

John H. Walton, *Methodology: An Introductory Essay*
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Comparative Studies

For over a century, studies comparing the OT and the ancient Near East have hovered on the fringe of hermeneutics and exegesis. Since these studies were at times exploited by critical scholars for polemical attacks against the biblical text, evangelicals were long inclined to avoid or even vilify them. They viewed the idea that the OT borrowed or adapted ancient Near Eastern ideas or literature as incompatible with Scripture's inspiration. Even as evangelicals in recent decades have grown more interested in tapping into the gold mine of comparative data, the results have often been considered tangential to the ultimate theological task. The influence from the ancient world has been identified with all that Israel was supposed to reject as they received the revelation from God that would purge their worldview from its pagan characteristics. Comparative studies served only as a foil to the theological interpretation of the text.

Consequently, comparative studies have been viewed as a component of historical- critical analysis at best, and more often as a threat to the uniqueness of the literature of the Bible. In contrast, today more and more biblical scholars are exploring the positive uses of comparative studies. As a result of half a century of the persistent scholarship of Assyriologists, Hittitologists, Egyptologists, and Sumerologists, we are now in a position to add significant nuances to the paradigms for studying the impact of the ancient Near East on the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible. The end result is a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the text.

Ever since the discovery of the Babylonian flood and creation accounts, critical scholarship has been attempting to demonstrate that the OT is derivative literature, a disadvantaged step-sister to the dominant cultures of the ancient Near East. These scholars have attempted to reduce the OT to converted mythology, whose dependency exposes its humanity. For confessing orthodoxy, however, there is no room for the conclusion that the OT is man-made theology. If the Flood is simply a human legend invented by people and borrowed into Israelite thinking, if the covenant is merely Israel's way of expressing their optimism that God has specially favored them through a treaty agreement with them, if the prophets never heard the voice of God but simply mimicked their ancient Near Eastern counterparts, then Christians are greatly to be pitied for having been duped in what would have to be considered the greatest hoax in history. It is no surprise, then, that evangelicals have often rejected the claims of these critical schools of thought.

There is, however, nothing inherently damaging to orthodox theology and beliefs about the Bible if its authors were interacting at various levels with the literature current in the culture. All literature is dependent on the culture in which it arises—it must be, if it intends to communicate effectively. Even when a text engages in polemic and correction of culture, it must be aware of and interact with current thinking and literature.

If we think about the example of creation texts, we realize that if God were to reveal his work of creation in our modern culture, he would have to explain how it related to the Big Bang theory or to evolution. His revelation would focus on the origins of the physical structure of the universe because that is what is important in our cultural perspective. In the ancient world, though, physical structure was

relatively insignificant. People at that time were much more interested in the aspect of bringing order out of chaos and the divine exercise of jurisdiction demonstrated in giving everything a role and a purpose. In this context, any account of origins would of necessity have to be presented with these ancient ideas in mind.

The biblical text, in other words, formulated its discussion in relation to the thinking found in the ancient literature. It should be no surprise, then, if areas of similarity are found. This is far different from the contention that Israelite literature is simply derivative mythology. There is a great distance between borrowing from a particular piece of literature (as has been claimed in critical circles) and resonating with the larger culture that has itself been influenced by its literatures. When Americans speak of the philosophy of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” they are resonating with an idea that has penetrated society rather than borrowing from the writings of Epicurus.

Another area where we must be sensitive to cultural issues is in the way we understand literary genres. It should be no surprise that OT genres need to be compared to genres in the larger culture. Whether we are looking at wisdom literature, hymnic literature, historical literature, or legal literature, we find generous doses of both similarities and differences. Understanding the genre of a piece of literature is necessary if we desire to perceive the author’s intentions. Since perceiving such intentions is essential to our theological interpretation of a text, we recognize that understanding genre contributes to legitimate theological interpretation. Some genres will operate differently in the ancient world than they do in our own culture, so we must become familiar with the mechanics of the genres represented in the ancient Near East.

Where there are similarities, they help us to understand the genre parameters and characteristics as they existed in the ancient mind. What defined historical writing in the ancient world? How close was it to the journalistic approach of today, which relies heavily on eyewitness accounts? How did genealogies function in OT times? Were they compiled for the same purpose that we compile them for? Occasionally comparisons within genres reveal close similarities between the biblical and ancient Near Eastern literatures on the level of content. Such similarities do not jeopardize inspiration. Even if the OT had the very same law or the very same proverb that was found in the ancient Near East, inspiration would be involved in the author choosing to incorporate that law or proverb into the canonical collection and to nuance it properly in appropriate context.

Where there are differences, it is still important to understand the ancient Near Eastern genres because the theological points will often be made by means of contrast. The theology behind the book of Job, for example, is built primarily on the distinctives of the ancient Near Eastern view (represented in the arguments of Job’s friends), which was based on an appeasement mentality. The book’s message is accomplished in counterpoint. If we are unaware of the contrasts, we will miss some of the nuances.

In fact, then, we must go beyond the simple identification of similarities and differences to articulate the relationships on a functional level. Similarities could exist because Israel adapted something from ancient Near Eastern culture or literature, or, as previously mentioned, because they simply resonated with the culture. Differences could reflect the Israelites’ rejection of the ancient Near Eastern perspective, or they might emerge in explicit Israelite polemics against the views of their neighbors. In all such cases, the theology of the text may be nuanced by the cultural context.

In light of all of this, it may be logically concluded that without the guidance of comparative studies, we are bound to misinterpret the text at some points. A text is a complex of ideas linked by

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threads of writing. Each phrase and each word communicates by the ideas and thoughts that they will trigger in the reader or hearer. We can then speak of these underlying ideas as gaps that need to be filled with meaning by the audience. The writer or speaker assumes that those gaps will be filled in particular ways based on the common worldview he shares with his audience. Interpreters have the task of filling in those gaps, and when interpreting authoritative texts, it is theologically essential that we fill them appropriately.

For example, the Tower of Babel is described as being built “with its head in the heavens.” Without the benefit of ancient Near Eastern backgrounds, early interpreters were inclined to provide the theological explanation that the builders were trying to build a structure that would allow them to launch an attack on the heavens. Comparative studies have allowed modern interpreters to recognize that this is an expression used to describe the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, which were intended to serve as a bridge or portal between heavens and earth. Such an understanding leads to an alternative, and arguably more accurate, interpretation of the text. In conclusion, then, as our interpretation of the text requires us to fill in the gaps, we have to be careful to consider the option of filling those gaps from the cultural context before we leap to fill them with theological significance.

As we make this transition in our thinking, we must expand the focus of our comparative studies. Too often in the past, comparative studies have been limited either to individual features (e.g., birds sent out from the ark) or to the literary preservation of traditions (e.g., creation accounts, vassal treaties) and have been conducted with either apologetics (from confessional circles) or polemics (against confessional traditions) in mind. As those interested in the interpretation of the text, we should recognize in addition the importance of comparative studies that focus on conceptual issues, conducted with illumination of the cultural dynamics behind the text in mind. . . .

There are ten important principles that must be kept in mind when doing comparative studies:

1. Both similarities and differences must be considered.
2. Similarities may suggest a common cultural heritage rather than borrowing.
3. It is common to find similarities at the surface but differences at the conceptual level and vice versa.
4. All elements must be understood in their own context as accurately as possible before crosscultural comparisons are made.
5. Proximity in time, geography, and spheres of cultural contact all increase the possibility of interaction leading to influence.
6. A case for literary borrowing requires identification of likely channels of transmission.
7. The significance of differences between two pieces of literature is minimized if the works are not the same genre.
8. Similar functions may be performed by different genres in different cultures.
9. When literary or cultural elements are borrowed, they may in turn be transformed into something quite different.
10. A single culture will rarely be monolithic, either in a contemporary cross-section or in consideration of a passage of time.

Successful interpreters must try to understand the cultural background of the ancient Near East just as successful missionaries must learn the culture, language, and worldview of the people they are trying to reach. This is the rationale for us to study the Bible in light of the ancient Near East. What we contend, then, is that comparative studies has three goals in mind: 1. We study the history of the ancient Near East as a means of recovering knowledge of the events that shaped the lives of people in the ancient world. 2. We study archaeology as a means of recovering the lifestyle reflected in the material culture of the ancient world. 3. We study the literature of the ancient Near East as a means of penetrating the heart and soul of the people who inhabited the ancient world that Israel shared. These goals are at the heart of comparative studies and will help us understand the OT better.

John H. Walton from the introduction to
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Translating Culture

The very act of trying to translate the culture requires taking it out of its context and fitting it into ours. What does the text mean when it describes Sarah as “beautiful”? One not only has to know the meaning of the word, but also must have some idea of what defines beauty in the ancient world. When the Bible speaks of something as elemental as marriage, we are not wrong to think of it as the establishment of a socially and legally recognized relationship between a man and a woman. But marriage carries a lot more social nuance than that in our culture and not necessarily similar at all to the social nuances in the ancient culture. When marriages are arranged and represent alliances between families and exchange of wealth, the institution fills a far different place in the culture than what we know when feelings of love predominate. In that light the word marriage means something vastly different in ancient culture, even though the word is translated properly. We would seriously distort the text and interpret it incorrectly if we imposed all of the aspects of marriage in our culture into the text and culture of the Bible. The minute anyone (professional or amateur) attempts to translate the culture, we run the risk of making the text communicate something it never intended.

Rather than translating the culture, then, we need to try to enter the culture. When people want to study the Bible seriously, one of the steps they take is to learn the language. As I teach language students, I am still always faced with the challenge of persuading them that they will not succeed simply by learning enough of the language to engage in translation. Truly learning the language requires leaving English behind, entering the world of the text and understanding the language in its Hebrew context without creating English words in their minds. They must understand the Hebrew as Hebrew text. This is the same with culture. We must make every attempt to set our English categories aside, to leave our cultural ideas behind, and try our best (as limited as the attempt might be) to understand the material in its cultural context without translating it.

How do we do this? How can we recover the way that an ancient culture thought and what categories and ideas and concepts were important to them? We have already noted that language is keyed to culture, and we may then also recognize that literature is a window to the culture that produced it. We can begin to understand the culture by becoming familiar with its literature.

Undoubtedly this sounds like a circular argument: We can't interpret the literature without understanding the culture, and we can't understand the culture without interpreting the literature. If we were dealing only with the Bible, it would indeed be circular, because we have already adjusted it to our own cultural ways of thinking in our long familiarity with it. The key then is to be found in the literature from the rest of the ancient world. Here we will discover many insights into ancient categories, concepts and perspectives. Not only do we expect to find linkages, we do in fact find many such linkages that enhance our understanding of the Bible.

To compare the Old Testament to the literature of the ancient world is not to assume that we expect or find similarity at every point; but neither should we assume or expect differences at every point. We believe the nature of the Bible to be very different from anything else that was available in the ancient world. The very fact that we accept the Old Testament as God's revelation of himself

distinguishes it from the literature of Mesopotamia or Egypt. For that matter, Egyptian literature was very different from Mesopotamian literature, and within Mesopotamia, Assyrian literature and Babylonian literature were far from homogeneous. To press the point further, Babylonian literature of the second millennium must be viewed as distinct from Babylonian literature of the first millennium. Finally we must recognize that in any given time period in any given culture in any given city, some people would have had different ideas than others. Having said all of this, we recognize at the same time that there is some common ground. Despite all the distinctions that existed across the ancient world, any given ancient culture was more similar to other ancient cultures than any of them are to Western

American or European culture. Comparing the ancient cultures to one another will help us to see those common threads even as we become aware of the distinctions that separated them from one another. As we identify those common threads, we will begin to comprehend how the ancient world differed from our modern (or postmodern) world.

So to return to the illustration of marriage: we will understand the Israelite ideas of marriage much more accurately by becoming informed about marriage in Babylon or Egypt than we will by thinking of marriage in modern terms. Yet we will also find evidence to suggest that Babylonian customs and ideas were not always exactly like Israelite ones. The texts serve as sources of information for us to formulate the shape of each culture's ways of thinking. In most areas there is more similarity between Israel and its neighbors than there is between Israel and our twenty-first-century Western world. As another example, even though today we believe in one God, the God of Israel, and therefore share with them this basic element of faith, the views of deity in the ancient world served as the context for Israel's understanding of deity. It is true that the God of the Bible is far different from the gods of the ancient cultures. But Israel understood its God in reference to what others around them believed. As the Bible indicates, Israelites were continually drawn into the thinking of the cultures around them, whether they were adopting the gods and practices of those around them or whether they were struggling to see their God as distinct.

As a result, we are not looking at ancient literature to try to decide whether Israel borrowed from some of the literature that was known to them. It is to be expected that the Israelites held many concepts and perspectives in common with the rest of the ancient world. This is far different from suggesting literature was borrowed or copied. This is not even a case of Israel being influenced by the peoples around them. Rather we simply recognize the common conceptual worldview that existed in ancient times. We should therefore not speak of Israel being influenced by that world—they were part of that world.

To illustrate the idea, we must think of ways in which we are products of our own culture. For example, we do not borrow the idea of consumerism, nor are we influenced by it. We are consumers because we live in a capitalist society that is built on consumerism. We don't have to think about it or read about it. Even if we wanted to reject its principles we would find it difficult to identify all its different aspects and devise different ways of thinking. One could make similar observations about Aristotelian, Cartesian or Baconian forms of thought. We could speak of capitalism and the value of liberty. We could consider self-determinism and individualism. We could analyze our sense of personal rights and the nature of democracy. These are ideas and ways of thinking that make us who we are in the United States. Where did we learn the principles of naturalism or the nature of the universe? They are simply absorbed through the culture in which we live. One can find all of this in our literature, but we didn't learn it from our literature—it is simply part of our culture that we absorb, often with no alternatives even considered.