



# The IVP Bible Background COMMENTARY

*Old Testament*

An indispensable resource for all students of the Bible,  
accessibly providing the cultural background  
of every passage in the Old Testament

JOHN H. WALTON  
VICTOR H. MATTHEWS  
& MARK W. CHAVALAS



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# PENTATEUCH

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## Introduction

**T**hough there are many reasons to consider the Pentateuch as a single, unitary piece of literature, the background materials pertinent to the study of each book are vastly different. As a result, we offer here an introduction to each of the five books individually.

### Genesis

Genesis is typically divided into two main sections (1—11, 12—50). The background material most helpful for understanding the first section is the mythological literature of the ancient Near East. Both Mesopotamian and Egyptian mythology provide a wealth of materials concerning contemporary perspectives on the creation of the world and of human beings. These works include the *Enuma Elish* and the Atrahasis Epic, as well as a number of \*Sumerian myths from the region of Mesopotamia. From Egypt there are three main creation texts, one each from Memphis, Heliopolis (in the Pyramid Texts) and Hermopolis (in the Coffin Texts). Additionally, there are several flood stories available from the region of Mesopotamia, found in the Gilgamesh Epic and in the Atrahasis Epic. Examination of this literature helps us to observe many similarities and differences between ancient Near Eastern and Israelite concepts. Similarities will make us aware of the common ground that existed between Israel and her neighbors. Sometimes the similarity will be in the details of the narrative (such as sending out birds from the ark) or in aspects of the text we might not have noticed before (such as the naming of things in conjunction with their creation). Some similarities might lead us to question whether we have read too much theological signifi-

cance into certain elements in the text (e.g., the creation of woman from a rib), while in other cases we might find that we have not seen enough of the theological significance (e.g., God's coming to the garden in the "cool of the day"). In general such similarities help us to understand the biblical accounts in broader perspective.

The differences between the ancient Near Eastern and biblical literatures will help us to appreciate some of the distinctives of both the Israelite culture and the biblical faith. These will again include specific details (shape of the ark, length of the flood) as well as foundational concepts (the contrast between the biblical view of creation by the spoken word of God and the Mesopotamian view that the creation of the world was associated with the birth of the cosmic deities). In many cases the differences are related (either directly or indirectly) to the unique monotheistic faith of Israel.

It is not unusual for the similarities and the differences to come together in a single element. The concepts of humankind's being created (1) from clay and (2) in the image of deity are both familiar in the ancient Near East, but Israel puts a unique twist on the idea that moves it into an altogether different sphere.

We cannot always account for the similarities and the differences as clearly or as conclusively as we might wish. Different scholars will have varying opinions of the implications based on some of their own presuppositions. The issues are often complex, and any individual scholar's conclusions may be highly interpretive. For this reason it is easier to offer information than it is to offer satisfying answers.

Finally, the comparative literature not only provides parallel accounts to some of those found in Genesis 1—11 but also provides a parallel to the overall structure of this section. The Mesopotamian Atrahasis Epic, like Genesis 1—11, contains a summary of creation, three threats and a resolution. Such observations can help us to understand the literary aspects to how this portion of the Bible is pieced together. Additionally, if this parallel is legitimate, it can help us see the genealogies in a different light, because when the biblical text has genealogies it reflects the Genesis blessing of being fruitful and multiplying, while in the comparable sections of Atrahasis the gods are distressed by the growth of human population and try to curb it.

Finding literary parallels to Genesis 12—50 presents more of a challenge. Though scholars have attempted to attach various descriptive terms to the patriarchal narratives (such as "sagas" or "legends"), any modern terminology is inadequate to encompass the nature of the ancient literature and is bound to mislead as much as it helps. There is nothing in the literature of the ancient Near East to parallels the stories about the patriarchs. The closest material is found in Egypt in works such as the *Story of Sinuhe*, but that account covers only the lifetime of one man, rather than following several generations, and has nothing to do with resettlement or relationship with God. Even the Joseph story, considered on its own, is difficult to classify and compare. Again comparisons could be made to the stories of Sinuhe, \*Wenamon or \*Ahiqar (all dealing with the life and times of royal courtiers), but the similarities are quite superficial.

The background information for understanding these narratives comes from a different set of materials. These chapters concern the lives of the patriarchs and

their families as they move from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt in the process of the formation of the covenant. A number of archives (\*Nuzi, \*Mari, \*Emar, \*Alalakh) that have been discovered in Syria and Mesopotamia have provided information about the history, culture and customs of the ancient Near East in the second millennium. Often these materials can shed light on the political events or settlement history of the region. They can also help us to see how families lived and why they did some of the things that appear odd to us. In the process we gain important information that can help us process the biblical materials. For instance, we commonly seek ethical guidance in the behavior of biblical characters (though this is not always a productive procedure). In order to understand why people do what they do and to understand the decisions they make, it is important to become familiar with the norms of culture. We may find, then, that some of the behavior of the patriarchs is driven by norms that we have misunderstood or that we could easily misconstrue. Corrective information can often be provided by the archives.

One of the interesting conclusions that can be drawn from this kind of analysis is the understanding that there was not much in the worldview of the patriarchs and their families that differentiated them from the common ancient Near Eastern culture of the day. Again, then, an understanding of the general culture may help us to sort out what elements in the text have theological significance and what elements do not. For instance, an understanding of the practice of \*circumcision in the ancient Near East may provide helpful guidelines to our assessment of it in the Bible. Observations about the use of the torch and censer in ancient Near Eastern \*rituals may open up the meaning of Genesis 15. Even Abraham's understanding of God can be illuminated by information from the ancient Near Eastern documents.

As we encounter all of this information, we must be impressed with how often God uses the familiar to build bridges to his people. As what was familiar to them becomes more familiar to us, we can understand more of the text. On the other hand it is important to realize that the purposes of the book of Genesis go far beyond any of the literature available in the ancient Near East. The presence of similarities does not suggest in any way that the Bible is simply a secondhand, second-class repackaging of ancient Near Eastern literature. Rather, the background material helps us understand Genesis as a unique theological product linked to people and events embedded in a specific cultural and historical context.

## Exodus

The book of Exodus contains a virtual cornucopia of types of literature, from narrative to law to architectural instructions. All are skillfully woven together to narrate the sequence of events that led a people from feeling that God had abandoned them to understanding themselves to be God's elect people with his presence in their midst. As a result there are many different primary sources that may offer assistance.

As might be expected, Exodus has more connections to Egyptian sources than any other book. Unfortunately the uncertainty concerning the date of the events

and the sparsity of materials from some of the related periods of Egyptian history leave many questions unanswered. As a result it is not so much the historical literature of Egypt that we depend on but all the sources that give information about geography or culture. Locating the cities and places mentioned in the biblical text is very difficult and many uncertainties remain, yet one by one some of the gaps are being closed as archaeology continues to investigate significant sites.

The legal passages of Exodus are comparable to a wide range of law collections from Mesopotamia. These include \*Sumerian legal texts such as the reform of Uruinimgina (or Urukagina), the laws of \*Ur-Nammu and the laws of \*Lipit-Ish-tar. These are fragmentary texts that date from the late third millennium and early second millennium B.C. The more extensive texts are the laws of \*Eshnunna and \*Hammurabi (from the \*Old Babylonian period, eighteenth century B.C.), the \*Hittite laws from the seventeenth century and the Middle Assyrian laws from the twelfth century. These law collections, as indicated by the paragraphs that surround them, are intended to testify to the gods how successful the king has been at establishing and maintaining justice in his kingdom. As such, the laws are designed to reflect the wisest and fairest decisions the king could imagine. Like the candidate making a campaign speech who seeks to find every possible piece of legislation that he can claim responsibility for, the king wanted to show himself in the best possible light.

These laws help us to see that the actual legislation that determined the shape of Israelite society was not all that different on the surface from the laws that would have characterized Assyrian or Babylonian society. What was different was that for Israel the law was part of God's revelation of what he was like. The Babylonians had just as strong prohibitions of murder as the Israelites had. But the Babylonians would have refrained from murder because murder was disruptive to the smooth ordering of society and the principles of civilization. Israelites would have refrained from murder because of who God was. The laws may look the same, but the foundation of the legal system was remarkably different. For the Israelites, \*Yahweh their God was the source of all law and the foundation of all societal norms. In Mesopotamia the king was entrusted with the authority to perceive what the law ought to be and to establish the law. The gods were not moral, nor did they require moral behavior, but they did expect humans to preserve the values of civilization and therefore to act in orderly and civilized ways.

The point is, then, that the law given at Sinai does not necessarily prescribe new laws. Its actual legislation may be very much like the laws that Israel had been living under in Egypt and is clearly similar to the laws that governed other societies of the ancient Near East. What is new is the revelation of God that is accomplished through the institutionalization of the law as part of the \*covenant between God and Israel. Comparing the law of the Bible to the ancient Near Eastern law collections can help us to understand both the concept of law and order as well as the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the law.

When we get to the section of Exodus that has to do with the construction of the tabernacle, we may be well served by understanding the use and construction of shrines (portable and otherwise) in the ancient Near East. The detailed description of the materials that were used in the construction of the tabernacle, can be



understood as we become aware of the value that culture attached to those materials. For example, consider the value that our society places on a mink coat, an oak desk, a leather chair or a stone house. Alongside of materials, we also attach value to positioning, as in the penthouse apartment, the corner office or the house at the top of the hill. So as we become acquainted with the materials and positions that the ancient Israelites attached value to, we can appreciate the rationale behind certain details. Again, we will often find that the rationale is cultural rather than theological. Once we understand the cultural elements, we can avoid attaching a foreign theological significance to some of the features.

## Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is filled with instructions concerning how to maintain the holy space that was set apart for God's presence. This includes details of the sacrificial system, instructions for the priests and laws concerning \*purity. In the ancient world \*impurity was believed to create an environment for the demonic, so \*purity needed to be maintained. This generally involved \*rituals as well as incantations. For Israel \*purity was a positive value that included rules of ethical behavior as well as issues of etiquette.

The ancient Near Eastern material that is most helpful for understanding the book of Leviticus is that which gives information about sacrifices, rituals and instructions for priests and dealing with \*impurity. This information usually must be gleaned in bits and pieces from many different sources. There are, however, a few major ritual texts available that serve as significant sources of information. While \*Hittite literature contains many sorts of ritual texts, among the most helpful is the *Instructions for the Temple Officials* from the mid-second millennium. This text details the means that should be used to protect the sanctuary from sacrilege and trespass. Mesopotamian sources are also plentiful.

The *maqlu* texts contain eight tablets of incantations as well as one tablet of rituals connected to the incantations. Most of these incantations are attempts to counter the powers of witchcraft. Other important series would include the *shurpu* texts, which concerned purification, the *bit rimki* texts concerning royal ablutions and the *namburbu* rituals of undoing.

Most of these texts assume a background of magic and divination where witchcraft, demonic forces and incantations represented powerful threats in society. Israelite beliefs ideally did not accept this worldview, and their concepts of \*purity and \*impurity had noticeable differences. Nevertheless, studying this material can expose many facets of the ancient worldview that the Israelites shared. Even though the biblical literature purged the rituals of the magical element, the institutionalized practices and the terminology describing them at times still contained the trappings or vestiges of the broader culture.

Certainly Israelite beliefs and practices were closer to the ancient Near East than they are to our own concepts of ritual, magic and \*purity. Since we understand so little concerning these aspects of their worldview, we are often inclined to read very foreign theological concepts or symbolism into some of the practices and rules. This often creates an erroneous view of the nature and teaching of the book. By acquainting ourselves with the ancient Near Eastern worldview, we can

avoid this type of error and understand the text a little more in the way that the Israelites would have understood it.

## Numbers

The book of Numbers contains instructions for travel and setting up the camp, as well as records of the events that took place during the nearly forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. It also includes a number of ritual and legal passages. Many of the sources that contribute to an understanding of the books of Exodus and Leviticus also provide background for the book of Numbers. In addition, itineraries from Egyptian sources can help in locating various places listed in the Israelites' travels. These itineraries come from a number of different sources, including the \*Execration Texts (where the names of certain cities were written on bowls and then shattered in connection with cursing rituals; Twelfth Dynasty, \*Middle Bronze period) and the topographical lists carved on the walls of temples such as those at Karnak and Medinet Habu (\*Late Bronze period). They preserve maps in a list form as they name each of the cities that would be encountered traveling along certain routes. It is interesting that some biblical sites, which archaeologists have considered suspect because no remains from a given period have been found there, are attested in the Egyptian itineraries for the same period.

Numbers, like several of the other books of the Pentateuch, contains information concerning Israel's ritual calendar. Information about feast days and ritual calendars is abundant in the ancient Near East because calendars were generally regulated by the priesthood. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ferret out many of the critical details of observances and especially to discover what is behind the formation of the traditions that are institutionalized in these calendars. It is a treacherous path that seeks to identify the links between the festivals of differing cultures even though there may be evidence of many areas of cultural exchange or dependence.

## Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy follows the format of agreements between nations, as described in the sidebar "The Covenant and Ancient Near Eastern Treaties." In these ancient covenants, the largest section was usually the stipulations section, which detailed the obligations of the vassal. These would include general expectations, such as loyalty, as well as specifics, such as paying tribute and housing garrison troops. There would also be prohibitions against harboring fugitives and making alliances with other nations. There were obligations to contribute to the defense of the suzerain nation and to treat envoys with respect.

In Deuteronomy the stipulations are in the form of laws that detail expectations and prohibitions. Some interpreters believe that the laws in chapters 6-26 (or 12-26) are arranged according to the Ten Commandments. Just as the ancient law collections have a prologue and an epilogue to give them a literary framework (see the introduction to Exodus), it is the covenant that provides the literary framework for the law. The literary framework of \*Hammurabi's laws helps us to understand that the collection of laws was not for framing legislation but for demonstrating how just Hammurabi's reign was. Likewise the literary framework of

Deuteronomy gives us an idea of why these laws were collected. Deuteronomy is framing these laws not as legislation but as \*covenant.

When the people of the ancient Near East agreed to a treaty and its stipulations, they were obliged to abide by the terms of the treaty. It is the same level of obligation that would be connected to the laws of the land, but it operates differently, not within a legal system. For example, in today's world each country has its own laws, enacted by its legislative bodies, that are binding on its citizens. But there is also international law, which in part has been established by multinational bodies, often by treaty-type agreements. This international law is binding on all of the parties involved in the agreement. The binding nature of Deuteronomy is tied to treaty rather than to law (that is, to the covenant rather than to legislation). What that means is that Israel's obligations were connected to sustaining the relationship outlined in the covenant. If they were to be God's people (covenant), they were expected to conduct themselves in the described ways (stipulations). We should therefore not look at the laws as laws of the land (though they may well have been). The Israelites were not supposed to keep the law because it was the law; they were to keep the law because it reflected something of the nature of God and of what he wanted them to be like in order to remain in relationship with him.

An additional characteristic of Deuteronomy is that it is presented as the exhortations of Moses to the people. In this way Moses is seen as the mediator of the covenant because as God's messenger or envoy he is establishing the terms of the treaty. The \*Hittite treaties preserve only the treaties themselves and offer no insight into the envoy who delivered the treaty. Other texts, however, allow us to gain some insight into the role of the envoy. He often presented his message verbally but had a written copy for the documentation and for the records. The words of Moses admonishing the people to be loyal to the terms of the covenant are very much in line with what any royal envoy would have been expected to say. The vassal would have been reminded that it was a privilege to be brought into this agreement and that it would be prudent to refrain from any action that would jeopardize those privileges.

## 1:1—2:3

### Creation

**1:1. In the beginning.** An Egyptian creation text from Thebes speaks of the god Amun who evolved in the beginning, or “on the first occasion.” Egyptologists interpret this not as an abstract idea but as a reference to a first-time event. In the same manner, the Hebrew word translated “beginning” usually refers not to a point in time but to an initial period. This suggests that the beginning period is the seven days of chapter one.

**1:2. formless and empty.** In Egyptian views of origins there is the concept of the “nonexistent” that may be very close to what is expressed here in Genesis. It is viewed as that which has not yet been differentiated and assigned function. No boundaries or definitions have been established. The Egyptian concept, however, also carries with it the idea of potentiality and a quality of being absolute.

**1:2. Spirit of God.** Some interpreters have translated this as a supernatural or mighty wind (the Hebrew word translated “Spirit” is sometimes translated “wind” in other passages), which has a parallel in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. There the sky god, Anu, creates the four winds that stir up the deep and its goddess, Tiamat. There it is a disruptive wind bringing unrest. The same phenomena can be seen in Daniel’s vision of the four beasts where “the four winds of heaven were churning up the great sea” (7:2), a situation that disturbs the beasts there. If this is correct, then the wind would be part of the negative description of verse 2, paralleled by the darkness.

**1:1-5. evening and morning.** The account of creation does not intend to give a modern scientific explanation of the origin of all natural phenomena, but rather to address the more practical aspects of creation that surround our experiences of living and surviving. In the course of this chapter the author relates how God set up alternating periods of light and darkness—the basis for time. The narrative speaks of evening first because the first time period of light is just coming to a close. The author does not attempt an analysis of the physical properties of light, nor is he concerned about its source or generation. Light is the regulator of time.

**1:3-5. light.** The people of the ancient world

did not believe that all light came from the sun. There was no knowledge that the moon simply reflected the light of the sun. Moreover, there is no hint in the text that “daylight” was caused by sunlight. The sun, moon and stars were all seen as bearers of light, but daylight was present even when the sun was behind a cloud or eclipsed. It made its appearance before the sun rose, and remained after the sun set.

**1:6-8. firmament.** In a similar way the expanse (sometimes called “the firmament”) set up in day two is the regulator of climate. The ancient Near Eastern cultures viewed the cosmos as featuring a three-tiered structure consisting of the heavens, the earth and the underworld. Climate originated from the heavens, and the expanse was seen as the mechanism that regulated moisture and sunlight. Though in the ancient world the expanse was generally viewed as more solid than we would understand it today, it is not the physical composition that is important but the function. In the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, the goddess representing this cosmic ocean, Tiamat, is divided in half by Marduk to make the waters above and the waters below.

**1:9-19. function of the cosmos.** Just as God is the One who set time in motion and set up the climate, he is likewise responsible for setting up all the other aspects of human existence. The availability of water and the ability of the land to grow vegetation; the laws of agriculture and the seasonal cycles; each of God’s creatures, created with a role to play—all of this was ordered by God and was good, not tyrannical or threatening. This reflects the ancient understanding that the gods were responsible for setting up a system of operations. The functioning of the cosmos was much more important to the people of the ancient world than was its physical makeup or chemical composition. They described what they saw and, more important, what they experienced of the world as having been created by God. That it was all “good” reflects God’s wisdom and justice. At the same time the text shows subtle ways of disagreeing with the perspective of the ancient Near East. Most notable is the fact that it avoids using names for the sun and moon, which to the neighbors of the Israelites were also the names of the corre-

sponding deities, and refers instead to the greater light and the lesser light.

**1:14. signs and seasons.** In a prologue to a Sumerian astrological treatise, the major gods, An, Enlil and Enki, put the moon and stars in place to regulate days, months and omens. In the famous Babylonian Hymn to Shamash, the sun god, reference is also made to his role in regulating the seasons and the calendar in general. It is intriguing that he is also the patron of divination. The Hebrew word used for “sign” has a cognate in Akkadian that is used for omens. The Hebrew word, however, has a more neutral sense, and again the author has emptied the elements of the cosmos of their more personal traits.

**1:20. great creatures of the sea.** In the Babylonian Hymn to Shamash, the sun god is said to receive praise and reverence even from the worst groups. Included in the list are the fearsome monsters of the sea. The hymn thus suggests that there is a total submission of all creatures to Shamash, just as the Genesis creation texts shows all creatures created by, and therefore submitted to, Yahweh. The Labbu Myth records the creation of the sea viper, whose length was sixty leagues.

**1:20-25. zoological categories.** The zoological categories include various species of (1) sea creatures, (2) birds, (3) land-based creatures, which are divided into domestic and wild animals and “creatures that move along the ground” (perhaps the reptiles and/or amphibians), and (4) humans. Insects and the microscopic world of creatures are not mentioned, but the categories are broad enough to include them.

**1:26-31. function of people.** While the organizational or functional focus of the account may have similarities with the ancient Near Eastern perspective, the reason for it all is quite different. In the ancient Near East, the gods created for themselves—the world was their environment for their enjoyment and existence. People were created only as an afterthought, when the gods needed slave labor to help provide the conveniences of life (such as irrigation trenches). In the Bible the cosmos was created and organized to function on behalf of the people that God planned as the centerpiece of his creation.

**1:26-31. creation of people in ancient Near Eastern myths.** In creation accounts from Mesopotamia an entire population of people is created, already civilized, using a mixture of clay and the blood of a slain rebel god. This creation comes about as the result of conflict

among the gods, and the god organizing the cosmos had to overcome the forces of chaos to bring order to his created world. The Genesis account portrays God’s creation not as part of a conflict with opposing forces but as a serene and controlled process.

**1:26-27. image of God.** When God created people, he put them in charge of all of his creation. He endowed them with his own image. In the ancient world an image was believed to carry the essence of that which it represented. An idol image of deity, the same terminology as used here, would be used in the worship of that deity because it contained the deity’s essence. This would not suggest that the image could do what the deity could do, nor that it looked the same as the deity. Rather, the deity’s work was thought to be accomplished through the idol. In similar ways the governing work of God was seen to be accomplished by people. But that is not all there is to the image of God. Genesis 5:1-3 likens the image of God in Adam to the image of Adam in Seth. This goes beyond the comment about plants and animals reproducing after their own kind, though certainly children share physical characteristics and basic nature (genetically) with their parents. What draws the idol imagery and the child imagery together is the concept that the image provides the capacity not only to serve in the place of God (his representative containing his essence) but also to be and act like him. The tools he provided so that we may accomplish that task include conscience, self-awareness and spiritual discernment. Mesopotamian traditions speak of sons being in the image of their fathers (*\*Enuma Elish*) but do not speak of humans created in the image of God; but the Egyptian *Instructions of Merikare* identifies humankind as the god’s images who came from his body. In Mesopotamia a significance of the image can be seen in the practice of kings setting up images of themselves in places where they want to establish their authority. Other than that, it is only other gods who are made in the image of gods. (See comment on 5:3.)

**2:1-3. seventh-day rest.** In the Egyptian creation account from Memphis, the creator god Ptah rests after the completion of his work. Likewise the creation of humans is followed by rest for the Mesopotamian gods. In Mesopotamia, however, the rest is a result of the fact that people have been created to do the work that the gods were tired of doing. Nonetheless, the desire for rest is one of the motivating elements driv-

ing these creation narratives. The containment or destruction of chaotic cosmic forces that is often a central part of ancient creation narratives leads to rest, peace or repose for the gods. Likewise it is the gods' inability to find rest from the noise and disturbance of humankind that leads to the flood. In all it is clear that ancient ideologies considered rest to be one of the principal objectives of the gods. In Israelite theology, God does not require rest *from* either cosmic or human disturbances but seeks rest *in* a dwelling place (see especially Ps 132:7-8, 13-14).

**2:1. sabbath divisions.** Dividing time into seven-day periods was a practice that is so far unattested in the other cultures of the ancient Near East, though there were particular days of the month in Mesopotamia that were considered unlucky, and they were often seven days apart (that is, the seventh day of the month, the fourteenth day of the month, etc.). Israel's sabbath was not celebrated on certain days of the month and was not linked to the cycles of the moon or to any other cycle of nature; it was simply observed every seventh day.

## 2:4-25

### Man and Woman in the Garden

**2:5. botanical categories.** Only the most general descriptions of plants are found. Trees, shrubs and plants are listed, but no specific species. We know, however, that the principal trees found in the Near East were acacia, cedar, Cypress, fig, oak, olive, date palm, pomegranate, tamarisk and willow. Shrubs included the oleander and juniper. The principal cultivated grains were wheat, barley and lentils. The description in this verse differs from day three in that it refers to domesticated or

cultivated plants. The reference then is not to a time before day three but to the fact that agriculture was not taking place.

**2:5. description of condition.** A creation text from Nippur sets the scene for creation by saying that waters did not yet flow through the opening in the earth and that nothing was growing and no furrow had been made.

**2:6. watering system.** The word used to describe the watering system in verse 6 (NIV: "streams") is difficult to translate. It occurs elsewhere only in Job 36:27. A similar word occurs in \*Babylonian vocabulary drawn from early \*Sumerian in reference to the system of subterranean waters, the primordial underground river. The Sumerian myth of \*Enki and Ninhursag likewise mentions such a watering system.

**2:7. man from dust.** The creation of the first man out of the dust of the earth is similar to what is found in ancient Near Eastern mythology. The Atrahasis Epic portrays the creation of humankind out of the blood of a slain deity mixed with clay. Just as dust in the Bible represents what the body becomes at death (Gen 3:19), so clay was what the body returned to in \*Babylonian thinking. The blood of deity represented the divine essence in mankind, a similar concept to God's bringing Adam into being with the breath of life. In Egyptian thinking it is the tears of the god that are mixed with clay to form man, though the *Instructions of Merikare* also speak of the god's making breath for their noses.

**2:8-14. location of Eden.** Based on the proximity of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the \*Sumerian legend of the mystical, utopian land of \*Dilmun, most scholars would identify Eden as a place in or near the northern end of the Persian Gulf. \*Dilmun has been identified with the island of Bahrain. The direction that it is "in the east" merely points to the gen-

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## ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MYTHOLOGY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

Mythology in the ancient world was like science in our modern world—it was their explanation of how the world came into being and how it worked. The mythological approach attempted to identify function as a consequence of purpose. The gods had purposes, and their activities were the causes of what humans experienced as effects. In contrast, our modern scientific approach identifies function as a consequence of structure and attempts to understand cause and effect based on natural laws that are linked to the structure, the composite parts, of a phenomenon. Because our scientific worldview is keenly interested in structure, we often go to the biblical account looking for information on structure. In this area, however, the biblical worldview is much more like its ancient Near Eastern counterparts in that it views function as a consequence of purpose. That is what Genesis 1 is all about—it has very little interest in structures. This is only one of many areas where understanding ancient Near Eastern culture, literature and worldview can help us understand the Bible.

Many parallels can be identified between ancient Near Eastern mythology and Old Testament passages and concepts. This is not to suggest that the Old Testament is to be considered simply as another example of ancient mythology or as being dependent on that literature. Mythology is a window to culture. It reflects the worldview and values of the culture that forged it. Many of the writings we find in

eral area of Mesopotamia and is fairly typical of primordial narratives. This, plus the direction of flow of the rivers (the location of the Pishon and Gihon being uncertain), has caused some to look in the Armenia region, near the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates. However, the characteristics of a well-watered garden in which humans do little or no work and in which life springs up without cultivation fits the marshy areas at the base of the Gulf and may even be an area now covered by the waters of the region.

**2:8. The “garden of Eden.”** The word *Eden* refers to a well-watered place, suggesting a luxuriant park. The word translated “garden” does not typically refer to vegetable plots but to orchards or parks containing trees.

**2:9. tree of life.** The tree of life is portrayed elsewhere in the Bible as offering extension of life (Prov 3:16-18), which sometimes can be viewed as having rejuvenating qualities. Various plants with such qualities are known from the ancient Near East. In the \*Gilgamesh Epic there is a plant called “old man becomes young” that grows at the bottom of the cosmic river. Trees often figure prominently in ancient Near Eastern art and on cylinder seals. These have often been interpreted as depicting a tree of life, but more support from the literature would be necessary to confirm such an interpretation.

**2:11. Pishon.** Analysis of sand patterns in Saudi Arabia and satellite photography have helped identify an old riverbed running northeast through Saudi Arabia from the Hijaz Mountains near Medina to the Persian Gulf in Kuwait near the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates. This would be a good candidate for the Pishon River.

**2:11. Havilah.** Perhaps because gold is mentioned in relation to Havilah, it is named in several other passages (Gen 10:7; 25:18; 1 Sam

15:7; 1 Chron 1:9). It has most often been placed in western Saudi Arabia near Medina along the Red Sea, an area that does produce gold, bdellium and onyx. Genesis 10:29 describes Havilah as the “brother” of Ophir, a region also known for its wealth in gold.

**2:21-22. rib.** The use of Adam’s rib for the creation of Eve may find illumination in the \*Sumerian language. The Sumerian word for rib is *ti*. Of interest is the fact that *ti* means “life,” just as *Eve* does (3:20). Others have suggested that a connection should be seen with the Egyptian word *imw*, which can mean either clay (out of which man was made) or rib.

**2:24. man leaving father and mother.** This statement is a narrative aside, which provides a comment on the social world of the people in later times. It uses the story of Eve’s creation as the basis for the legal principle of separate households. When a marriage was contracted, the wife left her parents’ home and joined the household of her husband. New loyalties were established in this way. Furthermore, the consummation of the marriage is associated here with the idea of the couple becoming one flesh again, just as Adam and Eve come from one body. The statement here that the *man* will leave his family does not necessarily refer to a particular sociology, but to the fact that in this chapter it is the man who has been seeking a companion. It also may reflect the fact that wedding ceremonies, including the wedding night, often took place in the house of the bride’s parents.

### 3:1-24

#### The Fall and the Pronouncement

**3:1. significance of serpents in ancient world.** From the very earliest evidence in ancient Near Eastern art and literature, the serpent is presented as a significant character. Perhaps

the Old Testament performed the same function for ancient Israelite culture that mythology did for other cultures—they provided a literary mechanism for preserving and transmitting their worldview and values. Israel was part of a larger cultural complex that existed across the ancient Near East. There are many aspects of that cultural complex that it shared with its neighbors, though each individual culture had its distinguishing features. When we seek to understand the culture and literature of Israel, we rightly expect to find help in the larger cultural arena, from mythology, wisdom writings, legal documents and royal inscriptions.

The community of faith need not fear the use of such methods to inform us of the common cultural heritage of the Near East. Neither the theological message of the text nor its status as God’s Word is jeopardized by these comparative studies. In fact, since revelation involves effective communication, we would expect that whenever possible God would use known and familiar elements to communicate to his people. Identification of similarities as well as differences can provide important background for a proper understanding of the text. This book has only the task of giving information and cannot engage in detailed discussion of how each individual similarity or difference can be explained. Some of that type of discussion can be found in John Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).



because its poison was a threat to life and its lidless eyes provided an enigmatic image, the serpent has been associated with both death and wisdom. The Genesis account evokes both aspects in the wisdom dialogue between the serpent and Eve and with the introduction of death after the expulsion from Eden. Similarly, \*Gilgamesh is cheated out of perpetual youth when a serpent consumes a magical plant the hero had retrieved from the sea bottom. The sinister image of the serpent is graphically displayed by the intertwining coils of a snake encompassing a \*cult stand found at Beth-Shean. Whether as a representative of primeval chaos (\*Tiamat or \*Leviathan) or a symbol of sexuality, the serpent harbors mystery for humans. Of particular interest is the \*Sumerian god Ningishzida, who was portrayed in serpent shape and whose name means "Lord of the Productive/Steadfast Tree." He was considered a ruler in the nether world and "throne-bearer of the earth." He was one of the deities that offered the bread of life to \*Adapa (see next comment). Even when not related to a god, the serpent represented wisdom (occult), \*fertility, health, chaos and immortality, and was often worshiped.

**3:2-5. temptation to be like God.** Aspiration to deity and lost opportunities to become like the gods figure prominently in a few ancient myths. In the tale of \*Adapa an offer of the "food of life" is inadvertently refused. Adapa, the first of the seven sages before the flood, is attempting to bring the arts of civilization to the first city, Eridu. As a fisherman, he had an unfortunate escapade with the south wind one day that eventuated in an audience with the chief god, Anu. Under the advice of the god \*Ea, when Anu offered him food he refused it, only to discover that it was food that would bring immortality. Eternal life also eludes \*Gilgamesh. In the famous epic about him, the death of his friend Enkidu leads him in a search for immortality, which he discovers is unattainable. In both of these accounts, being like the gods is viewed in terms of achieving immortality, whereas in the biblical account it is understood in terms of wisdom.

**3:7. fig leaf significance.** Fig leaves are the largest found in Canaan and could provide limited covering for the shamed couple. The significance of the fig's use may lie in its symbolism of fertility. By eating the forbidden fruit, the couple have set in motion their future role as parents and as cultivators of fruit trees and grain.

**3:8. cool of the day.** \*Akkadian terminology

has demonstrated that the word translated "day" also has the meaning "storm." This meaning can be seen also for the Hebrew word in Zephaniah 2:2. It is often connected to the deity coming in a storm of judgment. If this is the correct rendering of the word in this passage, they heard the thunder (the word translated "sound" is often connected to thunder) of the Lord moving about in the garden in the wind of the storm. In this case it is quite understandable why they are hiding.

**3:14. eating dust.** The depiction of dust or dirt for food is typical of descriptions of the netherworld in ancient literature. In the Gilgamesh Epic, Enkidu on his deathbed dreams of the netherworld and describes it as a place with no light and where "dust is their food, clay their bread," a description also known from the *Descent of Ishtar*. These are most likely considered characteristic of the netherworld because they describe the grave. Dust fills the mouth of the corpse, but dust will also fill the mouth of the serpent as it crawls along the ground.

**3:14-15. curses on serpents.** The Egyptian Pyramid Texts (second half of third millennium) contain a number of spells against serpents, but likewise include spells against other creatures considered dangers or pests who threaten the dead. Some of these spells enjoin the serpent to crawl on its belly (keep its face on the path). This is in contrast to raising its head up to strike. The serpent on its belly is non-threatening, while the one reared up is protecting or attacking. Treading on the serpent is used in these texts as a means of overcoming or defeating it.

**3:14-15. all snakes poisonous.** While it would have been observable that not all snakes were poisonous, the threat provided by some would, in the haste to protect oneself, attach itself to all. Of thirty-six species of snake known to the area, the viper (*Vipera palaestinae*) is the only poisonous snake in northern and central Israel. Snakes are associated occasionally with fertility and life (bronze serpent in the wilderness). However, they most often are tied to the struggle for life and the inevitability of death. The poisonous snakes would be the most aggressive, so an attack by a snake would always be viewed as a potentially mortal blow.

**3:16. labor pains.** Perhaps displaying the dual character of life, the joy of motherhood can be gained only through labor pain. Without modern medicine, these pains are described as the worst possible agony for humans (see Is 13:8; 21:3) and gods (note the \*Babylonian goddess \*Ishtar's cry in the \*Gilgamesh flood



epic when she sees the horror of the flood unleashed). \*Babylonians associated demons such as Lamashtu with the pain of childbirth and the tenuous condition of life for both mother and child in the birth process.

**3:16. husband-wife relationship.** Arranged marriages downplayed the role of romantic love in ancient Israelite society. However, in this labor-poor society men and women had to work together as a team. While pregnancy and child care periodically restricted the woman's work in the fields or the shop, a couple's survival was largely based on shared labor and the number of children they produced. Domination of the wife by her husband, while evident in some marriages, was not the ideal in ancient relationships. Both had their roles, although the legal rights with regard to making contracts, owning property and inheritance rights were primarily controlled by males. It is also a fact that concern over female chastity led to restrictions on associations by females and male control of the legal process.

**3:17. toil.** In Mesopotamian thinking people were created to be slaves and to do the work that the gods had tired of doing for themselves, much of it concerned with the agricultural process. In \**Enuma Elish* the entire purpose for creating people was to relieve the gods of their toil, unlike the biblical account, in which people were created to rule and became burdened with toil only as a result of the Fall.

**3:18. thorns and thistles.** In the Gilgamesh Epic, a paradisiacal place is described as featuring plants and trees that grow gems and precious stones instead of thorns and thistles.

**3:20. significance of naming.** Adam earlier had named the animals, which was a demonstration of his authority over them. Here his naming of Eve suggests Adam's position of rule, as referred to in verse 16. In the ancient world when one king placed a vassal king on the throne, a new name would often be given to demonstrate the overlord's dominion. Likewise, when God enters \*covenant relationships with Abram and Jacob, he changes their names. A final example occurs in the \*Babylonian account of creation, \**Enuma Elish*, which opens with the situation before heaven and earth were named. The account proceeds to give names, just as God names the things he creates in Genesis 1.

**3:21. skin garments.** The long outer tunic is still the basic garment for many people in the Middle East. This replaces the inadequate fig leaf covering made by Adam and Eve. God provides them with these garments as the

type of gift given by a patron to a client. Gifts of clothing are among the most common presents mentioned in the Bible (see Joseph in Gen 41:42) and other ancient texts. It also prepares them for the rigors of weather and work which await them. In the *Tale of Adapa* (see comment on 3:2-5), after \*Adapa loses the opportunity to eat from the bread and water of life, he is given clothing by the god Anu before being sent from his presence.

**3:24. cherubim.** The cherubim are supernatural creatures referred to over ninety times in the Old Testament, where they usually function in the capacity of guardians of God's presence. From the guardian of the tree of life, to the ornamental representation over the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant, to the accompaniment of the chariot/throne in Ezekiel's visions, the cherubim are always closely associated with the person or property of deity. Biblical descriptions (Ezek 1, 10) agree with archaeological finds that suggest they are composite creatures (like griffins or sphinxes). Representations of these creatures are often found flanking the throne of the king. Here in Genesis the cherubim guard the way to the tree of life, now forbidden property of God. An interesting Neo-Assyrian seal depicts what appears to be a fruit tree flanked by two such creatures with deities standing on their backs supporting a winged sun disk.

## 4:1-16

### Cain and Abel

**4:1-7. sacrifices of Cain and Abel.** The sacrifices of Cain and Abel are not depicted as addressing sin or seeking atonement. The word used designates them very generally as "gifts"—a word that is most closely associated with the grain offering later in Leviticus 2. They appear to be intended to express gratitude to God for his bounty. Therefore it is appropriate that Cain should bring an offering from the produce that he grew, for blood would not be mandatory in such an offering. It should be noted that Genesis does not preserve any record of God requesting such offerings, though he approved of it as a means of expressing thanks. Gratitude is not expressed, however, when the gift is grudgingly given, as is likely the case with Cain.

**4:11-12. nomadic lifestyle.** The wandering nomadic lifestyle to which Cain is doomed represents one of the principal economic/social divisions in ancient society. Once animals had been domesticated, around 8000 B.C., herding and pastoral nomadism became a major economic pursuit for tribes and villages. General-

ly, herding was part of a mixed village economy, including agriculture and trade. However, some groups concentrated more of their efforts on taking sheep and goats to new pasture as the seasons changed. These semi-nomadic herdsman followed particular migration routes which provided adequate water for their animals as well as grazing. Contracts were sometimes made with villages along the route for grazing in harvested fields. These herdsman occasionally clashed with settled communities over water rights or because of raiding. Governments tried to control nomadic groups within their area, but these attempts were not usually successful over long periods of time. The result is the composition of stories which describe the conflict between herders and farmers as they compete for use of the land.

**4:14-15. blood vengeance.** In areas where the central government had not gained full control, blood feuds between families were common. They were based on the simple principle of "an eye for an eye," which demanded the death of a murderer or the death of a member of his family as restitution. There was also an assumption that kinship ties included the obligation to defend the honor of the household. No hurt could be ignored, or the household would be considered too weak to defend itself and other groups would take advantage of them. Cain's comment assumes that there is a more extensive family in existence and that some from Abel's line would seek revenge.

**4:15. mark of Cain.** The Hebrew word used here does not denote a tattoo or mutilation inflicted on a felon or slave (referred to in the Laws of \*Eshnunna and the Code of \*Hammurabi). It best compares to the mark of divine protection placed on the foreheads of the innocents in Jerusalem in Ezekiel 9:4-6. It may be an external marking that would cause others to treat him with respect or caution. However, it may represent a sign from God to Cain that he would not be harmed and people would not attack him.

## 4:17-26

### The Line of Cain

**4:17. city building.** Because the founding of a city is tied so intimately to the founding of a nation or people in the ancient world, stories about the founder and the circumstances surrounding its founding are a part of the basic heritage of the inhabitants. These stories generally include a description of the natural resources which attracted the builder (water supply, grazing and crop land, natural defens-

es), the special attributes of the builder (unusual strength and/or wisdom) and the guidance of the patron god. Cities were constructed along or near rivers or springs. They served as focal points for trade, culture and religious activity for a much larger region and thus eventually became political centers or city states. The organization required to build them and then to keep their mud-brick and stone walls in repair helped generate the development of assemblies of elders and monarchies to rule them.

**4:19. polygamy.** The practice of a man marrying more than one wife is known as polygamy. This custom was based on several factors: (1) an imbalance in the number of males and females, (2) the need to produce large numbers of children to work herds and/or fields, (3) the desire to increase the prestige and wealth of a household through multiple marriage contracts and (4) the high rate of death of females in childbirth. Polygamy was most common among pastoral nomadic groups and in rural farming communities, where it was important that every female be attached to a household and be productive. Monarchs also practiced polygamy, primarily as a means of making alliances with powerful families or other nations. In such situations the wives might also end up as hostages if the political relationship soured.

**4:20. animal domestication.** Raising livestock is the first stage in animal domestication, which involves human control of breeding, food supply and territory. Sheep and goats were the first livestock to be domesticated, with the evidence extending back to the ninth millennium B.C. Larger cattle came a bit later, and evidence for pig domestication begins in the seventh millennium.

**4:21. musical instruments.** Musical instruments were among the first inventions of early humans. In Egypt the earliest end-blown flutes date to the fourth millennium B.C. A number of harps and lyres as well as a pair of silver flutes were found in the royal cemetery at \*Ur dating to the early part of the third millennium. Flutes made of bone or pottery date back at least to the fourth millennium. Musical instruments provided entertainment as well as background rhythm for dances and \*ritual performances, such as processions or \*cultic dramas. Other than simple percussion instruments (drums and rattles), the most common instruments used in the ancient Near East were harps and lyres. Examples have been found in excavated tombs and painted on the walls of temples and palaces. They are described in literature as a means of soothing

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