

The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the God of Israel:
The Ancient Near East in the Bible

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I. Our Context

- École Biblique in Jerusalem founded in 1890
- *Providentissimus Deus*, 1893 (Leo XIII)
- The Catholic University of America's Department of Oriental Studies (now Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures) founded in Washington in 1889
- Papal call for creation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1902
- Pontifical Biblical Institute founded in Rome in 1909
- *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1943 (Pius XII)
- Second Vatican Council: *Dei Verbum*, promulgated on November 18, 1965; and *Nostra Aetate*, issued on October 28, 1965. See *Vatican II. Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation): A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (ed. Austin Flannery, OP; Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996); and *Vatican II. Nostra Aetate (on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions): A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (ed. Austin Flannery, OP; Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996, repr., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).
- "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993, (as published in *Origins*, January 6, 1994; online: http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm). For modern Catholic Church documents on the Bible, see <https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/index.html>.

Studies (by institution):

- Maurice Gilbert, S.J., *The Pontifical Biblical Institute: A Century of History (1909-2009)* (translated by Lee Arnold, S.J.; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2009)
- Dominique Trimbur, *Une École française à Jérusalem: De l'école pratique d'Études bibliques des Dominicaines à l'École Biblique et Archeologique Française der Jérusalem* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), and in collaboration with Jean-Baptiste Humbert, "The École biblique et archéologique française: A Catholic, French, and Archaeological Institution," in *Unearthing Jerusalem: 150 Years of Archaeological Research in the Holy City* (ed. Katharina Galor and Gideon Avni; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011) 95-108. See also Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., *The École Biblique and the New Testament: A Century of Scholarship (1890-1990)* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990); and Pierre Benoit, Jean-Luc Vesco and Jean-Baptiste Humbert, *Un siècle d'archéologie à l'École biblique de Jérusalem 1890-1990* (Jerusalem: Ecole biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, 1988). Note also Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P., *La Père Lagrange: Au service de la Bible - Souvenirs personnels* (Paris: Cerf, 1967), translated as *Père Lagrange: Personal Reflections and Memoirs* (trans. Henry Wansbrough; New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985).
- Joseph Nuesse, *The Catholic University of America: A Centennial History* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1990). Note also Joseph G. Prior, *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999).

From an ecclesial perspective, modern biblical scholarship has meant a shared project of study that takes place both within and across faith communities for their mutual benefit.

Theologically, one achievement of modern biblical criticism has been to shed light on the many and deep ways in which revelation is embedded in human cultural experience and literary expression; historical biblical criticism serves to help revelation shine a bit more brightly in its varied human dimensions. In short, it shows the Bible's incarnated character. Good historical critical work also holds the potential for deepening our sense of the biblical mystery of God.

II. The Ancient Near East in the Bible

- Bible versus the Ancient Near East; The Bible and the Ancient Near East; The Bible in the Ancient Near East; or, the Ancient Near East in the Bible?
- Problems of dichotomous categorization
- Israel's god originally: Yahweh or El?
- Evidence for Israel's sense of self-distinctiveness *historically* (not in terms of literature of the Bible) before the kings of Israel and Judah?
- The quixotic historical quest for Israel's distinctiveness or for the distinctiveness of its deity
- The problem also of seeking not only essentialist differences but also original ones. As a result, we may fail to ask where all of these complexities moved towards. Conceptually for the Bible, it is not only beginnings that matter; it is also how it is moving.
- Two major "moments" illustrating some of the complexities of the ancient Near East in Israel and the Hebrew Bible: (i) the Late Bronze Age texts (esp. ca. 1180 BCE) discovered at the site of Ugarit located on the coast of Syria about 100 miles north of Beirut; and (ii) the massive impact of the texts from Mesopotamia, located primarily in modern day Iraq, an impact made at a variety of levels and times, especially in the wake of Assyrian invasion and impact from about the eighth century onwards.
- Ugarit and Bible coming out of a *shared socio-religious matrix*, reflected not by general parallels of shared vocabulary and language, shared literary motifs and poetic style, but some of the same names, such as very name of Israel; the names of the gods, El, Baal and Asherah, as well as some of their titles, such as Baal's epithet, "Rider of the clouds," which appears as Yahweh's title in modified form in Deut 33:27 and Ps 68:5; the names of the divine enemies, Leviathan, *tinn*, the Seven-headed beast, and Sea (cf. Psalms 74:12-17, 89:26; Job 3:8), as well as Death (cf. Isa 25:8); and Mount Saphon as the divine mountain (cf. Isa 14:13).
- Mesopotamian *political and cultural invasion* of Israel and the Bible: Akkadian loanwords into Hebrew, such as Akkadian loanword, e.g., the sacrificial cake known in Hebrew as *kawwān* (Jer 7:18, 44:19) derived from the Akkadian word, *kamānu*; the Mesopotamian deities, namely "the Tammuz" in Ezekiel 8:14 and the Queen of Heaven in Jeremiah 7:18 and 44:18, 25.
- Mesopotamia literary impacts directly or not: Mesopotamian models for the biblical Flood traditions; biblical law (notably the debated case of the Covenant Code and the Code of Hammurabi); and perhaps the type of biblical historical reporting as found in the books of 1-2 Kings.
- Bible's distinctive features? First, the works of the Bible were gradually collected as a separate work, distinguishing it from other ancient Near Eastern textual traditions. Second and related, the Hebrew Bible shows a distinctive profile relative to the bodies of texts produced by Israel's neighbors that are known today: *the problem of so few royal texts in the Bible*. Third, this collected work that we call the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament reflects the experience of Israel over approximately a thousand years, from the 1100s BC/BCE to 100s BC/BCE. And as it is compiled, it becomes read and interpreted across books and across its major divisions.

Studies:

- *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn et al. (second extensively revised edition; Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1999).
- Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (translated by Thomas Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).
- Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of GOD: Ancient Israelite Religion through the Lens of Divinity* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
- Peter Machinist, “The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn; New York/London: New York University Press, 1991) 420-42.
- For Canaanite/Ugaritic matrix with ancient Israel, see Peter Machinist, “To Refer or Not To Refer: That is the Question,” in *Subtle Citation, Allusion, and Translation in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Ziony Zevit; Sheffield/Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2017) 182-227; and Mark S. Smith, “Biblical Narrative between Ugaritic and Akkadian Literature: Part I: Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible: Consideration of Recent Comparative Research,” *Revue Biblique* 114 (2007) 5-29.
- For the Mesopotamian “invasion,” see Paul Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (HSS 47; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000); Tallay Ornan, “Ishtar Depicted on Finds from Israel,” in *Studies in the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan* (ed. A. Mazar with the assistance of G. Mathias; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 235-52; Mark S. Smith, “Biblical Narrative between Ugaritic and Akkadian Literature: Part II,” *Revue Biblique* 114 (2007) 189-207; Peter Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in Isaiah,” *JAOS* 103 (1983) 719-37. See also Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1-39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

III. The Story of God in the Hebrew Bible

- So how does this look at the ANE in the Bible affect how we think about God in the Bible? The short answer: God goes as Israel goes; and the complexity of expressions about God point not only to the complexities of Israel’s experience, but also to the complexity of Israel sense of God. Or from the point of revelation, wherever God brings Israel, Israel goes in its understanding of divinity; and as Israel brings the ANE into its Bible, so its representations of divinity are so marked. Or from the perspective of revelation, God has brought ANE conceptualizations of divinity to Israel and into its Bible.
- The theological challenge of El-Yahweh. See Exodus 6:2-3 (El Shadday identified with Yahweh); Genesis 49:25 (“El” parallel to “Shadday” along with the goddess called “Breasts and Womb”; and Numbers 23:22 = 24:8 (El “who brought them from Egypt.” He also “has (horns) like the horns of the wild ox”). Cast in theological terms, we might say that El and Yahweh meet or converge in the same Israelite Godhead; no biblical writer expresses a problem with their identification.
- The imprint of the goddess Asherah in the Bible was perhaps more subtle but certainly no less profound, for example, on the figure of female Wisdom in Proverbs 3 with her tree of life (see especially verse 18).
- Some impact also with the god, Baal, who unlike El is the object of biblical polemic. Earlier I mentioned Baal’s title, “Rider of the clouds” (cf. Deut 33:27; Ps 68:5) and the names of his enemies that appear for Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible.
- With El, Asherah and Baal, there is the outline of a shared cultural heritage with Ugarit and early Israel with respect to the god of Israel.
- By contrast with Mesopotamia, Israel was under invasion from an empire with its empire god. In turn, Israel’s god would become an empire god over the universe and more, an empire god for a people in exile, a colonized people and ultimately an empire god without other gods. The cosmology of

Mesopotamia as found in the Enuma Elish (sometimes called the Creation Epic) and other texts aided Israel's thinking about its God in the midst of its terrible circumstances, yielding a sometimes overwhelming, yet also consoling god for a sometimes overwhelmed and at times suffering people that was able to exercise its own agency in a variety of ways, including the creation of the Hebrew Bible as we know it.

Studies:

- Wilfred George Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013).
- Beate Pongratz-Leisten, editor, *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).
- Ze'ev Meshel et al. *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012). See also the essays in the journal, *Maarav* 20.1 (2013).
- Barbara Nevling Porter, editor, *What is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009).
- Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (second edition; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans; Dearborn, MI: Dove Booksellers, 2002); and *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; paperback edition, 2003).

Closing Observations

Divinity in ancient Israel is not simply about origins; and it is not only about what appears as the end-product. It is not simply an exalted, sublime notion of monotheism. It is no less about the constant change in Israel's experience of itself, its world and its God; a project of endless and open-ended revision. Biblical divinity is divine paradox in motion, shrouded in mysterious beginnings, middles and ends, none fully determinative for any religious tradition and none fully grasped by any religious tradition. As religious persons, lay learners and scholars alike, faithful and doubters as well, we may sense the mystery of the divine embedded in our biblical texts and embodied in them.

Our story also involves how our field of biblical studies is moving and changing and also how, God willing, the Church is changing and moving. Our ancient sources, our field and our deity constitute moving targets that we can rarely grasp together; all three show motion, complexity and mystery, sometimes in interrelated ways. It is the important work of all in faith communities -- religious leaders and biblical scholars, theologians, religious thinkers and lay people alike in light of their own incarnate experience -- not to simplify the Bible or its God, but to embrace Bible's revelatory motion and complexity and thereby its intimations of the mystery of the biblical God.

Studies:

- Francis X. Clooney, SJ, "Neither Here Nor There: Crossing Boundaries, Becoming Insiders, Remaining Catholic," in *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (edited by José Igancio Cabezon and Sheila Greeve Davaney; London/New York: Routledge, 2004) 99-111.
- Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans in 2010); and *How Human is God? Seven Questions about God and Humanity in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).