of myths of origins, but also of many other approaches to God's dwelling with humankind. But the diffusionist model makes us blind to the variety of ways these cultures viewed life and the cosmos. Upon closer examination, it turns out that there were many culturally and regionally specific outlooks, including myths of origins, in the different civilizations of the ANE, making it very difficult to show any kind of straight-line influence of one or another on the Bible. Not to deny the parallels of course. They are there. But what exactly are the influences and affinities between these different cultures?

More importantly, this challenge against a too simple kinship between ancient cultures, including the Hebrews, reminds us of something not as well stressed by Niehaus as it could have been. God's revelation was as often as not critical, indeed, sharply judgmental against the local cultures surrounding Israel. The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness, according to Rom 1:18, and one sees that exhibited on nearly every page of the OT. To give just one example of where more could have been said: When Jeremiah "implies divine abandonment," as is suggested (125), it does appear to parallel other forms of abandonment in the ANE. And Niehaus does affirm that the Lord's words of judgment through Jeremiah respond to the false confidence that Israel exhibited that assumed God could never abandon his people. Yet why not raise the larger issue of God's purposes in judging the very sinful cultures of the ANE, especially when Israel sinfully accommodates them? That way, in addition to the "symphony of parallels" and "shared theological thought" we could underscore the remarkable uniqueness of biblical revelation.

It seems to me we have here a great opportunity in biblical studies as elsewhere to speak to the "Christ and culture" issue. Too often we have been satisfied to look at ways in which God's revelation is accommodated to human culture. This is not wrong of course. John Calvin spoke of God's "lisping" to accommodate us.[18] And Niehaus does not fall into the snare of acknowledging only a one-way cultural influence. But the other side of it is that God is busy transforming culture. He stands over culture as its creator and redeemer as well as judge. This is not so much a reproach, as one book cannot accomplish too many purposes, as it is an encouragement to take the next step and commend the uniqueness of revelation, stemming from the unique and self-authenticating God of the universe. True enough, all truth is God's truth, but that does not say quite enough about the authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient manner in which he has revealed himself.

[18] *Institutes* 1.13.1.

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How to Write—and How Not to Write—a Review: An Appreciative Response to Reviews of *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* by Dempster and Edgar

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I want to thank *Themelios* for the unusual opportunity to interact with two reviewers of my book *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*. An author does not often have the opportunity, not only to join discussion with two reviewers, but also to express and document further some concepts that he may not have expressed as fully as possible in the original work.

I also want to thank Stephen Dempster and William Edgar for their reviews, which illustrate what a review ought to be. Both of them have understood the work under review and have helped the reader to see some of the virtues of that work. Both of them have also raised reasonable questions regarding points that might have been made more clear or explored further. The goal of such reviews is to understand better and establish more clearly what we may know to be true of the data under discussion, in this case, the Bible and ancient near eastern materials that may relate theologically to the Bible.

If the reviews they have written are exemplary in the ways mentioned above, there is another sort of review that is not. Since two examples of this latter form of review have recently appeared, I would like to take this occasion to comment on them briefly before entering the lists with Dempster and Edgar. In a sense, the two specimens discussed briefly below may be taken as foils to the better reviews by Dempster and Edgar, which most of my discussion will engage.

1. How Not to Write a Review

Recently two other reviews of my book have appeared: one by Krzysztof Baranowski and the other by Elke B. Speliopoulis.[1] Because Speliopoulis follows Baranowski uncritically, it will be convenient to deal with both of their critiques *in tandem*.

Perhaps their most important critique is that—in Baranowski's words and which Speliopoulis quotes—many of the texts studied show "a reliance on antiquated scholarly literature," which, to use

[1] Krzysztof J. Baranowski, review of Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009): 1–2; Elke B. Speliopoulis, "*Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* by Jeffrey J. Niehaus—*A Critical Interaction*," unpublished review submitted to Gary E. Yates in partial fulfillment of requirements for THEO 695 at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary (Downingtown, PA: March 1, 2010). http://www.scribd.com/doc/27692261/Book-critique-of-Ancient-Near-Eastern-Themes-in-Biblical-Theology-by-Jeffrey-J-Niehaus. Baranowski, also a student, is pursuing a PhD at the University of Toronto (http://utoronto.academia.edu/Baranowski/CurriculumVitae).

Speliopoulis's words, "would show up in a markdown of a grade in any graduate student's work."[2] I think, however, that any fair-minded reader of my book—or, perhaps better, any reader who actually checks its bibliography and the proportional use of the works cited—will come to a different conclusion. The textual sources that I have quoted for the great majority of non-Egyptian materials are not at all "antiquated" but continue to be standard reference works for such data.[3] Some scholarly works that comment on ancient texts, as well as reproducing select material in translation, are in the same category.[4] I have used Weidner's edition of the Hittite treaties in Akkadian, and that is an older work.[5] In doing so, I ought perhaps to have mentioned the more recent translations by Gary Beckman, which, however, do not offer the reader the original language texts.[6] For a different reason, I drew extensively on Breasted's translation of the Egyptian annals because it remains the only set that accomplishes anything like completeness.[7] Any reader who considers the actual space devoted to particular ancient near eastern textual materials will see that the great majority of those materials are not from sources that are "antiquated." Further, the older source material cited for reasons noted above continues to be accurate for the purposes employed (e.g., the Akkadian of Weidner's edition).

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[2] Speliopoulis, 7.

[3] E.g., Jerrold S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions, I, Presargonic* (New Haven: The American Oriental Society, 1986) ; R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); Loren Fischer, *Ras Shamra Parallels* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1972); Douglas R. Frayne, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Old Babylonian Period* (Early Periods 4; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Albrecht Götze, *Die Annalen des Mursilis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967); A. K. Grayson, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Assyrian Periods* (2 vols. [*Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia B.C.* and *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium B.C.*]; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987–91); W. M. Green, "The Eridu Lament," *JCS* 30 (1978): 127–61; W. M. Green, "The Uruk Lament," *JAOS* 104 (1984): 253–79; S. N. Kramer, "Lamentation over the Destruction of Nippur: A Preliminary Report," *Eretz-Israel* 9 (1969): 89–93; Raphael Kutscher, *Oh Angry Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Biography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991); Piotr Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989).

[4] E.g., Riekele Borger, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königsinschriften, erster Theil* (Leiden: Brill, 1961); Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (CBQMS 26; Catholic Biblical Association of America: Washington, 1994); Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula: Scholars, 1974); J. van Dijk, "Le motif cosmique dans la pensée sumeriénne," *AcOr* 28:1–2 (1964): 1–59; Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967). I do sometimes cite older articles, either in German or in English, because they deal with some inscriptional evidence that is either pertinent to a particular point or is not available in a more recent edition. E.g., W. G. Lambert, "Three Unpublished Fragments of the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic," *AfO* 18 (Graz: Weidner, 1957–58): 38–51; William L. Moran, "A Note on the Treaty Terminology of the Sefire Stelas," *JNES* 22:3 (1963): 174; Knut Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1938); Ernst F. Weidner, "Die Kämpfe Adadniraris I. gegen Hanigalbat," *AfO* 5 (1928–9): 89–100; D. J. Wiseman, "A New Stela of Assur-nasir-pal II," *Iraq* 14:1 (1952): 24–44, which is important for its mistranslation of *mamītu* as "spell," as I note in *Ancient Near Eastern Themes* (61n15).

[5] Ernst F. Weidner, *Politische Dokumente aus Kleinasien, die Staatsverträge in akkadischer Sprache aus dem Archiv von Boghazköi* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche, 1923).

[6] Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (2d ed.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1999).

[7] James H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (5 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906).

Baranowski and Speloipolis also take issue with my finding parallels in some cases, but that is to be expected. One area that certainly requires further documentation is that of supposed divine-royal or divine-human covenants in the ancient Near East, and I will address that below. In addition to disagreeing with an author whom they review, reviewers can also show their own theological biases or misconceptions in their reviews, as both Baranowski and Speliopoulis do. Baranowski for instance finds it "naive" that "on Jesus' authority, the author seems to consider as fact Jonah's sojourn in the belly of a great fish (p. 15)."[8] Speliopoulis, for her part, comments in her summary of the book's chapter topics, "The following chapters evaluate specific text elements, both from ANE texts and from the Bible—surprisingly from both Old and New Testaments."[9] However, this should come as no surprise. A thematic comparison that involves both Testaments is the whole point of the book, whose title, after all, is *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*.

2. The Reviews of Dempster and Edgar

A book that not only surveys ancient near eastern data and compares them with biblical data but also uses spiritual criteria to do so is likely to meet with some unsympathetic response. I am grateful that such has not been the case with the reviews of Stephen Dempster and William Edgar. It would be a good thing, in my opinion, if evangelical scholarship were more open to the spiritual side of things and did not avoid such considerations because two hundred years of liberal scholarship has considered them unscientific. Being open to such matters includes, of course, accepting the historicity and truth of what Jesus and the NT writers affirm as well as the historicity and truth of the OT witness. Every scholarly work has assumptions, and my work assumes without apology the historicity and truth of the biblical data.[10]

Another of the governing assumptions of *Ancient Near Eastern Themes* is the possibility of correspondences between the ancient near eastern and biblical data on spiritual grounds. If such connections are possible—that is, if parallels can justly be attributed to one or more non-human spiritual source—then synchronic and/or diachronic considerations obviously become less significant.[11] This is, of course, a theological matter, and one in which considerations of common grace and/or of demonic

[8] Baranowski, 1. Different readers, of course, will reach different conclusions as to whether they accept Jesus' statement as made by him and whether they accept the historicity of Jonah.

[9] Speliopoulis, 4.

[10] Although it has not been my purpose to argue at length for such historicity and truth, I am certainly grateful for the work of others who have done so. Perhaps the most important volume of that sort recently produced is by K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[11] I note in addition here what was never in doubt in the book: I have not attempted to reconstruct the ancient cultural milieus that produced the texts under study. That was not the purpose of the book, and one can find a host of respected scholarly works that use ancient near eastern texts in studies of biblical parallels without discussing the ancient near eastern cultures that produced the parallel texts. E.g., Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1973); and Peter Machinist, "Literature as Politics: The Tukulti-Ninurta Epic and the Bible," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 455–82. The reason for this is probably that a good deal of commonality obtains among the ancient cultures, despite undeniable differences. It was such commonality that makes possible such a book as Cyrus Gordon's *Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York: Norton, 1965). I submit further that even parallels that some readers may find questionable will be borne out by future study and discovery, perhaps the most important one being the divine-royal/human covenant category.

influence come under discussion. Dempster has called for greater clarity regarding this distinction, and I turn now to interact with his review.

2.1. Dempster

In §3 of his review, Dempster comments, “I also appreciated the spiritual dimension of the book, a willingness to go where some of the evidence led.” I think it is appropriate that he highlights the irony of cultural development in pre-World War II Germany, where, as he notes, “A country that produced some of the most demonic acts in history also produced a theology that discounted the world of the demonic.”[12] Higher critical scholarship in Germany, with its antisupernatural bias, arguably led to a cultural climate in which Nazis could characterize the Bible as “the Jews’ book of lies.” Ironically, on the other hand, Hitler could be aware of power coming upon him as he began to speak, and naturally believed that power was none other than “der Gott der uns geschaffen hat.”[13] I am consequently not only happy to agree with Dempster that the theological outline proposed in my book “accounts for a remarkably vast section of scripture, providing it with a coherent and logical outline,” I also agree that it has “extra-biblical relevance.”

The question that remains to be explored, however, is how both common grace and demonic influence can play roles in extra-biblical theologies. I agree that I do not explore that issue with anything like the care that it deserves, and I am not sure that I could have explored it with such care at the time of the book’s composition. I do hope to explore it further in the forthcoming biblical theology. I would say now, however, that I find Dempster’s statement of a possibility—that demonic spirits can distort common grace natural revelation and thus produce darkened parallels—is close to my own further thought. Another possibility is that evil spirits, knowing what God has done, and perhaps even, by God’s permission, knowing what he intends to do (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19–22), can and sometimes do produce a false version of divine activity to which people respond because people are shaped in God’s image to receive the truth and if the closest thing to the truth is a distorted version of it, that is what people will embrace.

It is also possible that the Holy Spirit provides some inspirations or guidance in the realm of common grace, even in the cultural context of demonic religion. So, for instance, the Lord can call Cyrus his “shepherd,” and even his “messiah” (i.e., “anointed one,” Isa 45:1), and yet say of the polytheistic pagan emperor, “You never knew me” (Isa 45:4). “Messiah” is highly significant in this context because it implies that the Holy Spirit comes upon the emperor and gives him the authority and guidance to accomplish what God intends. Similarly, God tells Elijah to “anoint” Hazael king of Damascus (1 Kgs 19:15). Summarily, Paul affirms that all earthly governmental authority is from God (Rom 13:1–2), and such authority can come only from the *active* presence of the divine *Person* of the Holy Spirit, who also, for example, gives “authority” to believers to become children of God (John 1:12). The Bible indicates clearly enough by its terminology that God’s Spirit acts in an empowering and revelatory way in the very context of pagan, polytheistic, and thus demonic religious contexts (cf. Deut 32:16ff., 1 Cor 10:20).

[12] Bultmann’s “electric light bulb speech” may seem rather quaint today when we can view it from the perspective provided by a century or more of dynamic experience both of the Holy Spirit and of demonic resistance in the global growth of the church.

[13] “The God who has formed/created us,” a quote from one of Hitler’s speeches at the 1934 *Reichsparteitag*, as documented in Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* (trans. of *Triumph des Willens*; Bloomington: Synapse Films, 2001).

It may be within our grasp to understand each particular biblical example. To understand whether or where the Holy Spirit operates in one case or another of pagan theology is not so easy.

As evil spirits can produce false teaching (cf. 1 Tim 4:1), so they can adopt and use forms or ideas or acts that originated with God to inform such teaching or theology. This is where, as Dempster suggests, we may see the influence of such spirits on, for example, the pagan flood and creation accounts, and also the pagan development of the international treaty forms—pagan forms of a covenant relational concept that, as I have argued elsewhere, originated as an idea in the mind of God, or in the very nature of God as Suzerain in relationship with his vassals.[14] In these matters I agree entirely with Dempster, and I ought to have made my views more clear.

Another area of parallelism, and one that perhaps I should have specially noted, lies in the area of the polemical. Dempster mentions the use of mythological imagery in the Psalms, and I would add, for example, Isa 27:1, a virtual lifting of lines from an old Ugaritic poem about Baal and Mot done for polemical, allusive, and illustrative purposes, which I have discussed in that light in another book.[15] I have also treated some of the Psalms in this regard, in particular Ps 18 with its allusions to Canaanite mythology.[16] I would point out, though, that when Dempster quotes me as saying that the biblical writers would not have just "couched things in terms familiar to them from their contemporary thought world," I was not ruling out such parallels produced for polemical or other purposes by the biblical writers, but rather making the point that the biblical writers did not simply borrow uncritically the concepts from the world around them and then make up a literature out of such material. That would consider them "to be part of an ancient near eastern worldview," as I said in the sentence preceding the one Dempster quoted.[17]

Dempster also raises the question that if some of the parallels we find in the ancient Near East are part of natural grace revelation, "then why is it limited to the ancient near east because it is not really found anywhere else?" First, I am not sure that such theological parallels as I have indicated are not found anywhere else. I suggested at the end of the first chapter,

> *As humankind spread across the globe and cultures arose that were more remote in time from the beginning, the theological outline we find in the ancient Near East became somewhat blurred. Modern western cultures, of course, have abandoned it altogether in favor of alternate, secular worldviews*, except that it is kept alive in the church, God's people, who continue to be his temple and to advance his kingdom, until he returns to establish it once and for all: for all time, and for all who believe in him.[18]

I have no doubt that further study on a global scale would produce more of the sort of theological and thematic parallels that form the subject matter of the book. To take one example, poetry about the exploits of Ghengis Khan shows the emperor enacting the same sort of household judgments that I discuss in the sixth chapter ("The Covenantal Household: Destruction and Salvation").[19] To take another,

[14] Cf. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "Covenant: An Idea in the Mind of God," *JETS* 52 (2009): 225–46.

[15] Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 111–15.

[16] Ibid., 301–4.

[17] Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 177.

[18] Ibid., 54–55 (emphasis added).

[19] Cf. Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan* (San Francisco: North Point, 1984), 42, 48–49, 68.

Charles Halton has noted the parallel shown by my diagram (Amon Ra > Pharaoh, son of Ra, "Ra in his limbs" > warfare > covenant with conquered > temple service, and Jesus, Son of God, God incarnate > warfare > new covenant > temple service), and he has drawn a further parallel with Krishna.[20] Halton seems to think that in doing so he has presented a counterexample to my thesis, but in fact he may have presented further evidence in favor of it. The occurrence of such a parallel in India suggests the very sort of theological production by evil spirits that I have proposed.[21] In any case, to revert to the question Dempster raises, it touches on an issue that, in their own ways, Frazer and Jung also handled, although not in ways that I could endorse.[22] But the question of global parallels is, after all, a subject for another book. My book sought to explore *ancient near eastern themes* (not global themes) in biblical theology. The attempt to do so, and to account for some parallels spiritually, naturally raises questions about theological parallels beyond the ancient Near East, but to engage that question, beyond the sort of general and suggestive comment that I made at the end of the first chapter, lies beyond the proper scope of the book.

Dempster devotes attention to the same parallel between Pharaoh and Christ that Halton notes, but raises a different question about it, namely, the question of temporal distance: "There are connections here, but frequently in his haste to make comparisons the author skips immense temporal gaps." The spanning of such temporal gaps, however, comes not from a haste to make connections, but from a belief that such apparent parallels have a spiritual substrate. I believe I have drawn an accurate set of parallels between the essential elements of the theology of pharaonic kingdom-advance on the one hand and that of Christ's kingdom-advance on the other. Such a portrayal of essential elements may be viewed unsympathetically as simplistic by some (although not by Dempster), or it may be viewed as part of the "grammar," to use Dempster's term, of ancient near eastern theological thought. I have proposed, in effect, that it is the latter. As such (as noted above) diachronic and synchronic issues become less important and certainly fall short of being determinative any more than diachronic issues impede our recognizing past (and possible future) manifestations of antichrist types, of which each Pharaoh was one.[23] If we are willing to accept John's statement that there are, have been, and will be many "antichrists" (from ancient near eastern monarchs with divine pretensions through Roman emperor worship, and on to such figures as Napoleon, Hitler, and so on), we already participate in the point of view whose application in comparative biblical theology I have advocated. Similarly it may be true that "a leap of imagination is required to move from 2000 B.C. to the time of Christ and from wars of conquest to the spread of the gospel," but I would argue for precisely such leaps of imagination, if the elements that

[20] Charkes Halton, review of Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, *JETS* 52 (2009): 133.

[21] Halton elaborates, "This chart and associated discussion are simplistic. It is akin to saying one could substitute Jesus for Nirvana and change Buddhism into Christianity" (review of Niehaus, 133). I think any thoughtful reader will not agree with the kinship that Halton proposes, and my book clearly advocates no such substitutions; such a reader may also question whether my chart or Halton's comment is the more "simplistic."

[22] For Frazer, cf. in brief Dempster's summary of my treatment above. Carl Jung accounted for parallels of religious thought by positing "the universality of the collective unconscious," which he attributed to the "similarity of the structure of the brain in all races of men, and this similarity in turn is due to a common evolution." Cf. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 19 (and 16–21 for the more general discussion that includes Frazer, Freud, and Jung).

[23] This observation applies to such apparent problems as the use of, e.g., the shepherd metaphor or the lack of such usage in different periods in Egyptian history, as Dempster notes.

constitute the comparative structures of thought are sufficiently, and so obviously, parallel. Imagination has a role to play in scholarship, just as all scholarship is in one way or another an act of *poiesis*.

A related parallel that appears questionable is that of divine-human covenants. As Dempster rightly observes, "Many times commands can exist without assuming a prior covenantal context." However, I would note here a work to which Dempster refers, and I am indebted to him for it. Morton Smith, at the end of "The Common Thought of the Ancient Near East," concludes, "The *relation* between people and god was therefore a contractual one, and the question as to when it was first given dramatic expression *in a formal contract* is one for the history rather of rhetoric than of theology."[24] Although I disagree with Smith's classically liberal perspective on the OT and its constituent documents, I entirely agree with him on this. I have recently argued, on theological grounds, that covenant is an idea in the mind of God, or to put it another way, an expression of God's nature in *relation* to his creatures.[25] Since humans are made in the *imago Dei*, one could reasonably expect that not only the capacity for relationship, but also some of the constituent elements of relationship, being grounded in God's very nature, would show up in human relationships (e.g., in family relationships, as discussed in my article). It also follows that covenantal elements may be expected to appear in any relationship between one in authority and one who is under that authority. Such elements can be expected to include affirming the authority of the "suzerain," noticing his prior relationship with and benefits to the "vassal," and then making requirements of the "vassal" (i.e., stipulations), blessings for obeying the "suzerain" and curses for disobeying. Not all of these elements may be articulated in every conceivable or recorded contractual or power relationship, but we should expect in such power relationships some statement of the most essential elements, namely, those that define the roles of "suzerain" and "vassal" or "boss" and "subordinate" and that stipulate the subordinate party's obligations to his superior. So, for example, K. A. Kitchen notes that the term *brt* appears as a Canaanite loan word in the Nauri Decree of Year 4 of Sethos I (ca. 1302/1291 B.C.), where it is used for a contract involving hired labor paid at an agreed rate.[26] It also characterizes the contractual situation of a group of hired women during the reign of Merenptah (ca. 1200/1210 B.C.).[27]

Dempster is understandably concerned that one avoid what he calls "covenantal overkill." However, I respectfully disagree with his understanding of the four examples he cites from my book. One of them (the Philippian jailer episode as it illustrates the concept of household redemption) is properly appreciated if we see it as drawing upon a paradigm foundational in creation, that is, the paradigm of household headship and its potential consequences when dealing with a Suzerain who can bless or curse (as I have argued). The concept of household judgment (or, its alternate, redemption) as a primordial value, is, in effect, built into humanity and human thinking and will appear in a variety of contexts (as,

[24] Morton Smith, "The Common Thought of the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 71:3 (1952): 145 (emphasis added). I would note here a separate point: the desirability of my interaction with, e.g., Assmann, Bottero, and Snell, as Dempster indicates. I interacted with Bottero, in effect, when I disagreed with Walton's acceptance of his thesis about the Codex Hammurapi (*Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 56–57n1). As for the others, and as for Bottero also, although their contributions are clearly very worthwhile and although I do not agree with their understanding of the ancient near eastern data at every point (this applies especially to Bottero), it was not my purpose to interact with their work, since the goal of my book is quite different from theirs. Cf. further comments below.

[25] Niehaus, "Covenant," 228–30, 245–46.

[26] K. A. Kitchen, "Egypt, Ugarit, Qatna and Covenant," *UF* 11 (1979): 454–56.

[27] Ibid., 457, where Kitchen summarizes the Egyptian data under discussion: "By c. 1300 B.C., the term *brt* could be used for contract/compact/agreement, in the economic sphere, for hired labour."

e.g., in the case of Ghengis Khan, noted above). A second example is that of royal typology in Samson, suggested because he is able to fight with and kill a lion with his bare hands. I would still maintain that an ancient near eastern reader would have, or could have, caught the implication of fitness to be a judge, because monarchs (who could also be called "judges"—cf. the king of Moab as a "judge" in Amos 2:3) claimed to do the very thing that Samson did.[28]

Dempster's other two examples regard observations by other scholars with whom I agree. The first of these is the commonality of blood shed and smeared on an altar as a covenant sealing ritual in a Hittite example and, in the case of the Mosaic altar, a parallel drawn by Gurney before me.[29] The second is the translation of Hebrew *nir* not as, traditionally, "lamp," but rather in light of an Assyrian cognate meaning "yoke." Paul Hanson first proposed this alternative translation.[30] Other scholars have made the same identification, and I believe it has merit.[31] As has been shown to be the case with Hebrew *yom* ("day"), and *yom* ("wind, storm"), both of which also have Assyrian cognates (ūmū and ūmū), two Hebrew words that look alike may both appear in the OT and cause confusion or lead to mistranslations when the second, though less common, translation value is not appreciated.[32]

Another very valuable question Dempster raises is why the theological substructure I have outlined—what he calls a "grammar" of ancient near eastern thought—"never produced in the ancient near east a narrative similar to that of the Bible." The possible causes that he indicates, those of continuity and the plethora of divine wills in ancient near eastern perspective, probably played a role in producing a cultural soil (or cultural soils) that were not favorable to the development of historiography as we find it in the OT. Ultimately, however, I believe that this question of historical narrative and its origins can be answered only from the realm of treaty (or covenant), because it is in connection with this genre that most ancient near eastern history appears.

Some years ago I argued that ancient near eastern historiography was rooted in covenant.[33] History writing as we find it in the ancient world suggests that this is so. The ancient Near East provides for the most part two genres of historical narrative: the historical prologues of second millennium B.C. international treaties on the one hand, and royal annals on the other. The first genre is obviously rooted

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[28] We might also note, e.g., the association of the lion with rule in the blessing of Judah as thematically related (Gen 49:9–10). Cf. Elena Cassin, "Le roi et le lion," *RHR* 298 (1981): 355–401.

[29] O. R. Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* (The Schweich Lectures, 1976; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29–30.

[30] Paul Hanson, "The Song of Heshbon and David's *NIR*," *HTR* 61:5 (1968): 297–320.

[31] Cf. further, and in agreement with Hanson's proposal, M. Görg, "Ein 'Machtzeichen' Davids 1 Könige xi 36," *VT* 35 (1985): 363–68; Iain W. Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 91, who translates 1 Kgs 15:4–5, "Nevertheless, for David's sake Yahweh his God gave him *dominion* in Jerusalem, setting up his son after him and establishing Jerusalem; because David did what was right in his sight."

[32] For the two values of *yom*, cf. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 384. They are followed by William L. Holladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 131. Cf. also my article on the translation of *yom* in Gen 3:8, "In the Wind of the Storm: Another look at Genesis III 8," *VT* 44 (1994): 263–67, and subsequently in *God at Sinai*, 155–59.

[33] I put forth this thesis in a rudimentary fashion in "The Warrior and His God: The Covenant Foundation of History and Historiography," in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 299–312.

in covenant, since historical prologues are part of the structure of Hittite international treaties.[34] The second genre, the royal annals, records various royal activities (conquest, sometimes the royal hunt, domestic building projects, temple building or refurbishing, and dedicating booty to the gods), but mostly they record royal conquest. Such conquest involved making new suzerain-vassal treaty relationships (routinely reported, e.g., in Assyrian annalistic tradition by the concluding phrase, "I made them swear the oath of the great gods," i.e., enter into a suzerain-vassal treaty with the Assyrian emperor). They also involve the reconquest of rebellious vassals (of which the Hittite royal annals also give us some good examples). A study of these two genres makes it obvious that they are history written on the basis of covenant: either the formation of new suzerain-vassal treaties, or the punishment of rebellious vassals and the return of the same, if possible, to their previous vassal condition.[35]

If ancient near eastern historiography is rooted in treaty/covenant, we may expect to find that the same is true of OT historiography. I would submit, and have argued elsewhere, that the same covenantal foundation for historiography is to be found in the OT. Indeed, that is why the historical books, with their covenant-lawsuit undertones, were traditionally referred to as the "former prophets" (and recognition of the same covenant-lawsuit or prophetic perspective has made possible that famous but misguided reconstruction, the "Deuteronomistic History"). However, in addition to a shared foundation in the concept of covenant, there is also a profound difference between the historiography of the ancient Near East and that of the OT. The fact that God truly acted in the history of a people and instituted covenant relations with them answers why the pagan cultures of the ancient Near East never produced such *continuous* historical narrative as we find in the OT. On the one hand, people in the ancient Near East arguably thought they were the people of their gods. This implied both a familial relationship (they could call themselves, e.g., the "sons of Ashur") and, correspondingly, a covenant relationship. Cross has argued that these nations were sacral leagues, like Israel, in covenant with their god (e.g., "the *am Kemos*, 'sacral league' or 'kindred' of Chemosh, and Ammon, the *am Milkom*").[36] On the other hand, however, and this is of the utmost importance, no god ever actually manifested himself among any of them as God did at Sinai, and no god ever actually made a covenant with them as God did there. To have

[34] Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary* (trans. David E. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 11, made a very brief but similar observation about the historical prologue (which he calls the "antecedent history") of a Hittite treaty: "The description must be considered as a form of historiography." By "description" he means the account of prior events and relations between the two parties to the treaty, in other words, the "antecedent history" or historical prologue. We should note here the long tradition, amply documented in Mesopotamia, of dedicatory inscriptions that contain historical episodes. Jerrold S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions, I* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986), 13, notes, "The historical narrative is attested as early as Urnanshe, full-blown, as it were, and sources before his reign are too few to pinpoint a specific moment when reports of political successes were introduced into building and dedicatory inscriptions, or commemorated on monuments specially designed for that purpose." Urnanshe's reign has been dated ca. 2520 B.C. Such inscriptions portray a range of concepts, including the god's choice of and commissioning of the king to do various works, from conquests to public works to the impartation of law both for the nation of the god and for subjugated foreign kings and their lands. Such elements obviously have to do with relationships, whether elective or enforced, that entail obligations and thus have a covenantal tone to them, even when covenants are not explicitly mentioned. For the basic concept, cf. Niehaus, "Covenant," *passim*.

[35] I have just completed an article that touches on the topic, "Covenant and Narrative, God and Time," which will appear sometime next year in *JETS*.

[36] Frank Cross, *From Epic to Canon, History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998), 12.

the concept that you are the "sons" or "people" of your national god and are thus implicitly in covenantal relationship with him is one thing. To have experienced the reality of his redemption and forging of such a relationship, and his intervening again and again to maintain it through history, is quite another.[37] I believe that historiography took the form it did in Israel because, like other ancient near eastern historiography, it reported on relations between suzerain and vassal, but, unlike other ancient near eastern historiography, it could report the successive real encounters with, and actions of, that living Suzerain God among and on behalf of (or even in judgment of) his people. Finally, the clarity of mind, honesty of evaluation, and continuity of purpose shown by Israelite historiography ought justly to be attributed to the action of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth, since the historical books of the OT, like the rest of Scripture, are "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Not every scholar will be comfortable with such a claim, but evangelical scholars ought to be.

2.2. Edgar

I turn now to the review of William Edgar, for which likewise I express appreciation. I am especially grateful for his emphasis on the compatibility of Scripture with the data derived from textual and historical study, an emphasis I share. I also share his concern to understand the relation between the divine inspiration of Scripture, on the one hand, and its humanity, on the other. I have long agreed with Bishop Lowth, for example, in his hierarchical ranking of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in poetical quality. Ezekiel is far from being the poet that Isaiah is, and yet, the work of both prophets is "God-breathed." The Spirit works in mysterious cooperation with the particular gifts and background of each biblical writer to produce just what God wanted to say through that writer. Finally, I appreciate Edgar's affirmation of my book as "an excellent first step" toward understanding the significance of the many parallels between the ancient near eastern data and the biblical data.

As I have proposed, above, the importance of treating the biblical data—and the ancient near eastern data, too—from a spiritual point of view, I also agree with Edgar about the objectivity of God: "God has an objective way of looking at phenomena, which in turn allows us to discover what they are through careful science. A comparative method thus emerges by which the unknown is enlightened by the known." There is only one objective point of view in the universe, and God has it. Only he knows all things exactly as they are. We can approximate his objectivity to the degree that we come to be in step with the Spirit in the way that we evaluate and understand phenomena, in everything from our personal relationships to the phenomena of the Bible and the ancient Near East.

Like Edgar also, I am far from being a Kantian, and in this regard it may be that referring to God's breaking "into the historical plane" was unfortunate because it is potentially misleading. God sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb 1:1), which means, I suspect, that his Spirit, working through his Word, is in touch with and sustains all things (as Jesus could say, "The words I speak to you are Spirit, and they are life," John 6:63). So it certainly follows that God's general and special revelation "work together, not against the backdrop of history, but within the very fabric of history," as Edgar says.

[37] Cf. Deut 4:32–34 (NIV): "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?"

Edgar poses a couple of questions with regard to my book, and to these I now turn. He asks, "How legitimate are the discoveries of parallels between Egyptian parity treaties and OT covenant treaties of conquest?" This question perplexes me a little. I cannot see what Egyptian parity treaties (of which we have only one exemplar, that between Rameses II and Hattusilis III) should have to do with "OT covenant treaties of conquest" (of which we have few instances, e.g., in Josh 9, since God commanded Israel to exterminate those they conquered and explicitly forbade Israel to make treaties with them). Edgar may have intended to question parallels between Egyptian suzerain-vassal treaties and the OT Suzerain-vassal covenants (e.g., the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic). Since Edgar mentions Weeks' work on the topic, I assume that this is his concern, and it is an appropriate topic to raise.

Weeks notes the paucity of documentary evidence for Egyptian suzerain-vassal treaties, and provides some possible explanations for it.[38] I suspect that the reason for such apparent lack is akin to the reason we find no pharaonic legal corpus (e.g., no "Codex Thutmoses III" comparable to the "Codex Hammurapi"): since Pharaoh was considered to be a god, his word was law.[39] This would apply to foreign vassals, as well as to Egyptians. Indeed, what I wrote in *Ancient Near Eastern Themes* would be consistent with this understanding: Pharaoh's job was to extend the borders of Egypt and to make the conquered people both people and *servants* of Amon Ra and the gods of Egypt.[40] Whether or not the future presents us with newly uncovered Egyptian suzerain-vassal *treaties*, a *de facto* suzerain-vassal *relationship* obtained between any pharaoh and any king or kingdom that he conquered.[41] As I have written above, it is the relationship that is essential, and that is what we find in the Egyptian conquest of foreign peoples, who are then made part of the land of Egypt (in theory at least) and people of Amon-Ra, pay tribute to Pharaoh, and even become servants in the temples of Egypt's gods.[42] They are effectively vassals, subject to Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt.[43] It follows that the parallelism that I propose between Pharaoh, the supposed incarnate god, and Christ, the true incarnate God, contains an element of effective covenantal relationship in each case.

Edgar raises two other matters that I would like to address. One is the broad socio-historical question of "the influences and affinities between these different cultures." With regard to this question, I affirm what Edgar says: "one book cannot accomplish too many purposes." My purpose is to demonstrate by quoting relevant data that the elements of a shared theological structure of thought can be found

[38] Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, 111; cf. 99–112 for the Egyptian treaty question more broadly.

[39] Weeks makes essentially the same point, 111. The same consideration—the supremacy of a pharaoh above merely human considerations—may be the cause why circumlocutions such as "brotherhood" and "friendship," which as Weeks notes are standard in references to treaty relationships, occur in the Amarna correspondence, whereas the normal terms for treaty or oath (Akk. *riksu, mamītu*) do not. Cf. Weeks, 100–101.

[40] Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 68–69.

[41] Weeks points out that the administrative details of such a relationship would be carried out by subordinate Egyptian officials (103–11).

[42] All of which I discuss in "Covenant and Conquest," ch. 3 in *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*.

[43] I note briefly here the same concept of territorial addition and its legal/treaty implications in Assyrian royal tradition, where the conquering emperor (in ancient near eastern parlance, the "great king") added "land to his land and people to his people" with each conquest—and such additions were legally sealed by causing the conquered to "swear the oath of the great gods," i.e., enter into treaty with the Assyrian suzerain. For the continuity of such phrases in Assyrian royal tradition, cf. Riekele Borger, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königsinschriften, erster Theil* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), and Wolfgang Schramm, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königsinschriften, zweiter Theil* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

throughout the ancient Near East. I suggest that such a structure might also be found beyond the ancient Near East, although probably in increasingly attenuated forms, and in modern western cultures, not at all. I take this approach with the understanding that the Bible got it right: that the demonstrated structure of thought does indeed represent the way that God had operated with his people through history as part of his program of salvation in which the making of successive covenants played a key role. This understanding enables us to recognize parallel structural elements in ancient near eastern data (as Edgar says, "A comparative method thus emerges by which the unknown is enlightened by the known"). It is not part of my purpose, then, to produce a comparative study of ancient near eastern cultures or to suggest how one culture might have influenced another.[44] As we have seen, if Pharaoh, Krishna, and Christ can all be part of a parallel structure of thought, then that structure of thought is more likely to be spiritual in its origin than cross-cultural.

The second question has to do with "the larger issue of God's purposes in judging the very sinful cultures of the ANE, especially when Israel sinfully accommodates them." Here again, although I affirm such a point and will readily discuss it in the forthcoming biblical theology, I do not see it as germane to the purpose of my book. Similar matters (i.e., those worthy of discussion but not germane to my purpose) might be the transcendence of God (as opposed to the immanence of the deities of the ancient Near East), the presence of eschatology in the OT and NT, or even, to pick a manifestly NT datum, the triune nature of the true God. My purpose is not to review the qualities of God or of his activity that set him apart from the deities of the ancient Near East, but rather, to explore and demonstrate a shared structure of thought.

As I review these last two questions raised by Edgar, I also affirm them as, to use his words, "an encouragement to take the next step and commend the uniqueness of revelation, stemming from the unique and self-authenticating God of the universe." To do so will be a fundamental purpose of the future biblical theology.

3. Conclusion

I revert here to Smith's article on the common thought of the ancient Near East. That thought, as he understood it, was as follows: a contractual relationship existed between a people and their gods, and that relationship included obligations of worship and sacrifice (i.e., cultic law) as well as prescribed and proscribed behavior in the land (i.e., social law):

> But as father and king, the god of worship is just as well as merciful, an object—not to say an objectification—of fear as well as love. His justice has accordingly expressed itself in the law, both the law of his cult and the law of the land, which he has given or caused to be given . . . it should be noticed that everywhere the civil law, like the cult law, is the god's law, and an offender against either is an offender against the god.[45]

I have argued elsewhere for the intimate connection between family and covenant, an argument Gruenler made before me, and one that Cross and Hafemann have also, each in his own way, affirmed.[46]

[44] As noted above in n11.

[45] Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," 142–44.

[46] Cf. Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 12–13, 19–20; F. M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon, History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998). 17; Scott Hafemann, "The Covenant Relationship," in *Central*

I have argued that such a connection exists as part of the *imago Dei* because God is from the beginning in covenant with his human family, who are made in his image.[47] It is no surprise that such creational ideas later appeared in the fallen cultures of the ancient Near East.

Although Smith's study of ancient near eastern theology builds upon presuppositions that I do not share regarding the nature of Scripture, he succeeds in outlining some of the basic elements (e.g., a god in contractual relationship with a people, the divine donation of law, and divine blessing or punishment according to a people's obedience or disobedience) of a larger paradigm that obtained not only in the Bible but also in the ancient Near East. Producing and demonstrating that paradigm is the goal of my book. As I indicated in my first chapter, and indeed in the book's title, my goal is to demonstrate that larger paradigm within the ancient near eastern and biblical domains. That self-limitation is purposeful.[48] Others may wish to pursue the occurrence of such a structure globally. I myself may make such a pursuit ancillary to a future biblical theology.

One cannot address all topics in one book, and there may be some topics that I should have pursued more completely in *Ancient Near Eastern Themes* (although I think there are some concepts I could not have pursued more completely at the time of the book's composition). I am grateful for the opportunity provided by *Themelios* and by the reviews of Dempster and Edgar to elaborate more fully on some concepts and to answer the valuable questions they raise. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to discuss further the issue of the spiritual causation of some theological parallels and what such causation implies for the significance of cultural influences (and of diachronicity and synchronicity). When I began the collection of essays for ETS conferences that eventually led to the book, I had no idea that the spiritual dimension would loom so large. But the longer I live the more convinced I am, not only of the spiritual nature of our universe, but also of the pervasive quality of spiritual influences globally, culturally, and even individually. Scholarship—including scholarship in institutions that discredit such spiritual realities—is not immune to spiritual influence.[49] I hope that biblically considering such matters will become more acceptable as part of the scholar's kit in days to come.

Themes in Biblical Theology (ed. Scott Hafemann and Paul House; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 26–27.

[47] Niehaus, "Covenant," 225–29.

[48] In this, too, I agree with Smith's earlier approach, and I also suspect he may be correct with regard to more global manifestations of the same ideas: "Such was the common theology of the ancient Near East—and not only of the ancient Near East, but of most periods and countries where polytheism has been the religion of civilized peoples. In describing it I have discussed only its appearance in the ancient Near East, because that alone is usually referred to in the study of the OT" (Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," 146).

[49] One might reflect here ironically on the perspective of Bultmann, illustrated by his above comment.