Hidden Riches

A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East

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Time Lines of Ancient Periods

Egyptian Periods

Early Dynastic	3000–2686
Old Kingdom	2686–2160
First Intermediate Period	2160–2055
Middle Kingdom	2055–1650
Second Intermediate Period	1650–1550
New Kingdom	1550–1069
Third Intermediate Period	1069–715
Late Period	715–332

Mesopotamian Periods

Akkad Dynasty	2334–2154
Third Dynasty of Ur	2112–2004
First Dynasty of Babylon	1894–1595
Kassite Dynasty of Babylon	1374-1155
Neo-Assyrian Empire	1114–612
Neo-Babylonian Empire	626–539
Persian Empire	559–330

Hittite Periods

Old Kingdom	1650–1500
Middle Kingdom	1500–1420
Empire	1420–1200

Archaeological Periods of the Levant

Early Bronze I	3300–3050
Early Bronze II–III	3050–2300
Early Bronze IV/Middle Bronze I	2300–2000
Middle Bronze IIA	2000–1800/1750
Middle Bronze IIB–C	1800/1750–1550
Late Bronze I	1550–1400
Late Bronze IIA–B	1400–1200

Iron IA	1200–1150
Iron IB	1150–1000
Iron IIA	1000–925
Iron IIB	925–720
Iron IIC	720–586
Iron III	586–536
Persian Period	536–330

Periods and Dates in Israelite and Judean History

United Monarchy	ca. 1000–922
Division of Israel from Judah	922
Divided Monarchy	922–722
Fall of Samaria	721
Judean Monarchy	721–586
Fall of Jerusalem	586
Babylonian Exile	586–536
Persian Rule of Yehud	536–330
Completion of Second Jerusalem Temple	515
Death of Alexander the Great	323

PART I

Prolegomena

1

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible (commonly called the Old Testament) is a compendium of ancient Near Eastern texts. It's a mundane observation, but its vast consequences are not always recognized or honored.

The goal of reading the Bible in its context is simply to gain cultural literacy, a basic prerequisite for any interpreter who aspires to any authority. The prominent biblical scholar H. H. Rowley criticized interpreters who could not read Hebrew: "One who made it his life's work to interpret French literature, but who could only read it in an English translation, would not be taken seriously; yet it is remarkable how many ministers of religion week by week expound a literature that they are unable to read save in translation!"[1]

Much the same could be said of one who made it his life's work to interpret *Les Miserables*, but had never read any other French literature. That person might consider *Les Miserables* the greatest French novel, but how could he argue for that, without at least reading other French novels carefully? How would one appreciate Victor Hugo's interpretation of his times while knowing nothing about them apart from the novel itself? Indeed, without studying the history of the period, how would one grasp that *Les Miserables* is an interpretation at all, rather than a window through which one can view reality? In the same way, to appreciate the worldviews, messages, and artistic qualities of the Bible, one also has to understand its historical and literary context.

Nevertheless, nearly every reader today comes to the Bible without the cultural literacy to make sense of it as its first hearers could. That competence is scarcely taught today, as both ancient history and languages are marginalized in Western education.

There is no shame in being shaped by the cultural assumptions and reading strategies of our communities. That is inevitable for everyone. But at worst, we lay those assumptions and strategies over the biblical text so that they obscure it. We may well want to keep the perspectives that we had before; there is much of value in them, but if we do not lay them aside and enter into the thought-world (the "discursive universe") of ancient texts, we can never even see them for what they are. As I tell my students: There is a whole world back there in history. Real people, just like us, told these stories, prayed these prayers, and wrote these histories. Ancient Near Eastern studies is one of our poor, faltering attempts to encounter those people and do justice to their writings.

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[1] H. H. Rowley, *Expository Times* 74 (1963): 383.

What does it mean to give proper attention to the ancient Near Eastern nature of the Hebrew Scriptures? Minimally, it means reading other ancient Near Eastern texts. The Scriptures are exceedingly "respiratory": they breathe in the culture of their times, and breathe it back out in a different form. To the reader who learns to breathe the same air—the one who becomes familiar with the context—it is increasingly hard to believe that he or she once read the Bible without it. Reading the Hebrew Scriptures in context is intoxicating, like breathing pure oxygen: everything is clearer and sharper, and the energy is immeasurably higher.

WHY COMPARE?

Some readers, accustomed to assertions of the Bible's uniqueness, may ask why one should compare it at all. Is the Bible unique? And if so, what would that mean for comparative study?

The Bible itself can be understood to argue both for and against its own literary originality. Ecclesiastes 1:9–10 says that "there is nothing new under the sun," while Isaiah 43:19 says that God does new things, and various psalms invite the hearer to "sing a new song." The best solutions combine these two viewpoints, as when Julia Kristeva describes texts as fabrics woven out of citations of other texts:[2] in this metaphor, the author begins with materials already at hand but has the potential to create something not previously known to the reader.

Comparison of multiple texts is not an alternative to immersion in a single text; it can never replace careful reading of individual texts, because careful reading is a precondition of comparison. But when one has read multiple texts, then comparison is inevitable.[3] We compare cultural products all the time in an offhand way: *I enjoy U2's earlier albums more than the later stuff; she's so into indie movies, and she makes fun of Hollywood blockbusters*, and so on. Because of this inevitability, the only alternatives to thoughtful comparison are thoughtless comparison and ignorance of the things that are potentially comparable.

One simple answer to the question, *why compare?* is that comparison brings things into focus. Humans form their self-identities by comparison every day: Am I tall? Am I well spoken? Am I talented at math? Categories such as "tall," "well spoken," and "talented" turn out to be relative, and people discern their identities and purposes in life on the basis

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), 144.

[3] On the psychological underpinnings of comparison, see Meir Malul, *The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies* (AOAT 227; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990), 1–2.

of such comparisons. In a first-grade classroom, I'm tall. In an NBA locker room, I would be short. Context matters.

Literary and theological features come into focus through comparison as well. An example may be found in the comparison of biblical and ancient Near Eastern flood stories (see chap. 4): the biblical flood story in Genesis 6–9 concludes with a heavy emphasis on covenant, a theme not found in the otherwise similar Mesopotamian stories. This tells us something distinctive about the religious milieu of each text. If one wants to know what is distinctive about the Bible, one needs something to compare it to. Needless to say, it is not only the distinctive that is valuable. For example, the Bible's calls to protect the widow and the orphan turn out to have numerous precise cognates in ancient Near Eastern literature (see, for example, chaps. 7 and 11), but they are no less laudable because they are not unique.

Even complex concepts like justice, goodness, and beauty turn out to be relative, and our comprehension and appreciation of them are dependent on comparison. There is the famous comment by Winston Churchill: "Many forms of government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried."[4] In other words, democracy looks bad until you compare it to something else. Readers' experience of comparison between the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts will vary, but many will gain a greater appreciation for the biblical texts that they have always known, just as Churchill appreciated his own democracy more when he compared it with other forms of governments throughout history.

THE AIMS OF THIS VOLUME

The reader who perceives the basic value of the comparative project next faces the overwhelming flood of information that is potentially relevant. Ancient Near Eastern texts are usually encountered by introductory students in one of two ways: in snippet form in textbooks introducing the biblical texts (a few of Hammurabi's laws here, a fragment of the Assyrian version of Sennacherib's siege there) or in a compendium of ancient Near Eastern texts. It is the latter sort of book that this volume aspires to improve on.

This volume is both less and more than some comparable books. It gives up something in the scope of texts sampled: even the slimmest student collections of ancient Near Eastern texts comprise samples of about one hundred texts. But they also contain almost no discussion of what these texts are, where they came from, and so forth. In teaching ancient texts, I have found that giving students substantial context for the texts in advance made class discussion vastly richer and better. I went looking for a book that assembled the background data relevant to comparison of specific biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts—much of which is still found in widely scattered sources that are expensive and difficult to find—and at a level that an undergraduate or master's student could understand

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[4] Speech in the House of Commons, November 11, 1947, *The Official Report*, House of Commons, 5th ser., vol. 444, cols. 206–7.

and digest. Failing to find it, I wrote introductions myself. Eventually, I decided to expand and publish my materials.

The overarching goal of this book is simply to make intelligent comparison between biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts possible. To that end, its first goal is to anticipate questions that will occur to an inquisitive reader:

> Where did these texts come from?
> When were they written, and by whom?
> What were they written on?

Second, this book tries to give a wider view of the texts; sometimes this means discussion of the genre or the literary corpus into which a text fits. When a text must be excerpted, it means giving the reader a sense of the larger composition from which the excerpt was drawn.

Third, this book offers starting points for analysis and comparison. For readers without a strong background in literary study, who might be distracted by superficial difficulties in the texts, this is intended to get them started and take them part of the way, so that they can begin to see the payoffs of the method.

Fourth and finally, the book tries to open up avenues for motivated readers to explore further. The reflection questions typically point beyond the material that is presented; they are not aimed primarily at assessing reading comprehension but at sparking discussion and debate. This book doesn't just leave room for disagreement, it expects it. There are many contested issues and judgment calls in comparative studies, and wherever possible I have indicated that there is room for debate.

For all that this book sets out to do, it is certainly only a beginning. It needs a skilled teacher and thoughtful investment on the part of students. The things that are most desirable in a reader are these:

1. *Cultural and historical knowledge.* This book will complement, but not replace, a course or other textbook that gives students a broader sense of the history of the ancient Near East and the interactions between ancient Israel and its neighbors. For example, the book may allude to the impact of Mesopotamian culture on Judeans during the Babylonian exile, but it does not discuss the events of the period in detail.
2. *Skill in literary interpretation.* Reading well, like any skill, requires practice and training. Strong readers will be better prepared for comparative study of the Bible than those who are less attentive to nuance.
3. *Familiarity with ancient languages.* Of course many readers of this book will not know Hebrew, Aramaic, or the other languages of the Ancient Near East, but for higher-level work, such knowledge is greatly valuable. The method depends more upon close analysis of primary texts in their original languages than can be conveyed in an introductory book, though some linguistic features are briefly noted.

INTRODUCTORY CRITICAL ISSUES

Another piece of the background for the comparative method is the scholarly study of the Bible itself. The results of that study are presupposed throughout this book.

First of all, we are dependent on the study of the development of Hebrew language. Except for a few small pieces in Aramaic, the religious texts of ancient Israel and Judah were written entirely in Hebrew. Since there is no evidence that Hebrew texts were written until the tenth century BCE, no biblical text in this volume has a proposed date before then. It is possible that some biblical texts (primarily archaic poems such as Exod. 15, which are not part of this book) could have been transmitted orally or otherwise existed in a form of the language that preceded the Hebrew that we now read, but that theory is not demonstrable.

Second, this book is conversant with dominant critical theories of biblical composition and redaction, although prior knowledge of these is not presupposed. Chapters 4 and 17 each bring comparative data to bear on questions of composition and redaction in specific instances, in an attempt to suggest how comparison with demonstrable processes of ancient writing, copying, and editing might affect common scholarly theories. Throughout the book, texts are assigned dates conventional to critical treatments, but except for chapter 4 the emphasis is not on internal divisions. For our purposes, what is important is to recognize that the Hebrew Bible was formed of sometimes disparate parts through a lengthy process of scribal transmission and compilation; it is less important for the introductory student to master all the details of that process.[5]

Finally, the discussion sections address the connections between the biblical authors and the ancient Near Eastern cultures that produced the extrabiblical texts. There are numerous sorts of relationships among texts:

> In some cases (such as the comparison of Lamentations with Sumerian city laments in chap. 25) the two texts are separated by thousands of years and many miles, so that one can rule out direct contact and reckon instead with a lengthy preservation of literary and theological traditions.
>
> In other cases (such as the comparison of Moabite and biblical historiography in chap. 10) one is dealing with concurrent cultural developments in similar societies.
>
> In still other cases (as in Deuteronomy's summons to faithfulness to Yhwh alone in chap. 9) one is probably dealing with the biblical author's reaction against similar and competing claims by an imperial power.
>
> As a final example, one may in rare cases see biblical authors more or less borrowing from texts and adapting them to their own purposes. (The similarities between Prov. 22:17–24:22 and an Egyptian wisdom text in chap. 20 may be one such example.)

There is an effort throughout the book to consider texts within the real life of the ancient Near Eastern world, taking seriously questions such as, How did scribes actually work? How did cultural contacts between nations happen? How would cultural influence have taken place between peoples who spoke and wrote different languages? The intention is to respect the complex web of interconnections between ancient Israel and Judah and the other cultures that surrounded and preceded them.

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5. As Otto Eissfeldt urged, "The important point is not this or that individual dissection of the material, but the total outlook" (*The Old Testament: An Introduction* [trans. Peter Ackroyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1956], 241).

THE DESIGN OF THE CHAPTERS

Since the primary goal is to introduce the student of the Hebrew Bible to the value of the comparative method, diverse case studies have been selected from all parts of the Bible, reflecting the fact that there is no book or passage to which ancient Near Eastern data is irrelevant.

In many cases, merely selecting texts for comparison was daunting. Sometimes, as with prayer texts (chap. 22), the assortment of possibilities was very large (in both the biblical and ANE spheres), and so a selection of short, representative texts had to be chosen. In some cases where hard choices had to be made, I have cited snippets of other texts in the discussions to fill out the picture.

Texts are presented in as complete a form as possible, because it is important to be aware of "the broader contexts of the comparable items so that one avoids excerption that would skew the comparison."[6] The selection of too-narrow excerpts has, in my view, marred certain previous sourcebooks of ancient Near Eastern texts. At times it has been impossible to avoid using excerpts (for example, one cannot present the whole Epic of Gilgamesh in comparing flood narratives, and it would not add a great deal to do so), but I have identified those places and tried to give a sense of what is missing.

Date, Provenance, and Physical Form

No text exists in a disembodied, ahistorical form. Every text comes from somewhere; every text is written in a certain language at a certain time, by certain people, to a certain audience. Time, place, and language all shed light on how a text functions, and students new to the study of the ancient Near East need guidance to see the significance of it all. Language determines who can read it; time and place shed light on the culture and the people that produced it.

In light of the clear significance of a text's historical and cultural backgrounds, its literary context, and its physical form for interpretation, it is surprising how difficult it can be to glean these basic facts from many anthologies of ancient Near Eastern texts.[7] I was generally compelled to assemble them from first editions of the texts in question.

Often there is a significant gap between the historical situation in which a text is thought to have been produced and the period from which copies actually survive. This is the case with nearly every biblical text in this volume, as well as many of the extrabiblical texts, and the effects on interpretation are discussed on a case-by-case basis.

Each extrabiblical text's physical form is specified, and dimensions are supplied where possible. The physical form of a text sheds light on how it was intended to function. A text written on a monument (chap. 10), public wall (chap. 19), or statue (chaps. 11, 27) has at least the potential to function very differently from a text on a tablet or scroll stored in an archive. For example, if a text was inscribed on a large public monument, then even those who could not read it (and most people were illiterate through most of ANE history) may have had some idea of what it said on the basis of public readings or word of mouth.

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[6] Brent A. Strawn, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. J. M. LeMon and K. H. Richards; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 131.

[7] See similar remarks by Barbara N. Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993), 181.

In some cases, images of the artifacts are supplied to give the reader an idea of how a text appeared. Many ancient Near Eastern texts were accompanied by images, although iconography is still too little studied in this volume.

Primary Texts

Primary texts are placed before discussion and explanation in this volume. This is intended to encourage readers to encounter them first without too many preconceived notions. Although I hope the discussions and the context they supply will be valuable, there is no substitute for careful reading of primary texts. "Lay readers" may well come up with interesting questions based on their reading that they might have overlooked if they had begun thinking they knew what to expect. Of course, the choice of what to read first lies with the reader. Students have sometimes commented that they wanted to have the discussions to understand what was going on and thought they should have been placed first. Ideally, students would read the primary text twice: once with fresh eyes, and again after being introduced to some of the critical issues.

Many students will be surprised to encounter ancient Near Eastern texts that are not complete—that are only partly preserved—but this is the normal state of affairs. (Such gaps in the text are rare in the Bible, but they do occur, as in 1 Sam. 13:1, where there are blanks in the Hebrew text, as reflected in the NRSV translation: "Saul was . . . years old when he began to reign; and he reigned . . . and two years over Israel.") Many of the ancient Near Eastern texts are translated from clay tablets, which can degrade and break over time; or from scrolls, which are even more subject to decay and damage. I have made every effort to select texts that are coherent, but where there are breaks, these are marked by ellipses within square brackets: [. . .].

In many cases, it is possible to restore the text that should have appeared in a break, because there are other copies of a text or parallel passages within a text. Such restorations are indicated within square brackets. Where words are supplied for the sake of clarity that are not in the original text, these are indicated in parentheses.

Another help supplied in this volume is footnotes on ancient Near Eastern phenomena that often go unexplained in other compendia. These notes—on the proper names of people, deities, places, and also on obscure technical terms—have been placed on the page where they are needed rather than tucked away in a glossary. The goal always is maximum readability and comprehension.

In the body text of the translations, words transliterated from ancient languages, especially personal names and place names, are not rendered with a strict, academic system. Instead they are rendered approximately, with the goal of allowing students who do not know the languages to pronounce them as easily as possible. Diacritic marks (e.g., š, ḥ) are normally omitted, as are indications of vowel length (e.g., ā, â, ă). However, in certain footnotes intended for instructors and others with advanced knowledge, technical transliterations are supplied, to facilitate locating them in reference works.

Most of the biblical texts are not reproduced in this volume, which is intended to allow readers to choose their own translation. All biblical verse numbers correspond to those of most English translations, which sometimes differ from Hebrew verse numbers. Readers of translations that follow the Hebrew versification, such as the JPS Tanakh and *Jerusalem Bible*, will hopefully be able to surmount this small inconvenience.

Suggestions for Comparison

Particularly with lengthy pairs (or groups) of texts, it has seemed useful to offer specific suggestions for comparison as a guide for the reader. The purpose of these suggestions is usually fleshed out in the discussion section. Even where offered, such suggestions are by no means exhaustive; there are many other points at which one can see common cultural "fabric" in the texts, and occasionally these are indicated in a footnote.

Students have commented that they would find it useful to have the text of the suggested comparisons placed side by side. I can think of only two ways to accomplish that within the book: to reproduce sometimes large passages twice in the chapter (which length constraints would not allow), or to dismember the original texts in order to set the relevant passages side by side in the original presentation, which would do violence to the literary integrity of the texts. One way to address this issue through pedagogy is to assign one or more students per class session to make a handout that sorts the texts in order to make side-by-side comparisons.

Discussions and Reflection Questions

Many of the discussion points offered in this volume have arisen out of my own teaching. They are intended to start conversations based on good information that drive toward significant issues. Furthermore:

- They are *methodologically diverse*, because different comparisons press toward different questions and approaches.
- They are *not exhaustive*, because they are meant to open up teaching and learning opportunities rather than close them off.
- They are *not entirely conclusive*, because there is usually room for debate around key issues.

Ideally, the diversity and openness of the discussion sections will encourage students to think creatively about ancient texts and their interpretation. Interpretation of texts is not a simple process of reading them, placing them in their contexts, and turning a crank. Authors and audiences each bring their own ideas to any act of communication, and so texts continue to produce new and surprising interpretations.

Further Reading

The goal of the brief bibliographies at the end of each chapter is to offer next steps for the student who wants (or needs) to research a topic further and the instructor who wants to explore secondary literature more deeply in preparation.

The reading lists favor sources that are accessible and up-to-date. They are emphatically not intended to cite all of the most important original research in the history of a given topic, which is often in other languages that few students can read or in specialized sources that relatively few libraries hold. The researcher who wants a thorough bibliography or history of scholarship on a topic can usually find those things in the sources cited.

THEOLOGY, IDEOLOGY, AND TERMINOLOGY

I have just noted that this book does not intend to settle most critical issues; that is true of theological issues as well—although it will almost inevitably raise them. The discussions rarely allude to present-day theology or religion, but some of the reflection questions do invite students to think about the theological claims of texts and the comparative task's impact on their own beliefs.

In part, this reticence is a necessary limitation of the book's scope. More importantly, I hope it will allow the book to be useful in a wide array of teaching settings, including pluralistic ones. When it comes to theology, I have taken the view that each professor is the best judge of what is appropriate in his or her own context; this book is intended to help anyone who is interested in the data that inform biblical interpretation.

A field with the rich history and present controversies of biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies will inevitably generate competing terminology. Any writer must choose certain terms, often among imperfect alternatives.

First, when the term "Bible" is used in this book, it generally means the "Hebrew Bible" (not all of which is in Hebrew), a term invented by scholars. In Jewish circles, this may also be called the Tanakh (an abbreviation for the tripartite divisions: Torah [Pentateuch], Nebi'im [Prophets], and Kethuvim [Writings]). In Christian circles, it is known as the Old Testament (or occasionally as the First Testament), which presupposes a New Testament. To me, it is the Old Testament, yet I have attempted to write for all.

The divine name raises a different set of issues. For some Jews, the name of the god of Israel is too holy to be spoken. Thus already in antiquity, they substituted the Hebrew word *adonay*, "lord," for the divine name. The use of the Greek word for "lord," *kyrios*, in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible reflects the same preference, and most modern English translations reflect that translation as well. This book, however, prefers to convey the fact that *the divine name is a name*, not a title. In deference to those who prefer not to pronounce it, however, and because its correct pronunciation is genuinely in doubt, the name is presented without vowels: Yhwh.

Terms for the land of the Bible are often freighted with ideological meaning. In particular, the decision to designate it as "Israel" or "Palestine" often suggests a stance on the present-day political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. "Levant" is frequently used as an alternative. However, it is taken from the French term *soleil levant*, "rising sun," and indicates the land to the east of Europe, Rome, and Greece. Thus it is too broad for some purposes. In general, this book seeks to use the most precise political terminology possible: "proto-Israel(ite)" for the period before the institution of the monarchy, "Israel(ite)," for the period of the united monarchy and for the northern kingdom thereafter, and "Judah/Judean" for the southern kingdom. The whole region may be referred to as "Palestine," including Aram, Ammon, Edom, Moab, and the Philistine and Phoenician coastal states. "Palestine" is somewhat anachronistic when applied to the ancient Near East—it is a Latinized form of "Philistine"—but it is not intended to carry political weight for the present day.

In no case does this book amend quotations from other authors to conform to its style.

GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

This section offers background reading on various essential topics. It would also serve as a list of texts worth having close at hand as one undertakes comparative study of the Hebrew Bible—just as someone learning to cook would want to buy certain staple ingredients that go into many different recipes. Emphasis has been placed on works that are recent, affordable, and in English.

History and Religion of Ancient Israel

Albertz, Rainer. *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period.* Translated by J. Bowden. 2 vols. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Miller, J. Maxwell, and John H. Hayes. *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

Miller, Patrick D. *The Religion of Ancient Israel*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel.* 2nd ed. Biblical Resource Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Maps and Atlases

Curtis, Adrian, ed. *Oxford Bible Atlas*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Rainey, A. F., and R. S. Notley. *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World.* Jerusalem: Carta, 2006.

Roaf, Michael. *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.

Resources for Primary Texts in Translation

General

Hallo, W. W., ed. *The Context of Scripture*. 3 vols. New York: Brill, 1997.

Pritchard, James B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Sparks, Kenton L. *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005.

Volumes in the Writings from the Ancient World (SBLWAW) series by the Society of Biblical Literature (see a list at http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/Books_WAW.aspx).

Mesopotamian

Dalley, Stephanie, ed. *Myths from Mesopotamia.* Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Foster, Benjamin R. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature.* 3rd ed. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005.

George, Andrew. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Reprint, London: Penguin, 2003.

Egyptian

Lichtheim, Miriam. *Ancient Egyptian Literature.* 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973–[80].
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2

History and Methods of Comparative Study

With enough creativity, practically anything can be compared to anything else. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, one lover says to another, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"—and the poem delights and surprises because the comparison was not obvious or common. Language and thought are flexible, so that comparison is finally limited only by the decisions of the interpreter. Nevertheless, everyone plays by some set of rules, even if they go unstated—and they often do. Raising our methods to consciousness warrants the effort it requires because, as with any undertaking, some rules are more helpful than others.

One danger, in any study of method, is that it may become overly prescriptive and detailed. Given the vast variety of ancient Near Eastern literature, including biblical literature, it seems far more useful to describe the history of the conversation, touching on a few general principles along the way.

There has been a long scholarly debate about the proper parameters and methods for the comparative study of the Hebrew Bible. The history of comparativism is a story of heroic efforts by excellent scholars, even if it inevitably reflects the trial and error that any pursuit of knowledge entails. One could say that we are standing on the shoulders of those giants, but that would presume that we have arrived at a higher place, which remains to be seen. If we have, it is mostly because the available data have continued to increase in quantity and accessibility. It is an exciting time in biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies as more pieces of the puzzle emerge every year.

PREMODERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

It is difficult today to imagine the lack of good sources related to the ancient Near East only two hundred years ago. The classical histories were generally the best sources apart from the Bible, and their interpretation was plagued with innumerable problems.[1] Many Greeks and Romans had a fascination with the Orient, but few had firsthand knowledge (let alone access to primary sources), and so they transmitted unreliable accounts. Their purposes were didactic, and they reveled in telling stories about legendary figures such as Ninus and Semiramis (the former a made-up founder of Nineveh, the latter loosely based on the ninth-century Babylonian queen Shammuramat). Some works that were based on actual travels, such as the *Periegesis* and *Genealogiai* of Hecataeus of Miletus, have been lost.

Most of ancient Near Eastern history was simply overlooked in classical sources, and the descriptions of periods and people that were written were rife with errors and distortions. A few examples will suffice: In his *Persica*, Hellanicus of Lesbos (5th c. BCE) collapsed Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal into a single king, whom he called Sardanapalus. Herodotus (5th c. BCE) not only garbled events—placing the building of the pyramids after the New Kingdom, for example—he also viewed the Near East as a rival because of the wars between the Greeks and Persians, and so was prone to portray it negatively. Ctesias (5th c. BCE), who was a physician at the Persian court, appears to have transmitted in his *Persica* a version of ancient Near Eastern history so colored by pro-Persian biases as to be largely unrecognizable. Xenophon (4th c. BCE) traveled right past the ruins of Assyrian Nimrud and Nineveh without recognizing them, because he thought he was in the territory of ancient Media.[2] Berossus and Manetho (both 3rd c. BCE) were native to the regions whose history they were writing about—Mesopotamia and Egypt, respectively—and so in some ways surpassed other ancients in accuracy; but they also periodized history to such a degree that they distorted many details. Josephus (1st c. CE) had an apologetic bent in asserting the primacy of Judaism; his *Antiquities of the Jews* largely follows the contours of the biblical narratives, but he was prone to insert curious details, for example, to emphasize the tyranny of the Mesopotamians. Josephus, quoting Berossus, mislocated the hanging gardens in Babylon (rather than Nineveh, where they actually were), an error that was canonized as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.[3] Lucian (2nd c. CE), in his description of Levantine religion in *On the Syrian Goddess*, seems to have been so intent on entertaining that he made up details; he describes, for example, an 1,800-foot-tall statue of a phallus standing in the forecourt of a temple.

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[1] See further Lázsló Kákosy, “Egypt in Ancient Greek and Roman Thought,” and Amelie Kuhrt, “Mesopotamia in Ancient Greek and Roman Thought,” in *CANE* 1:3–14, 55–65, respectively.

[2] Mark W. Chavalas, “Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century and a Half of Tension,” in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* (ed. M. W. Chavalas and K. L. Younger Jr.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 23.

[3] See Stephanie Dalley, *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon: An Elusive World Wonder Traced* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Under these conditions, it is no pious exaggeration to say that the Bible was in many cases the best historical source available for the ancient Near East. Of course, the Bible has its own complexities and ideologies that can mislead modern historians; the primary goal of its authors was not to portray ancient Near Eastern history and culture accurately. But the biblical authors often accurately distinguished Assyria from Babylon, or Egypt from Kush; and they recorded events that were otherwise unknown until the decipherment of other ancient Near Eastern languages.

DISCOVERY AND DECIPHERMENT OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS

Eventually it became possible to encounter ancient Near Eastern cultures through their own words. The first ancient Near Eastern language to be deciphered was Egyptian. Hieroglyphic inscriptions had been reported in the West since classical antiquity, and they were already being studied in Europe in the sixteenth century, but without much success. In the 1650s, however, the polymath German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher recognized that hieroglyphic Egyptian was a precursor to Coptic, a later form of Egyptian written with Greek letters and additional signs. Just a few years later, Jean-Jacques Barthélemy suggested that the cartouches in hieroglyphic inscriptions encapsulated proper names.

The beginnings of ancient Eastern studies are tied up with the history of European colonialism in the Middle East; the earliest "Orientalists" were in the service of the Western powers exploring the East. For example, the real breakthrough in the decipherment of hieroglyphic writing came in 1799, when French soldiers serving in Napoleon's campaign to Egypt found the Rosetta Stone. Named for the nearby Egyptian port city of Rosetta (called Rashid in Arabic), the stone bore a trilingual Ptolemaic-period inscription written in hieroglyphs, demotic, and Greek. It was taken to Cairo, where it was kept by the French for eighteen months until they surrendered to the British, who took the Rosetta stone as a spoil of war. (It is on display in the British Museum to this day.)

By the time the British captured the Rosetta Stone, it had already been copied and disseminated to some extent. Still, it took decades for its hieroglyphs to be deciphered. Since Greek was already understood, translators began by recognizing that the names within the cartouches could be matched up with the names in the Greek text, and then worked backward to decipher the hieroglyphs. The greatest advances were made by Jean-François Champollion, an assistant professor of history at Grenoble and a linguistic savant, who systematized the understanding that hieroglyphs could represent not only whole words but also letters and syllables. (Some groundwork had been laid for him by other scholars who gained insight from other bilingual Egyptian inscriptions, and by comparison with the Chinese writing system.) In 1824, Champollion published his study of the language and writing system, *Précis du système hiéroglyphique*. Although many details have been refined (and some are still debated), this gave the modern study of Egyptian a solid foundation.

Even before most other ancient Near Eastern languages were deciphered and the texts understood, the artifacts that were being recovered from the East in the early years of the nineteenth century began to make a strong impression on European intellectuals. Painters portrayed Napoleon on horseback at the Giza pyramids, and great poets tried their hand at capturing antiquity. One famous example is Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" (1815), with its famous opening lines describing the attack on Jerusalem by the Assyrian emperor in 701 BCE:

> The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
> And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
> And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
> When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Of course, the poem is based entirely on the account of the siege from the Bible (see chap. 13), and Byron betrays his ignorance of Mesopotamian religion by referring to the Assyrians as Baal worshipers in the closing lines. But we see here already the way that the East was inspiring the imagination of the West.

Still more revealing about Europeans' view of the Near East was Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," published in 1818:

> I met a traveller from an antique land
> Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
> Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Here, even the king's name is refracted through Western eyes: "Ozymandias" is a hellenized version of Usermaatre-setepenre, a throne name of Ramesses II as given by Diodorus Siculus.[4] The poem is an imagined scene of archaeological discovery, and its art lies in the way it reimagines the king's boast as a failure, an embodiment of the saying "Pride goes before the fall" (cf. Prov. 16:18). Ozymandias thought his mighty works would cause despair in those who seek to surpass them, but now that they are fallen, they instead invite despairing reflection on the transience of human achievement. At the same time, the contemporary reader might have been expected to derive some satisfaction from Ozymandius's failure. The Bible repeatedly says that the ancient empires that had oppressed and conquered God's people—including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Greece—would themselves stand under divine judgment, and so its readers were prone to view the ruins of those once-powerful civilizations as a tangible vindication. (Of course, at a deeper level, Shelley's poem could be read as a warning to the powers of his own times that they too would fall into dust.)

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[4] Diodorus Siculus reported an inscription on a statue base as reading: "I am Ozymandias, king of kings. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works" (*Bib. Hist.* 1.47.4).

Many people of faith were quick to embrace the barely known ancient Near East. William W. Hallo recounts stories of a "little old seventeenth-century lady who used to say to her pastor that she 'had found great support in that blessed word 'Mesopotamia,'" and of the eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield, who "could reduce grown men to tears by the mere pronunciation of the word 'Mesopotamia.'" Hallo goes on to note that "the word lost some of its magic . . . with the successful decipherment of the cuneiform scripts. . . . Now fantastic and baseless speculations about the Mesopotamian past gradually gave way to more sober assessments."[5]

The discovery of ancient Near Eastern texts and the decipherment of their languages indeed changed the conversation considerably and shed great light. In the nineteenth century, a wide array of cuneiform languages came to light. Cuneiform script is named for the wedge shapes that form its characters (*cuneī* is Latin for "wedges"). Although its forms varied depending on the time and place, the same basic writing system was used for many ancient Near Eastern languages (including Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Persian) over more than 2,000 years. In the 1760s, Carsten Niebuhr traveled in the East and brought back to Europe accurate squeezes[6] of Persian inscriptions from Persepolis, which he published in the 1770s. Success was not immediate, but by the 1840s, Old Persian had also been deciphered. Some progress was also made on languages such as Elamite and Urartian.

The decipherment of Akkadian was perhaps the most important linguistic breakthrough. Invented in Mesopotamia, it became the common language of trade and diplomacy throughout much of the Near East, especially during the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BCE). The earliest Western discovery of Akkadian inscriptions was by Europeans traveling in the region during the seventeenth century, but decipherment did not began in earnest until the 1840s, when Assyrian monuments and inscriptions were brought back to England by A. H. Layard, both physically and in pictures.

Layard began working in 1845 at a site he thought was Nineveh; instead, he had uncovered Kalhu, Ashurnasirpal II's capital city. The French consul in Mosul, Paul-Émile Botta, had actually begun working in 1842 at the site that turned out to be Nineveh. After failing to meet with immediate success there, he eventually excavated significant artifacts from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, but the French were less successful at both publicizing and transporting their finds. Steven W. Holloway has described the British and European public as "mad to see the monuments" from ancient Mesopotamia when the first major exhibition was mounted at the British Museum in 1847. "For a year," he writes, "the public had pored over sketches from . . . Layard's Mesopotamian excavations in the *Illustrated London News*."[7]

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[5] W. W. Hallo, "Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach," 1.

[6] A squeeze is an impression of an inscribed surface, usually made with wet paper.

[7] Steven W. Holloway, "Mad to See the Monuments," *Bible Review* 17 (December 2001): 39; John Malcolm Russell, *From Nineveh to New York: The Strange Story of the Assyrian Reliefs in the*

In the atmosphere of public fervor, the most important work on the decipherment of Akkadian was done between 1848 and 1853. It has become increasingly clear in recent decades that the most important early decipherer was Edward Hincks, an Irish clergyman. A recent study of the correspondence and publications of the period suggests that it was he who first realized that Akkadian was basically written in a syllabic (nonalphabetic) system, determined that Akkadian incorporated another non-Semitic language (Sumerian), and made the greatest strides in identifying what specific signs signified.

In the past, Henry C. Rawlinson was often credited with the decipherment of Akkadian, and the reasons are fairly easy to see: he was a prominent public figure throughout his life, serving in the military and in Parliament; he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society; and his brother, George, was an Oxford professor who wrote an account of Henry's life that completely omitted Hincks's role in the decipherment. However, a survey of Rawlinson's correspondence shows he was well behind Hincks and even explicitly and wrongly disagreed with him on a number of points. Rawlinson did eventually produce a number of significant editions of cuneiform texts in Persian, Akkadian, and so forth, and these established his fame. But it is probably correct to call this the story of "the genius Hincks and the hard-working Rawlinson."[8]

The Akkadian language and its writing system seemed so complex and difficult that the decipherers' proposed solutions sparked incredulity. Instead of letters, cuneiform signs represent syllables, and because of the variety of possible syllables there are hundreds of these phonetic signs. Furthermore, a single sign usually has multiple values depending on its context. Finally, the signs can also represent whole words in another language (Sumerian), interspersed with syllabic signs. As W. H. Fox Talbot wrote,

> Many persons have hitherto refused to believe in the truth of the system by which Dr. Hincks and Sir H. Rawlinson have interpreted the Assyrian writings, because it contains many things entirely contrary to their preconceived opinions. For example, each cuneiform group represents a syllable, but not always the same syllable; sometimes one and sometimes another. To which it is replied that such a license would open the door to all manner of uncertainty; that the ancient Assyrians themselves, the natives of the country, could never have read such a kind of writing, and that, therefore, the system cannot be true, and the interpretations based upon it must be fallacious.[9]

Therefore, a major way station toward the decipherment of Akkadian was a famous contest held by the British Royal Asiatic Society in 1857. Talbot, Rawlinson, Hincks, and Julius Oppert were given copies of an unpublished cuneiform inscription of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I, and they sent their independent translations to the Royal Asiatic Society to be compared. In the end, they were deemed close enough to confirm that the language was understood.

Metropolitan Museum and the Hidden Masterpiece at Canford School (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

[8] Kevin J. Cathcart, "The Earliest Contributions to the Decipherment of Sumerian and Akkadian," *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal* (2011): 9. Accessed at http://www.cdli.ucla.edu/pubs/cdlj/2011/cdlj2011_001.html.

[9] W. H. Fox Talbot, "Comparative Translations," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (1861): 150.

The decipherment of the Hittite language was similarly controversial. As the primary language of one of the great powers of the Late Bronze Age, in which many significant treaties and prayers were written, Hittite was a significant missing piece in understanding the wider ancient Near East. It was first encountered in just two tablets in the large archive of the Amarna letters in Egypt. J. A. Knudtzon identified it in 1902 as an Indo-European language, but the claim was heavily criticized. Just over a decade later, on the basis of a much larger archive found at Boğazköy in present-day Turkey, Bedřich Hrozný was able to decipher Hittite cuneiform, and he confirmed Knudtzon's hypothesis.

There was one final major chapter in the unveiling of ancient Near Eastern cultures: the discovery of Ugarit, which began in 1928 when a Syrian farmer struck a stone with his plow near the Mediterranean coast. He had run into an ancient tomb. Eventually, the French authorities who then governed that part of Syria sent archaeologists and antiquities experts to explore. On the site, called Minet el-Beida ("White Harbor"), and the nearby ruin mound at Ras Shamra ("Fennel Head," named after the plants that grew on it), they discovered the capital of a wealthy city-state from the Late Bronze Age.

Less than a week after the archaeologists began working on the tell,[10] they made the first of the finds that secured the site's fame: cuneiform tablets—and not of a syllabic variety like Akkadian, but rather a previously unknown alphabetic type of cuneiform. An entirely new language had come to light, part of the same West Semitic family as Hebrew and Aramaic, but used hundreds of years earlier. The excavations eventually revealed that Ugarit had been destroyed at the beginning of the twelfth century BCE, and that the tablets mostly dated from the century leading up to its demise. Charles Virolleaud led the way in the decipherment and had already published his findings by late 1929. Further progress came from Hans Bauer of Germany and Édouard Dhorme of France, who had been military cryptoanalysts (on opposing sides) during World War I. The language was effectively deciphered by 1930, and with the publication of Virolleaud's sign list in 1932, it was in the public domain.

The impact of the Ugaritic texts went far beyond their linguistic significance; they also shed light on the Syro-Palestinian religions in which Baal, El, and Asherah were worshiped. These deities were frequently condemned (or their characteristics imputed to Yhwh; see chap. 19) by the biblical authors. In the Ugaritic texts, readers had the clearest picture to date of how those deities looked from a sympathetic, internal perspective. Furthermore, many stylistic aspects of Ugaritic poetry proved comparable to biblical poetry. For all these reasons, the discovery of Ugarit forged a stronger link between the Bible and its ancient Near Eastern context, and strengthened scholars' ability to compare and contrast the two.

By the early twentieth century, historians and biblical scholars had benefited from an unprecedented revolution in their knowledge of the past. Much refinement and further exploration remained, but in the space of two centuries, dozens of centuries of ancient Near Eastern history had become available for study in a way that had been impossible for millennia. We are still sorting through the implications of all this new information, and many texts still await translation and publication.

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[10] "Tell" is the Arabic word for a ruin mound, and it has become a technical term in archaeology.

EARLY COMPARATIVE SCHOLARSHIP

Although the discovery and decipherment of so many ancient Near Eastern languages meant a vast new trove of information for scholars of the Bible and religion, it also brought a whole new set of debates and controversies.

George Smith: Promise Unfulfilled

It did not take long for the British advances in Assyriology to yield dividends. In 1872, George Smith, an assistant at the British Museum, discovered on a tablet from Nineveh an Akkadian version of the flood story that resembled the biblical story in Genesis 6–9 (see chap. 4). The tablet that Smith found was broken, but he presented it in a paper to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in December of the same year. The paper created such great interest that a London newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, offered a thousand pounds to send Smith back to Kuyunjik (the site of ancient Nineveh) to try to locate the rest of the account. Despite being a novice in archaeology, Smith had great luck. Within days, he found tablets that completed the text, a copy of what is now recognized as Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic (chap. 4). Again pressed by public excitement, Smith quickly published the epic, along with other Akkadian texts, in *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (1876).[11] Tragically, Smith was less fortunate in his health than he was in his discoveries. When he returned again to Kuyunjik in 1876, he contracted dysentery, and he died the same year. Assyriology thus lost "one of its most valued students."[12]

Smith's writings reveal that he was not only a gifted decipherer, but also a judicious scholar. He recognized that "furious strife has existed for many years" about the meaning and date of the Genesis narratives.[13] Smith was not a biblical scholar or theologian; insofar as he commented on religion, he perceived a "total difference between the religious ideas" of Mesopotamia and Israel,[14] but he was not prone to make rash statements or to disparage one culture at the other's expense. He was circumspect about the question of the relationship between the flood stories, laying out many of the same details that are still widely accepted today. Even so, Smith assumed that some more complete Mesopotamian "version of Genesis" was still out there, which could fill in some of the blanks that have confounded biblical interpreters. For example, he writes, "The brief narration given in the Pentateuch omits a number of incidents and explanations—for instance, as to the origin of evil, the fall of the angels, the wickedness of the serpent, etc. Such points as these are included in the Cuneiform narrative."[15] This comment represents one of the major early stances regarding ancient Near Eastern texts: that they primarily clarified the Bible and brought it into better focus. Smith elsewhere suggests that they might be used to clarify "many of the obscure points in the mythology of Greece and Rome" as well.[16] Although he did not live to pursue much detailed comparative work, he seems to have believed in an essential unity underlying all ancient mythologies.

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[11] George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis: Containing the Description of the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod: Babylonian Fables, and Legends of the Gods: From the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1876).

[12] A. H. Sayce, preface to Smith's posthumously published *History of Sennacherib* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1878), iii.

[13] Smith, *Chaldean Account of Genesis*, 13.

[14] Ibid., 285.

[15] Ibid., 14.

Max Müller: A Linguistic Model

One of the towering figures in the early modern comparative study of religions, Max Müller, popularized a similar view. He famously applied Goethe's paradox—"He who knows one, knows none"—to religion.[17] That is, the person who knows only one religion does not even really know that one. This claim did not only mean that comparative study of religion can spare people from countless errors and mistaken ideas; Müller's vision for his studies went well beyond that. He was searching for a fundamental common ground among all religions, or as he put it, "something that makes the world akin."[18] If one added up all the religious knowledge in the world, somewhere in the common ground among them one could find "the inward nature" of religion. This is noble in its unifying hopes and characteristic of the boundless optimism of Western thinkers around the turn of the twentieth century. But Müller's project was based on the model of comparative linguistics, and just as languages remain divided into distinct families, so too religions have not proved susceptible to universal comparison.

William Robertson Smith: An Anthropological Approach

The anthropological approach of William Robertson Smith (1846–1894) compared ancient Israel to nineteenth-century pastoralist Bedouin tribes in the Middle East. In his view, life for such tribes had changed so little since ancient times that their beliefs and practices could shed light on ancient Semitic cultures. This led him to conclude that Israelite religion had developed in stages, such as fetishism, that are scarcely alluded to in the Bible. Although his work led to his dismissal from the chair of Old Testament at Free Church College in Aberdeen, it also proved highly influential. In the preface to his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1894), he made an essentially exegetical case for the comparative study of the Bible, in that "the doctrines and ordinances of the Old Testament cannot be thoroughly comprehended until they are put into comparison with the religions of the nations akin to the Israelites."[19] In his view, that was because

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[16] Smith, *Assyrian Discoveries: An Account of Explorations and Discoveries on the Site of Nineveh, During 1873 to 1874* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1875), 451.

[17] Goethe originally said this of languages. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in February and May, 1870* (1872; new ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1893), 11–16.

[18] Ibid., 15.

[19] William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1894), vi.

> the positive Semitic religions had to establish themselves on ground already occupied by these older beliefs and usages; they had to displace what they could not assimilate, and whether they rejected or absorbed the elements of the older religion, they had at every point to reckon with them. . . . No positive religion that has moved men has been able to start with a *tabula rasa*, and express itself as if religion were beginning for the first time; in form, if not in substance, the new system must be in contact all along the line with the older ideas and practices which it finds in possession. A new scheme of faith can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist in its audience, and it cannot reach these without taking account of the traditional forms in which all religious feeling is embodied, and without speaking a language which men accustomed to these old forms can understand.[20]

Robertson Smith went on to compare the Hebrew Bible's rhetorical use of precursor religions to the New Testament's use of biblical concepts such as priesthood and blood sacrifice even as it transformed them. He also shared in Müller's universal and humanistic apologetic for the work, however: he looked forward to a future in which the "crudities recorded alike in sacred and profane literature shall have been purged away in a nobler humanity."[21]

James G. Frazer: Comparison on a Grand Scale

Perhaps most famous among those who followed in Robertson Smith's path was James G. Frazer (1854–1941), whose work was both anthropological, in that it gathered up traditions from living human cultures, and universalizing, in that it spanned the globe. Frazer's most famous work is *The Golden Bough*, but it was in his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion*, *Legend and Law* (1918) that he discussed the Bible most extensively. He described the comparative method as "the instrument for the detection of savagery under civilization . . . Applied to the human mind, [it] enables us to trace man's intellectual and moral evolution, just as, applied to the human body, it enables us to trace his physical evolution from lower forms of animal life."[22] This comment shows how great was the impact of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) on various fields, and indeed when Frazer came to compare creation accounts, he opined that "roughly speaking, these two theories [creation and evolution] still divide the civilized world between them."[23]

Frazer wrote with regret that "the scope of my work has obliged me to dwell chiefly on the lower side of ancient Hebrew life revealed in the Old Testament, on the traces of savagery and superstition which are to be found in its pages." He believed it was possible, however, to separate the chaff from the wheat, "that higher side of the Hebrew genius which has manifested itself in a spiritual religion and a pure morality, and of which the Old Testament is the imperishable monument." As is typical of evolutionary schemes that were propounded in the enthusiasm of the early twentieth century, however, there is a discernible bias toward the modern and the Western:

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[20] Ibid., 2.

[21] Ibid., xii.

[22] James G. Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion*, *Legend and Law* (London: Macmillan: 1918), viii.

[23] Ibid., 44.

> The revelation of the baser elements which underlay the civilization of ancient Israel, as they underlie the civilization of modern Europe, serves . . . as a foil to enhance by contrast the glory of a people which, from such dark depths of ignorance and cruelty, could rise to such bright heights of wisdom and virtue, as sunbeams appear to shine with a greater effulgence of beauty when they break through the murky clouds of a winter evening than when they flood the earth from the serene splendour of a summer noon.[24]

In actuality, Frazer's writings do not often indulge in broad analysis of the material. For example, his discussion of flood stories spans more than 250 pages and every populated continent, but his interest in the end was far more in their origins and diffusion than on the moral or religious value of the various versions. Nor did he show much interest in how comparative data affected biblical interpretation. Instead, he offered vast storehouses of cultural (especially literary) material from all over the world, gathered and sorted but not assessed. (*The Golden Bough* appeared in 1890 as a two-volume work, but grew to twelve volumes by 1915!) Unfortunately these materials are generally presented in paraphrase, and so one may reasonably worry about the reliability of the far-flung and diverse sources of the reports. Frazer was not trained as an anthropologist, but held a post in classics at Cambridge.

Assertions of Biblical Superiority

Other early readers of ancient Near Eastern texts were not so reserved in their analyses. Rawlinson, who had played a role in deciphering Akkadian and built his fame on the ancient Near Eastern findings, opened his *Outline of Assyrian History* with this bold assertion: "Every new fact which is brought to light from the study of the Cuneiform inscriptions tends to confirm the scriptural account of [Mesopotamia]."[25] And Archibald H. Sayce (1845–1933), an Oxford professor and Anglican clergyman, published a number of books and articles asserting the compatibility of ancient Near Eastern data with the biblical texts, with titles such as *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments: A Sketch of the Most Striking Confirmations of the Bible* (1888).[26]

Early interpreters also tended to assess the religious value of ancient Near Eastern texts as being far below that of biblical literature. For example, Sayce wrote in 1903,

> Between Judaism and the coarsely polytheistic religion of Babylonia, as also between Christianity and the old Egyptian faith,—in spite of its high morality and spiritual insight,—there lies an impassable gulf. . . . It is like that "something,"

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[24] Ibid., x–xi.

[25] H. C. Rawlinson, *Outline of Assyrian History as Collected from the Inscriptions Discovered by Austin H. Layard, Esq., in the Ruins of Nineveh* (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society; London: John W. Parker and Son, 1852), 3.

[26] London: Religious Tract Society, 1888.

> hard to define, yet impossible to deny, which separates man from the ape, even though on the physiological side the ape may be the ancestor of the man.[27]

John Arendzen's entry on "Babylonia" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907) was similarly disparaging: "Babylonian . . . songs to the gods . . . are indeed often either weird incantations or dreary litanies; and when after perusal of a good number of them one turns to the Hebrew Psalter, no fair-minded person will deny the almost immeasurable superiority of the latter."[28] In general, it was typical for interpreters to emphasize the differences between the Old Testament and other ancient religious texts. Another scholar wrote in 1912 in a church-sponsored publication,

> The special religious value of the Old Testament literature does not lie in what is common to it and Babylon, but in the elements in which they differ. The points of contact must not blind the eye to the points of contrast. These points of contrast are in the spirit and atmosphere pervading the Hebrew Scriptures, which are quite distinct, not simply from Babylonian, but from all other literatures. . . . In many cases is agreement in form, but how far superior the spirit and substance of the Hebrew![29]

Early comparisons tended to assert the superiority of the "Hebraic religious spirit" and the biblical literature.

Friedrich Delitzsch: Babel and Bibel

A forceful countertestimony soon entered the conversation. From 1902 to 1904, the eminent German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch gave a series of lectures titled "Babel und Bibel" ("Babel and Bible"), in which he bluntly asserted both the priority and the superiority of Babylonian religion over that of the Hebrew Bible. He was not, of course, the first to make such statements, but they created a larger impact than ever. This was partly because of his own stature—he had recently been appointed professor in Berlin and would put German Assyriology on its path toward dominance—and it was partly the magnitude of the lectures, which were delivered to the German Oriental Society and an audience full of dignitaries. Even Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor, was in attendance. The opportunity to address such an audience attests to the immense public interest that discoveries of ancient Near Eastern artifacts and texts continued to generate in Europe.[30]

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27. Archibald Henry Sayce, *The Religions of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia* (The Gifford Lectures on the Ancient Egyptian and Babylonian Conception of the Divine; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), vi.

28. John Arendzen, "Babylonia," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1907). Accessed at http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=1363.

29. Frederick Carl Eiselen, *The Christian View of the Old Testament* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1912), 220–22.

30. Simo Parpola reports that the lectures were the subject of more than 1,650 newspaper and journal articles in Germany alone. See Parpola, "Back to Delitzsch and Jeremias: The Relevance of the Pan-Babylonian School to the Melammu Project," in A. Panaino and A. Piras, eds., *Schools of Oriental Studies and the Development of Modern Historiography* (Melammu Symposia 4; Milano: Mimesis, 2004), 237–47.

Delitzsch began his lectures on uncontroversial ground, noting that "from now till all futurity the names of Babel and Bible will remain inseparably linked together."[31] He pointed out that Mesopotamian (and Egyptian) religious traditions had their roots in periods much earlier than that during which the Hebrew Bible was composed: "Now that the pyramids have opened their depths and the Assyrian palaces their portals, the people of Israel, with its literature, appears as the youngest member only of a venerable and hoary group of nations."[32] Historical priority often carries with it a presumption of originality, and thus superiority, but in this first lecture Delitzsch expressed admiration for Israelite monotheism and for "those titanic minds, the prophets, [who] discovered in Yahweh the god of the universe, and pleaded for a quickening of the inner spirit of religion."[33]

Something had changed significantly in Delitzsch's thinking by the second lecture, given in 1903. This time, he said that it can only be "ignorance, indifference or blindness" to call the prophets agents of revelation, because they are religiously and ethically deficient. "The more deeply I dive into the spirit of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament," he said, "the more I shrink from Yahweh."[34] He claimed in passing that biblical authors probably had Babylonian texts in front of them and copied from them, and he eventually moved to a broader comparison of Israelite ethics versus those of the Mesopotamians:

> It seems to me a particularly unwise proceeding on the part of certain hotspurs to portray the ethical level of Israel, even that of the pre-exilic period, as elevated far above that of the Babylonians. It is undeniable that the warfare of the Assyrio-Babylonians was cruel and sometimes barbarous. But so was the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrew tribes accompanied by a torrent of innocent blood.[35]

It becomes clear in this lecture that Delitzsch was pursuing not only historical comparison but also a program of religious progressivism. He viewed the Hebrew Bible "as a unique monument of a great religio-historical process which continues even into our own times,"[36] but warned in the next breath, "let us not blindly cling to antiquated and scientifically discredited dogmas from the vain fear that our faith in God and our true religious life might suffer harm."[37]

Although these statements may not seem shocking by present-day standards, the scandal in 1903 was very great. Delitzsch was not only a leading professor speaking in a distinguished public forum, but also son of the eminent Old Testament scholar and (rather conservative) Lutheran churchman Franz Delitzsch. Yet the younger Delitzsch seemed to many people to be denigrating the Bible in both theological and humanistic terms. He was criticized as irresponsible in a statement by the emperor himself, and his third

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31. Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible: Three Lectures on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion* (Chicago: Open Court, 1906), 2.
32. Ibid., 3.
33. Ibid., 59, 66.
34. Ibid., 70.
35. Ibid., 106.
36. Ibid., 113.
37. Ibid., 114.

series of lectures in 1904 was relegated to smaller and less central venues. In these, his anti-Semitic tendencies seem to have hardened; he spoke, for example, of a "history of civilization which is constantly fettered by Semitic prejudices."[38]

Despite their flaws, Delitzsch's lectures merit significant attention because they raise a number of key issues in comparative studies: First, does historical priority matter to one's assessment of the value of religious ideas? That is, does the relative "youth" of Israel's religion indicate that it is derivative and less valuable? And second, apart from historical priority, can one compare the quality and importance of different ancient religions? Finally, even if it were possible, is it the proper role of comparative study to make such value judgments?

Alfred Jeremias: Revising Pan-Babylonism

A less polemical approach to Pan-Babylonism can be found in Alfred Jeremias's early comparative handbook *The Old Testament in Light of the Ancient Near East* (1904). Although Jeremias was a (German) Lutheran clergyman, he saw religions as fundamentally unified—not only ancient Israelite religion and other ancient Near Eastern religions, but Christianity as well. Within the first hundred pages of the aforementioned volume, he suggested Babylonian cognates for the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ. It was not, according to him, a question of literary dependence between the Bible and Mesopotamian texts, but rather a shared "conception of the world lying at their root." He conceived of this shared conception in terms of historical influence, however, so that a biblical author's "mind unconsciously but of necessity moved in the cycle of thought of . . . his surrounding world."[39] The historical rootedness of cultural influence would become a major component of the comparative method.

At its peak, Pan-Babylonism grew beyond a mere argument for the priority of Mesopotamian culture over Hebrew culture. In Jeremias's magnum opus, *Handbook of Ancient Near Eastern Spiritual Culture* (1913), he argued for the derivative nature of ancient Near Eastern religions generally, including Egypt's. The Pan-Babylonian school produced reams of work in the early years of the twentieth century, but World War I interrupted their productivity. After the war, with the leading proponents aging and their ideas unpopular, Pan-Babylonism sputtered.

Benno Landsberger: Conceptual Autonomy

After the war, Benno Landsberger, the most eminent Assyriologist of his era, advocated the view that Assyriology needed to be an essentially independent field rather than a comparative one. In a 1926 article, he argued that the field needed its own conceptual autonomy (*Eigenbegrifflichkeit*). For him "the most important key to understanding" a culture was to understand it in its own right, rather than in comparison to something else.[40] This might seem to be a retreat from the ambitions advocated by the likes of Müller and Robertson Smith, but Landsberger viewed it as ambitious enough to describe a single ancient culture. From his perspective, practitioners of Assyriology had been overwhelmed both by the enormous amount of textual data and by widespread interest, which together had "hardly ever allowed Assyriology leisure to reflect upon itself and to reach an awareness of where it was heading."[41] Although he did not make this explicit, his argument was for a kind of détente in the struggle between theologians and Assyriologists over which culture or religion was superior. Although the division of the fields that Landsberger sought to create has been transgressed regularly ever since, he (along with his students) did help to create the independent field of Assyriology that is often practiced independently of biblical studies.

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[38] Ibid., 172–73. This trend in Delitzsch's thinking culminated in his book *Die Grosse Täuschung* (*The Great Deception*).

[39] Alfred Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East: Manual of Biblical Archaeology* (New York: Putnam, 1911), 195–96.

The case for conceptual autonomy was so effectively prosecuted that Simo Parpola recently lamented that although comparative work on specific issues goes on, since Landsberger there has been no "systematic, well-documented attempt to reconstruct the Mesopotamian world-view and correlate it with other comparable systems in the ancient world."[42] Parpola has consciously tried to resurrect the methods of the Pan-Babylonian school, for example, by comparing aspects of Assyrian religion to Judaism, Christianity, and Kabbalah.[43]

Landsberger's warning was in many ways wise, however. It is hard to appreciate a Mesopotamian text on its own merits when it comes under the heading "The Babylonian Genesis" or "The Babylonian Job." And in many of these cases, the form and function of these Mesopotamian texts were quite different from the biblical texts to which they were being compared. Interpreters of those texts often gave little reflection to the different time periods and processes of formation that each text went through. Usually this process of comparing apples to oranges resulted in the exaltation of the biblical texts at the expense of the other, as when Morris Jastrow stated that "Job is of an infinitely higher order" than the much earlier Babylonian text *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi.*[44] It may be fine to conclude that Job is artistically superior, but *infinitely*? What standard is being applied in such a case?

These questions continued to be hotly debated throughout the early twentieth century. At the same time, the barriers to (at least moderately) informed participation in the conversation continued to drop, in that ancient Near Eastern texts were becoming increasingly accessible in translation. German scholars led the way in this undertaking, and some of the most successful early compendia of ancient Near Eastern texts in English were translations of German originals.[45] Eventually, however, George Barton's *Archaeology and the Bible* became a touchstone for readers of English. It sought to provide a kind of all-purpose handbook to ancient Near Eastern history, culture, and literature, including translations of numerous primary texts, and its popularity is reflected by the fact that it went through seven editions between 1916 and 1937.

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[40] Landsberger, "Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der Babylonischen Welt," *Islamica* 2 (1926): 355–72. Translated as *The Conceptual Autonomy of the Babylonian World* (trans. T. Jacobsen et al.; Malibu: Undena, 1967). Cited here, 6.

[41] Landsberger, *Conceptual Autonomy*, 5.

[42] Parpola, "Back to Delitzsch and Jeremias," 240.

[43] Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (SAA 9; Helsinki: Helsinki University, 1997), xiii–xliv.

[44] Morris Jastrow, "A Babylonian Parallel to the Story of Job," *JBL* 25 (1906): 189. See further in chap. 21.

[45] Good summaries of early comparative compendia can be found in Pritchard, *ANET*, xix–xx; and Hallo, "Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis," passim.

New Assertions of the Bible's Uniqueness

Some scholars were eager to embrace the independence of Israelite culture and religion from those of its neighbors, because this allowed them to assert the unique purity of "biblical religion." This was true in both Jewish and Christian circles.

Yehezkel Kaufmann published his massive history of the religion of Israel from 1937 to 1956, and in it he posits that although the ancient Israelites lived right next to polytheistic cultures, they were unaware of the real nature of those neighboring religions. He repeatedly characterizes the biblical authors as "naïve." For example, the prophets' mockery of idol worship as mere fetishism (e.g., Isa. 44:19: "Shall I fall down before a block of wood?") shows that it was not practiced or understood in Israel.[46] Even the structure of his book, with its identification of a "First Idolatrous Period" and a "Second Idolatrous Period," seems intended to suggest that religious purity was the norm except for a couple of brief periods. The methodological reasons for his conclusions are clear, since he criticizes the "deeply ingrained habit" of scholars of religion to found their interpretations on the "testimony of obscure passages, on ingenious combinations of isolated 'hints' and 'clues' scattered here and here."[47] By contrast, Kaufmann (who attended a yeshiva before earning his doctorate in philosophy) thought one should follow what he saw as the broad theohistorical claim of the text, that Israel's religion was fundamentally different from those of other nations.

Similarly, G. Ernest Wright argued in *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (1950) that far from reflecting polytheism or other common traits of ancient Near Eastern religion, the Hebrew Bible was primarily a long diatribe against the religious practices of neighboring nations.[48] Wright perceived "elements of Israel's faith which distinguish it sharply from the religions of its environment." Indeed, the world of the Hebrew Bible was "a totally different religious atmosphere" —not because of different intellectual development but because of Israel's foundational experience of revelation at Sinai. For Wright, Israel continued to be formed by its ongoing encounter with a God who is radically Other.

Both Kaufmann and Wright were attempting to reckon with a significant feature of Israelite religion: the claim that its own texts make to distinctiveness (and even uniqueness). This claim itself was not unique in the ancient Near East, but the repetitiveness and forcefulness with which it was made are distinctive.[49] Still, neither Kaufmann nor Wright reckons carefully enough with the textual and archaeological data, which complicate the picture of Israel as a nation set apart and devoid of foreign elements.

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[46] Kaufmann's work is available in a heavily abridged form in *The Religion of Israel, from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (trans. M. Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Cited here, 7–20.

[47] Ibid., 3.

[48] This argument has been made again, and even more sharply, by John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

[49] For a more careful discussion of this claim, see Peter Machinist, "The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel: An Essay," in *Ah, Assyria . . . Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor* (ed. M. Cogan and I. Eph'al; Scripta Hierosoly-

Morton Smith: A "Common Theology"

Alongside these voices arguing for Israel's uniqueness in the middle of the twentieth century were others who continued the older comparative-religions project of finding similarities. One example is Morton Smith's "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East" (1952), which asserted, "The striking thing about the theological material of the great majority of these ancient Near Eastern texts is that, despite superficial differences, it shows *one overall pattern.*"[50] He did not stop there, but added that this pattern also applies to "most periods and countries where polytheism has been the religion of civilized peoples," and is therefore probably rooted in "social, psychological and rhetorical patterns," rather than in cultural influence in history.[51] Smith did not deny that different religions have distinctive points; for example, he thought that Israelite religion was distinguished by the notion of Yhwh's jealousy and by its neglect of the underworld and the dead.

Later in his career, and less cautiously, Smith mocked the "pseudorthodoxy" of those biblical scholars who "attempt to separate the OT from the near eastern culture of its time and to prove that it teaches a 'higher truth.'"[52] His opening salvo against this group was confrontational:

> I do not know any competent OT critic now living who would not have been excommunicated 250 years ago by any of the major Christian or Jewish groups. Nobody I know accepts the OT chronology, or thinks the nature miracles really happened, or even attributes the whole of the Pentateuch to the direct authorship of Moses; and *a fortiori*, nobody has that notion of the world and of how it works which is pre-supposed throughout the OT and taught in many passages. Nobody, so far as I know, believes in the existence of Yahweh as the OT describes him—a North-Arabian mountain god who traveled in thunderstorms and liked the smell of burning fat. But everywhere there are persistent efforts to square the facts of the OT as far as possible with the traditional teachings of the institutions, and even more, to make them serviceable for homiletic presentation.[53]

It may not be such a damning rebuke of modern biblical theology that it would have shocked religious institutions around 1700. And many of Smith's generalizations here are vast oversimplifications; the views of biblical scholars are not so monolithic. Yet this diatribe usefully calls attention to the effect of differing outlooks, presuppositions, and social locations on interpretation. Generalizing about the situation in the mid-twentieth

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mitana 33; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), 196–212. Reprinted in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. F. E. Greenspahn; New York: New York University Press, 1991), 420–42.

[50] Morton Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 71 (1952): 137 (emphasis added).

[51] Ibid., 146.

[52] Morton Smith, "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *JBL* 88 (1969): 32.

[53] Ibid., 21.

century, Smith contrasted the tendency of comparative-religions scholars to find similarity with the tendency of theologians to find difference.

Summary: Parallelomania vs. Parallel-onoia

The field of comparative studies has often alternated between those extremes (similar vs. different)—between "parallelomania" (which Samuel Sandmel diagnosed as a "disease" in a presidential address delivered at the 1961 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature[54]) and "parallel-onoia," which Howard Eilberg-Schwartz more recently warned against.[55] A cyclical pattern in comparative approaches can be discerned: new data would spark a burst of hypercomparativism (as with the Pan-Babylonism that Delitzsch espoused, or the Pan-Ugaritism that reared its head later); the excitement of the new data would be so great that everything would be thought to be explicable by it; then the field would regret its excesses, and begin to reassess the work that had been done.

THE PAST 50 YEARS: NEW TOOLS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

The last half century or so has seen a gradual maturing of comparative study. It has helped to have increasingly useful tools for students. In 1950, James B. Pritchard published *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, which was not only "the largest collection of translations of texts relating to the Old Testament yet made,"[56] but was also blessed by authoritative and often artful translators. Unlike some comparable volumes before and since, *ANET* offered little commentary on the texts, an omission that probably helped the volume to last as fads and fashions in comparative studies came and went. *ANET* was soon joined by *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (1954), which opened up art-historical (iconographic) interpretation of the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern context to new audiences. Both volumes were great successes and were updated a final time in 1969. *ANET* stood as the primary English-language compendium of ancient Near Eastern texts for half a century, and it is still useful, though *The Context of Scripture* (3 vols.; 1997–2002), edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, has now superseded it in many ways. The maturity of these works is marked by the fact that recent German compendia such as *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments* (1983–97) have not been translated into English.

Shemaryahu Talmon: A New Focus on Method

The last fifty years have also seen moderation with respect to method. Shemaryahu Talmon articulated a pragmatic approach that both summarized some of the best practices up to that point and laid out guidelines for the future. Talmon criticized ahistorical "comparison on the grand scale" based on "diverse cultural contexts," which in his view "produces staggering and indeed nonsensical results." He pointed out that "seemingly identical phenomena which may occur in different cultures are often quite differently weighted."[57] Instead, Talmon argued that the most effective and convincing comparisons involved texts with certain similarities: (1) chronological proximity, (2) geographic proximity, and (3) cultural affinity. (This last qualification was not well defined by Talmon, but may be marked at least in part by similarity of language, which allows easier transmission of cultural ideas.) In sum, Talmon emphasized "the analysis of cultures *lying within a given historic stream.*"[58]

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[54] Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1–13.

[55] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Beyond Parallel-onoia," in *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 87–102.

[56] James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), xv.

Somewhat more controversially, Talmon also explicitly reaffirmed Landsberger's *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*, the emphasis on the study of cultures in themselves. This was based on Talmon's perception of Israel's distinctiveness. He wrote that an "insistence on the particularity of the Hebrew culture and its dissimilarity from neighbouring cultures should serve students of the Old Testament as a guideline in their comparative studies."[59] This sounds perilously close to returning to the naiveté of Kaufmann or Wright, but in practice what Talmon meant to emphasize was simply that comparison reveals difference as well as similarity: "Comparativists generally, and in the field of biblical studies especially, would do well to pay heed to differences between cultures and not only to likenesses. Adequate attention must be given to the interpretation of the dissimilarities from other cultures of the ancient Near East which made biblical civilization the peculiar and particular phenomenon it was."[60]

A different but related misconception arises from the project of finding similarities, or "parallel-hunting," namely the idea that, generally, similarities between texts mean that one author borrowed directly from another. Students are at risk of inferring this even from good comparative work such as John Walton's *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*, which repeatedly discusses "cases of alleged borrowing," as if literary influence were a criminal charge from which the Bible needed to be exonerated.[61]

In fact, it is very rare that one can confidently assert cross-cultural literary borrowing in the ancient Near East (for discussion and one possible instance, see chap. 20). When one speaks of (for example) Mesopotamian influence on the Bible, that does not mean that there was some original literary genius in Mesopotamia who dwarfed the biblical authors in creativity. After all, later Mesopotamian authors also owed much to earlier Mesopotamian authors. Instead, it means that both the Mesopotamian and biblical authors were part of ancient Near Eastern streams of tradition in which authors tended to conserve previous literary artifacts while also reshaping them and recombining them in new ways. Although one may not find the exact route of a cultural artifact's historical transmission,[62] it is worth the effort to identify the pathways and processes.

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[57] Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," in Greenspahn, *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, 384–85.

[58] Ibid., 386, emphasis in original. The italicized phrase is adopted from the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits.

[59] Ibid., 389.

[60] Ibid., 414–15.

[61] By contrast, Walton himself would later write, "Borrowing is not the issue, so methodology does not have to address that. Likewise this need not concern whose ideas are derivative. There is simply common ground across the cognitive environment of the cultures of the ancient world." John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 21.

A certain modesty with respect to claims about the originality or dependence of literary works is not only a feature of the discussion of ancient Near Eastern literature; it is very much an emphasis of recent literary theory in general. "In literature there is no creation *ex nihilo*," says Alastair Fowler.[63] Delbert Hillers agrees: "'Books are made out of other books,' and . . . biblical books are no exception."[64] The point is taken, yet somehow this does not abolish the potential for newness in a text or the creativity of its author.[65] To be sure, the materials, the words, are always in some sense "recycled"—the literary critic Marjorie Perloff has sought to honor the effective reuse of cultural materials by dubbing it "unoriginal genius"[66]—but there is excitement and enjoyment in recognizing the things that have been done with those existing materials.

William W. Hallo: The Contrastive Approach

One of the most important twentieth-century voices in the conversation about comparative method was the aforementioned William W. Hallo, the great Assyriologist who taught for many years at Yale. The same year that Talmon's essay appeared, Hallo wrote an essay calling for a "contrastive approach" to comparison.[67] Two decades later, he would coedit (with K. Lawson Younger) the magisterial compendium of ancient Near Eastern texts *The Context of Scripture*. In the introduction, he restated his approach: "Given the frequently very different settings of biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts . . . it is useful to recognize such contrasts as well as comparisons or, if one prefers, to operate with negative as well as positive comparison."[68] In short, difference is not something that only theologians are likely to discover. The eminent comparative-religions scholar Jonathan Z. Smith has written that "as practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity. . . . The issue of difference has been all but forgotten."[69] Clearly,

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[62] William W. Hallo, "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. William W. Hallo et al.; Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 6.

[63] *Kinds of Literature*, 156.

[64] Hillers, *Lamentations* (2nd ed.; AB 7A; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 33.

[65] The claim of the Bible's uniqueness is often bound up with claims about its status as revelation; that is to say, if the Bible is divinely revealed, then it is not comparable to products of human literary invention. That assumption is problematic, at least from the standpoint of classical Christian (in this case, Chalcedonian) theology: If human flesh was good enough for God's self-revelation in Christ, why should human literary texts not also have been good enough?

[66] Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[67] W. W. Hallo, "New Moons and Sabbaths: A Case-Study in the Contrastive Approach," in Greenspahn, *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, 420–42.

[68] Hallo, "Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis," *COS* 1.xxv.

[69] Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 25–26.

Smith is not advocating the sort of difference-finding that has too often been hastily practiced in a naive, apologetic mode; rather, like everyone else in the conversation, he is looking for a way to address both similarity and difference accurately and responsibly.

In assessing similarity and difference, the mind-set of the interpreter is important; as Hallo says elsewhere, the goal "is not to find the key to every biblical phenomenon in some ancient Near Eastern precedent, but rather to silhouette the biblical text against its wider literary and cultural environment."[70] His choice of the term "silhouette" is significant, in that it emphasizes *perception*. Interpretation is not simply a decision after the fact about what to emphasize. Instead, our knowledge (or lack thereof) often *determines what we are able to perceive*. Education in ANE studies thus provides a bulwark against the tyranny of idiosyncratic perceptions; it forms or socializes those who undertake it within a certain way of thinking.

WAYS FORWARD FROM HERE

In the case of comparative ancient Near Eastern studies, one of the goals of this socialization is a deep immersion in the cultures of those times and places. Most scholars view this as a desirable thing. Following in the path of Landsberger, we aspire to get inside the heads of ancient authors; and how could that be wrong? Some comparativists, however, have argued that strict adherence to historical-cultural horizons can be overly dogmatic and limiting. One of those who have recently suggested new directions is Brent A. Strawn. Beginning from J. Z. Smith's dissatisfaction with the historical constraints of the method as it has often been practiced, and on Earl Miner's work on "comparative poetics," Strawn suggests a more creative and playful approach to comparison: "Ideally, the best comparisons are intercultural, which means they include historically unrelated and/or noncontiguous cultural and/or linguistic traditions."[71]

There is no doubt that far-ranging comparisons can be useful; an excellent example is Strawn's own "Imprecatory Psalms: Ancient and Modern," which compares the "cursing psalms" to protest music from our own times, including "gangsta rap."[72] While Strawn is perfectly capable of interpreting the psalms in light of their own cultural context, something different is achieved by interpreting them in ours. By means of such comparisons, the psalms may come alive in a new way for readers who would otherwise be unable to understand them.

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[70] Hallo, "Compare and Contrast," 3.

[71] Brent A. Strawn, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. J. M. LeMon and K. H. Richards; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 129.

[72] Brent A. Strawn, "Sanctified and Commercially Successful Curses: On Gangsta Rap and the Canonization of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Theology Today* 69 (2013): 403–17; idem, "Imprecatory Psalms: Ancient and Modern," in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction* (ed. Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 203–4. Strawn draws inspiration from Carol Antablin Miles, "'Singing the Songs of Zion' and Other Sermons from the Margins of the Canon," *Koinonia* 6 (1994): 151–73.

The methodological question turns into a hermeneutical one, as Strawn is quite aware: "the purpose(s) or end(s) of the comparative endeavor matter."[73] The rhetorical context or moment also seems to matter: one might use a more free comparative method in pedagogy, while adhering to historical constraints in scholarly publication. In this way, the classroom can generate interpretive ideas that can then be investigated and checked. To build on the example just given: One can ask whether present-day protest music really functions as the imprecatory psalms did, since the latter (a) may well have been more the literature of high-level religious officials in their society; and (b) may, in light of the cursing practices of neighboring societies, have had an explicitly supernatural purpose in their composition.

In some hands, setting aside historical context would open the door to bad interpretation, because not every interpreter is an expert. Smith and Strawn are able to do it because of their hard-earned knowledge of their material. Probably every student of the ancient world perceives echoes of it in our world every day, but only by submitting oneself to the work of understanding the cultural matrix of ancient texts will one know how accurate such impressions are.

A final point of method for comparative study is that ideally it should illuminate both (or all) the texts that are compared. Meir Malul has asked why the Bible should always be privileged in the comparison:

> It is not that clear why the division should be such that the Old Testament always occupies one side of the equation, and the rest of the ancient world the other side. Why should the comparative method not be perceived as a research tool for comparing any two or more phenomena from the general cultural milieu of the ancient Near East, including the Old Testament being perceived as another one of the ancient sources left to us by that ancient and prolific civilization of the ancient Near East?[74]

While this book is intentionally bibliocentric, I do hope it is possible for readers to perceive the Bible as one of many ancient Near Eastern sources. Even for those who hold the Bible's uniqueness most dear, it is worth provisionally decentering the Bible in order to grasp the way it takes part in a much larger cultural matrix.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Has progress been made through the history of comparative study? If nothing else, the volume and quality of our data continue to increase, if not at the rate they once did. A recent example is the 2014 publication of a remarkable Babylonian tablet that contains more information about the ark than previously published texts had (see chap. 4). New information can open new doors and clarify existing theories.

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[73] Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 129.

[74] Meir Malul, *The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies* (AOAT 227; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990), 4–5.

In terms of method, we are often still prone to repeat the errors of our forebears, and so only a chastened awareness of the magnitude and incompleteness of the data can protect us. Of course, the only greater error than the ones the data tempt us toward would be the error of ignoring the data entirely. In 1985, J. J. M. Roberts expressed concern about the "perceptible shift away" from comparative study of the Bible, which "bodes ill" for the interpretive task. And so he issued a summons that needs to be sounded continually:

> Despite the abuses and the need for a more self-critical methodology, the attention to extra-biblical sources has brought new understanding to the biblical text. . . . However, if this light from the East is to continue shining and grow brighter, biblical scholars must continue to be conversant with fields outside their own discipline. To some extent one can and must depend on experts in these related fields, but unless one has some firsthand acquaintance with the texts and physical remains with which these related fields deal, one will hardly be able to choose which expert's judgment to follow. There is no substitute for knowledge of the primary sources.[75]

With ancient Near Eastern data ever more accessible, Roberts's call can be understood as deeply democratic. Comparative study of the Bible is not a task to be carried out by a few experts who can then deliver their results to the world; instead, it is a personal journey that any person ought to take who wishes to read in an informed way. In *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot wrote,

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

That should be the hope for education: that it transforms our understanding of our own heritage and history. In this case, those who begin the comparative journey knowing only the biblical texts may in the end return to the biblical texts, knowing them for the first time.

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[75] J. J. M. Roberts, "The Ancient Near Eastern Environment," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (Minneapolis: Fortress; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 96.

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