

# Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

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## Journal of Hebrew Scriptures - Volume 9 (2009) - Review

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Niehaus, Jeffrey J., *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008). Pp. 203. Paperback, US\$ 18.99. ISBN 978-0-8254-3360-3

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No biblical scholar would deny the importance of study of the ancient Near East for deeper understanding of the Hebrew Bible. At the same time many biblical scholars would confess frankly that they rarely open the volumes of *ANET* or *COS* which yet occupy an honorable place in their personal libraries. This being the state of the matter, every book which studies the ancient Near East and the Bible is a welcome addition to the field. This is especially true of books that, as the one under review, aim to examine concepts and ideas common to the ancient Near Eastern and Biblical worlds. However, after becoming acquainted with the content of this book, the initial excitement, that one might have felt while reading the title, yields to bitter disappointment.

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The introductory chapter offers methodological considerations and remarks on the way to approach the "Babel und Bibel" question, launched at the beginning of the 20th century. In this section the author's honesty in professing openly his Christian, more specifically Evangelical perspective and his firm belief in looking not only for probable interpretations but specifically for the objective truth are highly commendable. It seems, however, that in the author's perspective, critical attitude and strict, logical thinking are not indispensable for achieving the goal of his research. And so, relying on Jesus' authority, the author seems to consider as a fact Jonah's sojourn in the belly of a great fish (p. 15). No less naive is his acceptance of Ira M. Price's opinion that the Near Eastern creation accounts can be traced to "a time when the human race occupied a common home and held a common faith" (p. 22). Only a diligent reader will check at this point that Price's book dates back to 1925. The author's reliance on antiquated scholarly literature leads him also to accept the date of composition of the Babylonian Epic of Creation *Enūma eliš* from between 1894 and 1595 B.C. (pp. 21-22) while currently there is general agreement that the epic was written during the second half of the second millennium B.C., during the Kassite period or, more probably later, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 B.C.).

In the last section of the introductory chapter the author enunciates his vision of a shared theological structure of ideas that existed in the ancient Near East and that is found in the most complete and true form in the Old and New Testaments. This is how the author summarizes his theological construct: "A god works through a man (a royal or a prophetic figure, often styled a shepherd) to wage war against the god's enemies and thereby advance his kingdom. The royal or prophetic protagonist is in a covenant with the god, as are the god's people. The god establishes a temple among his people, either before or after the warfare, because he wants to dwell among them. This can mean the founding (or choice) of a city, as well as a temple location. The ultimate purpose is to bring into the god's kingdom those who were not part of it" (p. 30).

The bulk of the book is dedicated to exploring "parallels" between the Egyptian, Hittite, Mesopotamian and biblical worlds. This part of the book is organized by the following topics: 1. god and the royal shepherd, 2. covenant and conquest, 3. city, temple, image, 4. city and temple: abandoned and restored, 5. the covenantal household: destruction and salvation, 6. the restoration of all things. Some major criticisms apply to this part of the book. First of all, the "parallels" established by the author are mostly verbal and very general. The occurrence of a key-word or a loosely formulated idea is already enough for the author to recognize a "parallel." One quotation will suffice to show this procedure: "One creation account (ca. 2000 B.C.) says that Ra was a king who 'began to rule that which he had made.' Like God in the Old Testament, Ra is king over all creation. A Later hymn (ca. 1775-1757 B.C.) celebrates Amon-Ra as 'King of Upper and Lower Egypt.' The solar creator has become suzerain over one nation, a united Egypt. He is like Yahweh, suzerain over all (as Gen 1:1 implies), who became suzerain over Israel (cf. Deut 33:5)" (pp. 34-35). Moreover, in his harvesting of "parallels" the author hardly explores the proper meaning of each of the discussed texts, nor does he account for the differences between the Near Eastern and biblical worlds. And yet, these differences are more important than the similarities as they may disclose particular points made by these sources. For example, the discussion of the divine abandonment motif would benefit from noting and interpreting the apparent lack of this theme in Egyptian sources. The leveling of the differences is particularly unconvincing in treating the subject of covenant. It seems to be a far stretch to say in such strong terms as the author does that the peoples of the ancient Near East saw their relationship and the relationship of their king with gods as a covenant. Indeed, the level of elaboration and the importance of this subject seem to be more characteristic of biblical Israel than any other nation.

In the concluding chapter of the book the author offers explanations for a shared theological structure of thought whose existence he claims to have demonstrated. One who expects historical, literary or cultural considerations will be let down. In the author's opinion it is the demonic inspiration of false religions that produced such parallels (p. 179). The negative tone of this assertion is, however, difficult to reconcile with his more positive evaluation of theological "parallels" on p. 181 as a matrix of thought that formed a background for the definitive revelation of the Christian truth.

The book under review is also marred by some minor inaccuracies and defects. For instance on pp. 41 and 45 the author refers to Sumer as "Sumeria." On p. 61 the author speaks about the logogram MARDUK probably having in mind the writing <sup>d</sup>AMAR.UTU. His Egyptian "parallels" are taken almost exclusively from *Ancient Records of Egypt* by James H. Breasted published a century ago. Only in chapter 7 does the author make extensive recourse to another Egyptian collection, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* by R. O. Faulkner. The bibliography for Mesopotamian literature is more diversified but the large and important anthology *Before the Muses* by Benjamin R. Foster is lacking. No less bewildering is the absence of *The Context of Scripture* edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger. In general, most of the bibliographical references were published before the author's doctoral studies at Harvard.

In short, considering the deficiencies of the book under review, for anybody who looks for an updated and reliable introduction to study of the Hebrew Bible in its conceptual environment, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old*

*Testament* by John H. Walton still remains a better choice.

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