

## Unit 1 Lecture 1: Welcome!

Welcome to the course *The Bible in Light of the Ancient Near East*!

This course will introduce you to the cultures of the ancient Near East, Israel's neighbors during the biblical period, and the 'comparative research' that examines the Bible's relation to these cultures.

The Bible is the most extensively interpreted literary work in world history. Religious clergy, scholars, and thinkers have all attempted to decipher and comprehend this seminal piece. However, until the modern era they did not have the resources to understand it within a broader cultural context. Pre-modern exegetes shared a similar picture of the Bible: a sacred book, delivered by God, and – by definition – utterly unique. The Bible was conceived as an isolated, one-off work. It was interpreted either within itself, or in light of later religious traditions, but never in its original context. This is simply because the world had no knowledge of, or access to, this original context until the modern era.

However, with the development of archaeology in the modern era, the world discovered, to its amazement, a treasure trove of knowledge about the ancient Near East. Ancient peoples and languages came back to life in the archeological excavations – the Sumerians, Hittites, Hurrians, Elamites, Ugaritic culture, and many others. Today, two centuries into this great endeavor, we own an unimaginable wealth of knowledge relating to this lost world, and we continue to gather more.

As it turned out, the Bible is far from being an isolated creation. It was a part of a rich multicultural fabric of different civilizations, formed via constant dialogue with them. Biblical stories and traditions – the creation, Flood, Tower of Babel, and many others – are best understood when read in the light of parallel mythologies in neighboring cultures. Biblical genres such as prophecy, law, cultic instructions, and wisdom – have ancient counterparts that clarify and contextualize them. Most importantly, the ideas and concepts of the Bible can now be seen in a comparative light. Biblical thought was developed as a response to constant contact with the beliefs and worldviews of the surrounding cultures. In some cases, biblical theology was influenced and inspired by these ideas. In many other cases, it rejected them, and

attempted to suggest novel, even revolutionary religious agendas. Both patterns gave birth to biblical thought, which later became the basis of Western culture.

Our point of departure will be one of the most important places in the world for studying the Ancient Near East: the British Museum, where findings from the ancient Near East are kept and studied. Tens of thousands of artefacts and monuments belonging to the biblical world are housed here. Let me take you to a special place in the museum where ancient tablets are deciphered and studied every day.

Dr. Jon Taylor: First of all, welcome to the department of the Middle East, again. We are standing in the beautiful arched room. It dates to about 1840, that's one of the few parts of the museum that is still in the original condition of the time. So, this used to be what we would now call the British Library, and if you look you see that essentially this is still a library, except for the ground floor, where we have these wooden trays, and these trays are full of cuneiform tablets. So if you like, we have an ancient library on the bottom floor.

We are dealing with quite a large era of time, of course; wide geographical expanse, very different environments, many different types of people, many different languages; but it is very useful and indeed necessary to generalize a little bit. So, some common words we are going to come across are: Mesopotamia, which is the broadest term for essentially what we now call Iraq, but also important parts of what we now call Syria.

The most important thing to understand about Mesopotamia is from the very name itself. The clue is in the words. Mesopotamia means 'the land between the rivers', and we are talking about, here particularly, the Euphrates, and over here – the Tigris rivers.

The beautiful arched room functions as a storage area, but it also functions as a study place. Most of the people who come to this department to study, want to look at the cuneiform tablets. And we have about 140,000 in our collection. They range from about 3000 BC to the first century AD: an enormous spread of time. I have got just a few examples here to show you. Maybe something

about the objects themselves: they are made of clay, or, strictly speaking, it's actually silt. The rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, bring down the silt from the sources, and this is what they are made of. So it's not like modern potter clay. It's abundantly available, it's freely available, all of the cities are along the rivers and the canals, and it's perfectly suited.

What you need is clay that is moist: not too damp that you can't make a clear impression, but not too hard also, that you can't get your stylus into the clay. So, it has to be that sweet middle spot, which is just strong enough to take the impression. This one I prepared earlier. You see, of course, there it no ink. This is not like modern writing. They don't have pen, they are not drawing across the surface of the tablet. What they have is, if you like, a kind of printing. So this is – it's not actually a stylus – it's a piece of reed from south Iraq, and reeds grow abundantly in the rivers; like the clay – you just can't help it but to use these things. All you need is to chop a size about like that, and then you cut it lengthwise to create a very handy device. We are not quite sure exactly what a stylus looks like, there must have been different designs, but it's essentially a reed, held in the hand about something like this, and the tablet, maybe something like that, you need just to press, and press, and press. Again, we are not dragging across the surface. It's pressing and lifting. All you need to do when you finish your tablet is just leave it in the air to dry – not in the sun but in the air – and it will remain as crisp and clear as the day it was written for thousands of years.

Jon has shown us a small sample of the rich Mesopotamian culture. As Jon explained, Mesopotamia is the name of the area located between the Euphrates and the Tigris. This area was part of the region known as the 'Fertile Crescent'. The Land of Israel lies in its center.

In the next lectures, we will briefly review the history of Mesopotamia as a background for our discussion of the Bible in light of the Ancient Near East.

## Lesson 1 Lecture 2: History of Mesopotamia – Introduction

The modern discovery of the ancient Near East is no less than a scientific revolution. We can tell today which people lived in the ancient Near East, what languages they spoke, what gods they believed in, what they used to eat, drink, and wear, how they understood the world, and many other details of their cultures. This body of knowledge illuminates and even interprets the Bible in many cases.

Before we examine the engaging connections between the Bible and its environment, we must present the context: a general picture of the history of this world.

In the rest of this unit, I will attempt to present a general historical framework for our discussion throughout the course. An important aid for our historical discussion is the interactive timeline.

We do not have time to overview *all* the different civilizations of the ancient Near East. I will focus on Mesopotamian history, which is the most fertile source of material relevant for understanding the Bible, both qualitatively and quantitatively. More information about the centrality of Mesopotamia for comparative study is found on the course website.

The term ‘Mesopotamia’ is of Greek origin. Literally, it means ‘between the rivers’, that is, between the Euphrates and Tigris. In antiquity, this region was inhabited by speakers of languages known as Sumerian and Akkadian. Sumerian and Akkadian were both written in cuneiform script. However linguistically, they are very different from one another.

The Sumerian language is considered the oldest written language in world history. Sumerian is currently an isolated language: it does not belong to any known family of languages. Akkadian, on the other hand, was part of the family of Semitic languages. This means that Akkadian is a relative of various Semitic languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. Akkadian had two main dialects: the Assyrian dialect, identified with the city of Assur in northern Mesopotamia, and the Babylonian dialect, originating in the city of Babylon in the south. Speakers of the Assyrian and Babylonian dialects established the famous empires of Assyria and Babylonia respectively. We will discuss these empires in the following lectures.

**Lesson 1 Lecture 3:**  
**Mesopotamia – The Early Periods**

The first written texts in Mesopotamia appeared in approximately 3200 BCE and were written – as far as we can tell – in the Sumerian language. These texts are considered to be the oldest written sources in world history (although some scholars would argue that the earliest Egyptian texts predate the Sumerian ones). The script of these very ancient texts was pictorial, that is, the different signs were more or less pictures of concrete objects. The content was usually quite simple: the texts document financial transactions. Another interesting feature of this ancient period is the introduction of cylinder seals adorned with drawings.

Dr. Jon Taylor: What we see here is cuneiform in its infancy. Really early days, just after writing has been invented. At this period, cuneiform has well over a thousand characters, and the individual characters are mostly pictures of objects, or parts of objects, particularly the heads of animals.

The period between 2800 and 2350 BCE is referred to as the 'Early Dynastic Period'. The texts from this period are more diverse in nature: in addition to economic texts there emerge several literary texts, including the wisdom collection known as the *Instructions of Shuruppak*. Another new literary genre is royal inscriptions, texts that glorify the king's achievements. Most of these texts were written in southern Mesopotamia.

As the technology of writing developed during this period, scribes began using a triple-edged, sharpened stylus. This technique schematized the script, which became less and less pictorial. The basic unit of each sign now resembled a wedge. This graphic trait later gave this script its modern name: 'Cuneiform', after the Latin word *cuneus*, 'wedge'. As part of the process of schematization and abstraction of the script system, many of the signs began to signify syllables rather than concrete words. The new method – writing – began to spread beyond southern Mesopotamia, reaching cities in northern Mesopotamia and Syria.

**Lesson 1 Lecture 4:**  
**The Akkadian Empire and Ur III Empire (2334–2004 BCE)**

The end of the third millennium BCE in Mesopotamia witnessed the emergence of the first large kingdoms. This period was characterized by the centralization and organization of power. Two main kingdoms appeared one after the other. The Akkadian Empire, whose center was in northern Mesopotamia, flourished during the 24<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. During the 21<sup>st</sup> century BCE, a Sumerian kingdom rose whose capital was in the south.

The founder of the Akkadian Empire was king **Sargon**, also known as Sargon the Great. Sargon chose the city of Akkad as his capital. The exact location of this important ancient city is unknown, but we do know that it was in northern Mesopotamia. Sargon built a large and organized army. In his royal inscriptions he describes the military operations accomplished by this army. The large kingdom required an improvement in bureaucratic methods. For the first time, **uniform measurements and weights were established**. The years were marked by **fixed 'year names'**, determined by the palace and used throughout the empire. The kingdom's scribes adopted new patterns of writing. The language of writing was unified: Prior to the Akkadian Empire, most of the texts in Mesopotamia were written in Sumerian. **Now, the empire's formal language became Akkadian.**

In fact, the name of the language, Akkadian, is derived from the city of Akkad, the first important center of Akkadian speakers. Cuneiform script, originally developed to write Sumerian, was adapted to the Akkadian language, which now became the language of official documents and royal inscriptions. At its peak, the Akkadian empire ruled over all of Mesopotamia. The dynasty's kings described themselves as the kings of **'the four corners of earth'**, or in other words, **kings of the entire universe**. Some of them even portrayed themselves as gods. Art and literature also developed greatly. However a combination of internal rebellions and external threats brought the Akkadian kingdom to an end. This destruction occurred during the days of **King Shar-Kali-Sharri**. The Akkadian meaning of his name is: 'King of all Kings'.

Approximately 40 years after the fall of the Akkadian Empire, a new large kingdom arose in Mesopotamia – 'The Kingdom of the Third Dynasty of Ur', or in short 'Ur 3', named after the royal dynasty that ruled the empire.

The center of the new empire was the city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia. Its founder, **King Ur-Nammu**, led it as he ruled over all of Mesopotamia. He thus referred to himself as the **'King of Sumer and Akkad'**. The empire's formal language was Sumerian. It developed a sophisticated bureaucracy that enabled it to rule for longer than its predecessor.

Dr. Jon Taylor: The short period around the turn of the twenty first century BC, was a period of enormous bureaucratic activity. We have an early kind of empire: a number of large institutions generating vast quantities of documentation. We have something like 150,000 documents from a very short window of time, maximum hundred years. Most of them, really, within not much more than a generation. It's an incredible flourishing of activity. And they record, in great detail, the comings and goings of commodities and products and people doing various jobs, textile production etc., so you can actually reconstruct from these tablets a lot of the ancient economy. It's incredible that from such a distant part of history you can say a lot about what was going on though this incredibly rich documentation.

An important characteristic of this period is the great wealth of texts that document many aspects of life in the Empire. Today, we have tens of thousands of texts from the Ur 3 Period, and some of them are still being deciphered. **Schools** for scribes were established throughout the kingdom. These schools became the main centers for the development and distribution of literature. New genres appeared in Mesopotamia: the first royal hymns, that is, poetic texts praising the king and his virtues. We also find in this period the first law code: a collection of laws regarding civil and criminal law. This law code is ascribed to the founder of the dynasty, Ur-Nammu. We will discuss it later in this course, in our lesson on legal literature.

The Ur 3 rulers were responsible for grand construction projects, including the sacred building known as the **'ziggurat'** in the city of Ur. We shall discuss ziggurats and their relation to biblical stories in the lesson on the Tower of Babel.

In the year 2004 BCE, the kingdom of Ur was destroyed as the result of an attack by the kingdom of Elam and nomadic tribes of Amorite origin. The destruction, which

marked the end of the flourishing of Sumerian culture, was commemorated in five large literary laments that document the catastrophe.



## Lesson 1 Lecture 5

### Mesopotamia: The Old Babylonian Period and Old Assyrian Period

The years 2000–1600 BCE are known as the ‘Old Babylonian Period’ and ‘Old Assyrian Period’. These terms denote the main languages in which Mesopotamian documents were written during this period. In southern Mesopotamia, the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian was dominant; in the north, documents were written in the Assyrian dialect. What about Sumerian? This language was also in use. While it was no longer a spoken language, Sumerian was preserved as a literary language. Scribes in the schools in southern Mesopotamia copied traditional literary texts in Sumerian and even composed new ones.

From a political aspect, this period was characterized by a decentralization of the ruling authority. Many small city-states competed with each other for regional control.

An important innovation of this period was the appearance of Amorite elements in Mesopotamia. The Amorites and their culture will be presented later in this course, when we discuss biblical and ancient Near Eastern prophecy.

During the Old Babylonian Period, Amorite nomads gradually penetrated urban Mesopotamia until they became a central part of the Mesopotamian social fabric. The most prominent city-state of Amorite character was Mari, on the banks of the Euphrates. A large and splendid palace was unearthed in Mari. Within the palace, an immense archive was discovered that sheds light on almost every domain of life in the city.

Of special interest to biblical research are the texts from Mari that deal with prophecy. These will be discussed in the eighth unit of this course.

Other prominent city-states during this period were the rival cities Isin, Larsa, and Eshnunna. Isin supplies us with an important law code: the laws of King Lipit Ishtar, who ruled this city between 1934 and 1924 BCE. This law code will be discussed in the lesson on law in the Bible and the ancient Near East.

The Old Assyrian dialect, which we mentioned before, was spoken mainly in the city of Assur. Assur was the dominant city state in northern Mesopotamia during this period. Assur excelled at international trade with distant cities in the region of present-day Anatolia. As part of this trade, an advanced banking system was

developed. Many Old Assyrian texts tell us the story of the traders and bankers and their sophisticated business relations.

Turning back to southern Mesopotamia, here the city of Babylon also struggled for regional hegemony. Babylon, like many of its neighbors, was ruled by an Amorite royal dynasty. The city was involved in a constant struggle with other city states, such as Mari, that included alliances and counter-alliances.

The king who put an end to this battle of small regional forces was the famous Hammurabi. Hammurabi ruled the city state of Babylon. From 1763 BCE onwards, he conquered extensive areas of Mesopotamia. Gradually, he added the territories of Larsa, Eshnunna, Assyria, and Mari to Babylon. Eventually, he transformed the small city-state of Babylon into the largest kingdom of the Old Babylonian period. Hammurabi's most famous achievement was his law code. This law code is considered one of the foundation stones of comparative research of the Bible and the ancient East. This topic will be discussed later in the course.

The golden age of Babylon did not last long. Shortly after Hammurabi's death, Babylon began declining in power. Its ultimate destruction at the hands of the Hittite king Mursili I occurred in 1595 BCE. This defeat marks the end of the Old Babylonian Period.

### Lesson 1 Lecture 6:

#### The Kassite Period in Babylon and the Middle Assyrian Period in Assyria

The Hittites withdrew from Babylon shortly after its conquest. They left the region in a state of chaos. The vacuum of power enabled a new people, known as the **Kassites**, to exert their authority over southern Mesopotamia. We know almost nothing of the origin or language of the Kassites: like other newcomers, they swiftly integrated into Babylonian society. They wrote their documents in Akkadian, and their costumes and beliefs seem to be no less 'Babylonian' than that of the native inhabitants.

What we do know is that a Kassite dynasty ruled Babylon and its area for no less than 400 years(!), between the years 1595 and 1155 BCE. The capital of the Kassite kingdom was the city of Babylon. A detailed political history of this period is unavailable to us because only a limited number of relevant texts have survived.

In contrast to the political and historical aspects of the period, its literary production is well documented. During the Kassite period, scribes ceased to write and read Sumerian. Instead, they began to focus on copying classical Akkadian texts and composing new ones.

Here is one example of an important text written in Akkadian that was composed during this period: A poem describing a righteous sufferer, who questions the divine judgment. The poem is called 'Ludlul bēl nēmeqi'. In Akkadian this means 'I will praise the lord of wisdom', which is the first line of the text. Ludlul bēl nēmeqi is sometimes considered a parallel to the biblical book of Job. You may find additional information about this interesting connection in the recommendations for additional reading.

Dr. Jon Taylor: This is the story called Ludlul Bel Nemeqi, I will praise the lord of wisdom, and the lord of wisdom in this case is Marduk. Essentially, it tells us of the relationship between man and god. The first two tablets are about suffering of this character, and tablets 3 and 4 are about the redemption. Essentially what happens is that this character is a very important man at court, life is perfect – then something goes wrong, and he can't understand why. It completely ruins his life. His enemies turn the king against him, he is dishonored, even the lowest of the low

attack him in the street, he is despised and loathed. In tablet II he gets these horrible afflictions, and none of the doctors, the magicians – they can't work out why he has these problems or how to solve them, and he is at death's door. And then we have the redemption: Marduk steps in, his anger is appeased, he cures the problems, the medical issues, and he puts him back in the position where he walks down the street of Babylon, and people look at him and they cry: he's come back from the dead, effectively.

To the north of the Kassite kingdom lay the Middle Assyrian kingdom. Its capital was, naturally, the city of Assur. A long-lasting dynasty of Assyrian kings ruled the kingdom during this period. Middle Assyrian scribes made some contributions to the literary tradition of Mesopotamia. One of these was a collection of laws called the 'Middle Assyrian Laws', which are important for comparative research. They will be discussed in our unit on the law.

Middle Assyrian scribes also developed an elaboration of the old genre of royal inscriptions. Basically, Mesopotamian royal inscriptions consisted of poetry glorifying the king. In the Middle Assyrian period, the Assyrian scribes began to enrich the traditional royal inscriptions with **annual reports of the king's achievements.** For each year, they detailed his military campaigns, building enterprises, etc. The inscriptions provide a precise documentation of the king's deeds, appearing in chronological order. These texts are called the 'Assyrian Annals'. They are considered a treasure trove for historians of Mesopotamia.

### Lesson 1 Lecture 7: The Assyrian Empire (934-610 BCE)

By the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the kings of Assur began conquering more and more areas of northern Mesopotamia, until they built a strong local kingdom. 200 years into this process, the Assyrian kingdom transformed into a vast empire. This was the largest and strongest empire ever seen in the area. It ruled over the entire Fertile Crescent, including – for a limited period – parts of Egypt. The genre of Assyrian annals, which we mentioned in the previous lecture, provide historians with details regarding the endeavors of each Assyrian king during each year of his reign. We are thus able to reconstruct a clear picture of the political history of the Assyrian Empire.

Here are some prominent kings of the Assyrian empire. I will refer mainly to those who have some biblical connection:

In this period we find, for the first time, a direct historical link between Mesopotamia and Israel, which is recorded in the historical texts of the time. The empire spread westward, and one of the many nations occupied by the great Assyrian kings was Israel.

**King Shalmaneser III** (859–824 BCE) was an aggressive conqueror who greatly expanded the boundaries of the empire. His inscriptions explicitly mention two Israelite kings: **King Ahab and King Jehu**. Shalmaneser campaigned against both.

Dr. Jon Taylor: In 1846 Layard excavated at the city of Nimrud this imposing black obelisk, now known as *the* black obelisk. It's a record of the long and successful military career of an Assyrian king called Shalmanesser. We read about this on the inscription of the top. The five scenes that rap around the obelisk each come from a different part of the world, and what he seems to be doing is highlighting just how far he's been able to campaign. From a modern perspective, the most important by far is the second story here. Here we see Shalmanesser himself, and the winged disk up here – this is God Assur, who protects him. Groveling on the ground is the figure, the king figure of the scene, and the caption tells us that this is somebody called Yau from the house of Omri. It wasn't long before the object came to win scholarly attention, and

they worked out what cuneiform said – what the cuneiform really meant. It wasn't long, of course, before they related it to Jehu, and this must be the house of Omri, although strictly speaking he seems not to be from the house of Omri, but you can imagine from an Assyrian perspective this is a detail they weren't too bothered about.

**Tiglath-Pileser III** (744–727 BCE) was also a very powerful king. He conquered extensive areas of the kingdom of Israel, exiling many of its inhabitants. **His conquests significantly weakened the kingdom of Israel.** The Bible also tells us that he accepted the surrender of Ahaz, King of Judea (see 2 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 28, and Isaiah 7–9).

Shalmeneser V (727–722 BCE) imposed the final siege on the kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 18:9). The subsequent king, Sargon II (722–705 BCE), completed the process by destroying the kingdom and exiling its inhabitants. Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) embarked on a famous campaign to **Judah**, during which Jerusalem was saved at the last minute (2 Kings 19) but Lachish was destroyed. The destruction of Lachish and the exile of its inhabitants are described in detail in a large relief from Sennacherib's palace.

Dr. Jon Taylor: The palace of the Assyrian kings was decorated with these wonderfully detailed carvings – these reliefs. Originally brightly colored, now the paint is gone. All we can see is the stone underneath, but they preserve an incredible record of the deeds of the Assyrian kings. These come from the southwest palace in Nineveh, the "palace without a rival", and here we can see at the start, the Assyrian army mastering – attacking – somebody. Some poor unfortunate rebel or enemy.

This is the key to the entire battle scene. Here we can see defeated population has come out to grovel at the feet of somebody, and the Assyrian soldiers, the officers, this high official are approaching a figure to the right. And here he is, sitting on a throne with some servants behind, wafting the flies away, and this is – so the caption tells us – King Sennacherib. Importantly, it also tells us where the city is, and for them it's Lakisu, or as we know it, Lachish. We

know that **Sennacherib** campaigned in 701 BC at the city of Lachish, he made it his head courters for the invasion of that part of the world. We have, of course, a parallel account from the Bible, exactly this episode.

Finally, I will mention **King Ashurbanipal** who built an enormous library in Nineveh that housed texts of a wide range of types from various periods. Ashurbanipal's library included more than 30,000 clay tablets kept together in a big archive, and organized by shape and content. Ashurbanipal's library marks the era as a cultural 'Golden Age'. The texts found in this library serve as a primary source of information on Mesopotamian culture, literature and religion until today.

Following Ashurbanipal's death, somewhere between 639 and 620 BCE, Assyria began to decline. The causes for this decline are not entirely clear, but the process was so swift that by 605 BCE most of the empire's territory was ruled by a rival Babylonian dynasty whose center lay in southern Mesopotamia.

## Lesson 1 Lecture 8: The Babylonian Empire (626-539 BCE)

The historical sources describing the Babylonian empire are fewer compared to those describing the Assyrian empire. The main reason for this difference is the style of historical writing: the rulers of Babylon used their royal inscriptions to emphasize building projects more than military campaigns. As a result, our knowledge of the stages of the empire's expansion is relatively limited. Yet we do have a number of important sources of information, primarily the Babylonian Chronicles. These texts list political key events in a dry, laconic style. The Babylonian Chronicles enable historians reconstruct the empire's history.

At the end of the seventh century BCE, King Nabopolassar ascended the throne of Babylon. Nabopolassar was probably not a member of the royal dynasty but rather an army officer who occupied the throne. After establishing his rule in southern Mesopotamia, he attacked central Assyrian cities. Nabopolassar's heir, the famous Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BCE), made the dominance of Babylon clear after his victory in the 'Battle of Carchemish' in 605 BCE.

Nebuchadnezzar excelled in his military campaigns and in his tremendous building projects. He restored and beautified the temples of the empire, developing especially the city of Babylon itself. The temple and ziggurat of Babylon were restored, and a splendid royal palace was built. Ziggurats will be discussed in our forthcoming lesson on the Tower of Babel story.

In biblical history, Nebuchadnezzar is of course known as the king responsible for the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (Kings II 24;12-16; Kings II 25).

Among the Babylonian kings after Nebuchadnezzar, we should mention his son Awil-Marduk who ruled for two years only (561-560 BCE) until assassinated by his nephew. Awil-Marduk is mentioned in the Bible as having eased Jehoiachin's conditions of imprisonment in Babylon (Kings II 25;27).

The last king of Babylon was Nabonidus (556-539 BCE). Nabonidus was defeated by Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, in the year 539 BCE. This defeat signaled the end of the Babylonian Empire.

The history of the Persian Empire will not be discussed here. Although it is relevant to comparative research of the Bible, Persia itself is not part of Mesopotamia in terms of



geography, language and culture. You will find reading recommendations regarding the Persian Empire on the course website.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 1

#### Introduction: The Mesopotamian Creation Myth *Enūma Elish*

In the previous unit, we presented a general introduction to the discipline of the Bible and the ancient Near East. We will now begin to review specific cases of contact and parallels between the Bible and its surrounding cultures. In this lesson, we will discuss creation traditions.

Mesopotamian literature often refers to the creation of the world and humankind by the gods at the dawn of history. The most important and detailed creation myth is *Enuma Elish*, an Akkadian composition which describes the creation of the world by the Babylonian god **Marduk**. *Enuma Elish* exhibits several interesting similarities to the biblical creation story as described in the first chapter of Genesis.

Dr. Jon Taylor: These fragments all belong to the story called *Enuma Elish*.

This is the creation story, it is also a very important story in Babylonia. It was recited in the new year festival.

The name *Enuma Elish* was given to this work after the two Akkadian words which open the story. The words *Enuma Elish* mean: 'When above'.

According to *Enuma Elish*, the world's different elements came into being from the ancient Sea. This sea is embodied as an enormous **monster named Tiāmat**. *Enuma Elish* tells of a great battle waged between Tiāmat and a god named Marduk at the beginning of history. Marduk was the patron god of the city of Babylon, and in places and periods in which the Babylonians ruled, he was considered chief of the pantheon. The story tells us how Marduk won the battle. **After defeating and killing Tiāmat, he ripped her body into two halves, and used them to create the world.**

*Enuma Elish* was famous among ancient Mesopotamians. It was probably composed in the second millennium BCE, and during the first millennium BCE, it was read annually in front of Marduk's statue as part of the New Year festival. Some scholars even believe that the myth was dramatized in the temple during the festival.

Dr. Jon Taylor: These three all belong to the library of Assurbanipal, so that most of our sources will come from the library. That is a beautiful library script, easy to read. This one is from Babylonia. And this is important because it's a school tablet, and this tells us that as part of the education process, all of the scribes had to learn a certain number of things: lists of words, how to write people's names; but they also learn this snippet sort of classics, and one of the classics they all have to learn in school is Enuma Elish. Just a little fragment of the story, as part of the education process. So, by the time they come to write these beautiful library manuscripts they all have known this story very well indeed.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 2: *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 – Primeval Waters

*Enuma Elish* opens with a description of the world's primeval state before the creation took place. During this primordial period – the myth tells us – the world only contained two large bodies of water: the fresh water and the sea. Each of these bodies of water is personified as a deity: the fresh water appears as the god Apsu, and the sea water – as Tiamat. Let's read the first few lines of the English translation by Wilfred George Lambert: (W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, Winona Lake 2013)

When the heavens above did not exist,  
And earth beneath had not come into being—  
There was Apsu, the first in order, their begetter,  
And demiurge Tiāmat, who gave birth to them all;  
They had mingled their waters together  
Before meadow-land had coalesced and reed-bed was to be found  
When not one of the gods had been formed  
Or had come into being, when no destinies had been decreed...

The basic mythical idea here is that prior to creation, the world contained only ancient waters. Surprisingly, a very similar notion appears in Genesis 1:

In the beginning God created heaven and earth.  
And the world was unformed and void, with darkness upon the face of the  
deep water (Hebrew: *têhôm*), and a wind from God sweeping over the water.

Here is the best way to explain these verses: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” is a general title, referring to the entire story of creation. Only then does the process of creation begin in a chronological order. The first thing we are told is that the world was unformed and void. It contained only: darkness; ancient deep waters, called תְּהוֹם in Hebrew; and wind.

We therefore see that in this biblical creation story, the primeval material that preceded the world is a large body of water, just like in *Enuma Elish*.

The Hebrew word for this body of water is also very interesting: תהום is similar to the Akkadian word *Tiāmat*. These two words are likely to be etymologically related to each other. The main difference is that in Akkadian, the word is feminine, while in Hebrew it is masculine. In short, both the Mesopotamian and biblical traditions assume the existence of a large body of water prior to the creation of the world. And in both traditions, this body of water bears the same name: Tiāmat or תהום. This similarity seems too striking to be coincidental.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 3: *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 – Splitting the Water

After presenting Apsu, the fresh water, and Tiamat the sea water, *Enuma Elish* tells us of the mating of these two deities. Apsu and Tiamat then give birth to young gods. However the divine children are very loud, and the noise they make disturbs the peace of their parents. An intergenerational struggle then begins:

The divine brothers came together,  
Their clamor got loud, throwing Tiāmat into a turmoil.  
They jarred the nerves of Tiāmat,  
And by their dancing they spread alarm in Anduruna ...  
Apsu opened his mouth  
And addressed Tiāmat...:  
“Their behavior has become displeasing to me  
And I cannot rest in the day-time or sleep at night.  
I will destroy and break up their way of life  
That silence may reign and we may sleep.” (Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*)

Unfortunately for him, Apsu loses the battle against the young gods. He is killed by one of them, the god Ea. However the war is not over: Another young god, Apsu and Tiamat’s grandson, disturbs Tiāmat’s peace again. It is Marduk, the hero among all the gods. This time Tiāmat decides to fight Marduk and the young gods herself. A great battle begins, and it ends with the victory of Marduk. Marduk kills Tiamat, takes her corpse and splits it into two. The two parts are used to create the world:

After the warrior Marduk had bound and slain his enemies...  
He strengthened his hold on the Bound Gods,  
And returned to Tiāmat, whom he had bound.  
Bēl [i.e., Marduk] placed his feet on the lower parts of Tiāmat  
And with his merciless club smashed her skull....  
He split her into two like a dried fish:

One half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens.  
He stretched the skin and appointed a watch  
With the instruction not to let her waters escape.  
He crossed over the heavens, surveyed the celestial parts,  
And adjusted them to match the Apsu (i.e., the underwater)...  
Bēl [i.e., Marduk] measured the shape of the Apsu... (Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*)

Let's explain the mechanics of creation as described here: Marduk takes half of Tiamat's body and makes the heavens out of it. But because Tiamat is nothing but water, he needs an impermeable sheet to hold it from below. He uses Tiamat's skin for this purpose. Now he has half of the water above to form heaven, and half of it below, to form the seas or underwater. The upper waters in the sky are held by a waterproof surface.

A very similar procedure is performed by God in Genesis 1:

And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, that it may divide water from water. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven." (Gen 1:6–8)

The biblical firmament – in Hebrew, רקיע – is a thin sheet stretched out to separate the upper and lower waters, and prevent the upper water from leaking. At this point, the biblical and Mesopotamian traditions share the same conception of how the world is basically built, and how it was created.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 4: *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1: Creating the Reminder of the World

Later in *Enuma Elish*, Marduk creates the remainder of the world:

He fashioned heavenly stations for the great gods,  
And set up constellations, the patterns of the stars.  
He appointed the year, marked off divisions ...  
Gates he opened on both sides,  
And put strong bolts at the left and the right.  
He placed the heights (of heaven) in her [Tiāmat's] belly...  
The foam which Tiāmat ...  
He gathered it together and made it into clouds.  
The raging of the winds, violent rainstorms,  
The billowing of mist — the accumulation of her spittle —  
He appointed for himself and took them in his hand ...  
From her two eyes he let the Euphrates and Tigris flow,  
He blocked her nostrils, but left ...  
He heaped up the distant [mountains] on her breasts,  
He bored wells to channel the springs.  
... [He set up] her crotch — it wedged up the heavens—  
[(Thus) the half of her] he stretched out and made it firm as the earth (Lambert,  
*Babylonian Creation Myths*, Winona Lake 2013).

This description is not very similar to the biblical story of creation in Genesis 1. We can identify only general similarities: *Enuma elish* tells us here about the creation of the heavenly lights and their role in determining the calendar. A similar description is found in the biblical fourth day of creation:

And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to separate day from night; they shall be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And they shall be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to shine upon the earth. And it was so.” (Gen 1:14–15)

Back to *Enuma Elish*: After the creation of the lights, the precipitation, and the mountains,



Marduk presents himself before the gods and is crowned king of the world. Finally, he decides to add one more item to creation: A man.

This latter part reminds us of Genesis 1. There too, the creation of man occurs at the very end of the creation process, as a kind of climax.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 5: *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 – Similarities

Let's conclude our short comparative survey:

We noted several similarities between the stories of creation in *Enūma Eliš* *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1. They are basically two different stories; they do not entirely parallel each other. Yet, they both share several basic conceptions:

1. At the beginning of creation, the world consisted nearly only of (or only of) water.
2. These waters are called *těhôm* in Hebrew and *Tiāmat* in Akkadian. These are probably two versions of the same ancient word.
3. One of the first acts of creation was the division of the vast body of water into two parts, to serve as the heavens above and the groundwater and/or seawater below.
4. The god placed an impermeable sheet beneath the upper water to prevent water from leaking down and to preserve the separation between the two bodies of water.
5. Later, the god created the luminaries, and determined their role as calendar markings.
6. The last creature to be added to creation was the human being.

How are we to explain these similarities between the two creation stories?

Several researchers believe that the biblical story of creation is based directly on *Enuma Elish*. That is, the author of the biblical story was somehow familiar with the Babylonian story, and made extensive use of it.

However, this claim is problematic for several reasons.

First, the stories are not similar enough to claim direct dependence. The parallels look impressive, but the basic plot is different: it is not the same story retold.

A second consideration relates to the linguistic relation between Hebrew *těhôm* and Akkadian *Tiāmat*. We will not go into linguistic details right now; it's enough to say that a comparison between these two terms shows that the Hebrew source cannot be

dependent upon the Akkadian source, and that the two stories probably originate from a third common source. You can find more details in the appendix to this lecture.

A third consideration against direct literary dependence is the fact that stories similar to *Enuma Elish* are known from all over the ancient Near East. A myth which describes a hero-god overcoming the sea in ancient days was preserved in different languages and places. We will discuss this issue later in this unit. For now, it's enough to conclude that we must look at the broader picture before determining the exact relation between Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish*.

Let's close this part of the discussion with a more modest conclusion: **Genesis 1 does not seem to borrow its content directly from *Enuma Elish*.** What we probably have here is a nucleus of common tradition shared by both texts. The author of Genesis 1 integrated common scientific ideas of its time into his work. Thus, popular conceptions about how the world came into being out of primordial waters found their place in the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 6: *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 – Differences

So far, we have discussed the parallels between Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish*. But there are also many differences, which outweigh the similarities. The differences deserve attention too. In fact, several scholars believed that in comparative study, the dissimilarities are no less important than the similarities. Differences may teach us a lot about the nature of the two cultures and their religious conceptions.

A leading scholar who believed in highlighting the differences between biblical and extra-biblical texts was **Umberto Cassuto**. Cassuto believed that the comparative study can reveal the unique ideas of biblical religion, and its innovations vis-à-vis other religions.

I recommend his commentary on the Book of Genesis, chapters 1-11. These chapters are rich in parallels to the ancient Near East. Cassuto regards these parallels as a foundation for discussing the differences between the traditions. He begins his commentary on the story of the creation with these words:

“The purpose of the Torah in this section is to teach us that the whole world and all that it contains were created by the word of the One God, according to His will, which operates without restraint. It is thus opposed to the concepts current among the peoples of the ancient East who were Israel’s neighbors, and in some respects it is also in conflict with certain ideas that had already found their way into the ranks of our people. The language, however, is tranquil, undisturbed by polemic of dispute; the controversial note is heard indirectly, as it were, through the deliberate, quiet utterances of Scripture, which sets the opposing views at naught by silence or by subtle hint” (credit: U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, from Hebrew: I. Abrahams, Jerusalem 1961, p. 7).

This is one of the clearest formulations of the research school represented by Cassuto. Let’s follow Cassuto’s path and try to analyze the differences between the creation stories.

The most striking difference regards the nature of the gods. *Enuma Elish* teaches us that “in the beginning” there was a mating of two deities. The result was the birth of successive generations of younger gods, who soon began to fight their ancestors. This fact alone is very telling regarding the Mesopotamian conceptions of the divine. The gods are basically part of the natural world: they can be born and give birth. They can be involved in fights and get killed. Some of them are stronger than others. Often they are identified with elements of nature such as the sea.

In contrast, the biblical God stands above nature and has no history or genealogy.

This is why the story of the deity’s battle with the ancient sea is absent from Genesis 1 (although it is not entirely absent from the Bible as we see later). God is portrayed as a single, sovereign ruler. He has no rival during or after creation.

According to Genesis 1, there are (almost) no divine entities in the world besides God.

This is why the biblical creation account has to retell the story of the splitting of Tiamat’s body. In *Enuma elish*, the body of a dead mythological monster is divided.

In the Bible, the object that is separated is simply water – a neutral, inanimate element. The biblical waters are completely subordinate to the will of the God, and the sea has no independent power to rebel against Him.

This process of removing mythological qualities for religious purposes is sometimes called demythologization.

On the course website you will find some good recommendations for extra reading about the relation between Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish*.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 7: *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 – The Great Sea Monsters

We have seen that the author of Genesis 1 adapts mythological ideas about creation, and revises them in light of his religious conceptions.

Some scholars believe that the Bible here goes even further: there is one case in which the biblical story seems to protest against the ancient myth. Verse 21 says:

And God created the great *tannînîm*, and all the living creatures of every kind that moves, which the waters brought forth in swarms, after their kind, and all the winged birds of every kind.

The Hebrew word *tannînîm* – in singular *tannîn* – refers to a dangerous reptile, usually some type of snake. But it is very unusual for Genesis 1 to mention a specific animal: elsewhere, it refers only to general species: all the tress, all the birds, all the fish, and so forth. So why does the creation of the specific animal *tannîn* deserve a special mention?

According to *Enuma Elish*, when Tīāmat fought against Marduk she was assisted by an army of mythological sea creatures. *Enuma Elish* itself does not mention the *tannîn* among the helpers of Tīāmat. But other ancient sources, which we will discuss soon, refer to the *tannîn* as a sea monster who took part in a great battle against the god.

Cassuto remarks on this point:

“Here too, it would seem, the Torah intended to sound a protest ... In the countries of the Esat generally, all sorts of legends used to be recounted about the battles of the great gods against the sea dragon and similar monsters... the Torah is entirely opposed to these myths. It voices its protest in its own quiet manner, relating: *So God created the great sea monsters*. It is as though the Torah said, in effect: Far be it from any one to suppose that the sea monsters were mythological beings opposed to God or in revolt against Him; they were as natural as the rest of the creatures, and were formed in their proper time and in their proper place by the word of the

creator, in order that they might fulfil His will like the other created beings.”  
(Cassuto, 49–50).

It is interesting to mention that a similar interpretation of the *tannînîm* was already suggested hundreds of years ago. The medieval Jewish commentator Ramban did not know, of course, about *Enuma Elish*. But he was familiar with stories of the “ancient Greeks” depicting ancient sea-creatures, and he sensed that this verse presents a polemic against such mythological ideas.

## **Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context**

### **Lecture 8: Biblical Hints about God's Battle with the Sea**

We have seen that the story of creation in Genesis 1 adjusts the original mythological tradition to the religious ideas of the Bible. The adaptation includes an omission of the battle with the sea monster from the story.

However Genesis 1 is not the only biblical creation account. Ancient poetic creation traditions appear here and there in the Bible. These are fragmented and abbreviated traditions: they do not transmit a full, coherent creation narrative. But if we carefully collect and integrate them, a surprising discovery is revealed: it turns out that the Bible does include hints of the ancient war between God and the sea. Let's look at some examples.

The prophet Isaiah says:

Awake, awake, clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, as in former ages! It was you that hacked *Rahab* in pieces, that pierced the sea monster (Hebrew: *tannîn*; Isaiah 51:9)

With these words, the prophet attempts to arouse God's mighty arm. He wishes for a restoration of the power that God's arm possessed at the beginning of history ("the days of old"). In that ancient period, the prophet tells us, the arm of God defeated two creatures: *Rahab* and *tannîn*. But he gives us no more information: the circumstances of God's victory remain mysterious, and the story itself is not told. We only get a hint of this ancient great battle.

Similar hints are scattered throughout the Bible. Here is another example, from the book of Job:

(The one) who alone spread out the heavens, and trod on the back of the sea ... God does not withdraw His anger; under Him *Rahab*'s helpers stooped (Job 9:8–13).

Job tells us here that at the time of creation, when God spread out the heavens, He also prevailed over *Rahab* and his helpers. Again, the story of the battle is not told.



But there is another hint: In addition to *Rahab*, God also defeated the sea and trod on its back. Unlike in Genesis 1, the sea here is not a natural element of nature, but a mythological creature who has a back. And here is another piece of information which can be gleaned from this short description: *Rahab* did not act alone – he had assistants. After the battle, these assistants became enslaved to God and accepted his authority.

Our last example is taken from the book of Psalms. While glorifying God, the psalmist refers to God's battle with the sea and its helpers:

You broke the sea in pieces by Your strength; You shattered the heads of the sea monsters (Hebrew: *tannînim*) in the waters. You crushed the heads of *Liwyātān* (= a type of sea dragon), You gave him to be food to sea creatures (Ps 74:13–14)

Based on these and many similar verses, we can reconstruct a lost ancient Israelite myth. This myth told how, before creation, God fought the sea and its creatures that rebelled against Him. He killed or enslaved the sea creatures, and silenced the raging sea. Some of the ancient names of the sea creatures are preserved in the Bible. In the verses we read before, we found *Rahab*, *tannîn* and *Liwyātān*. After defeating the sea and its creatures, God began creating the world. This reconstructed story is much more similar to *Enuma Elish* than Genesis 1.

## Lesson 2: Biblical Creation Traditions in their Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 9: What Happened to the Ancient Israelite Creation Myth?

In the previous lecture, we collected hints of the existence of an ancient Israelite myth regarding God's primordial battle against the sea. The reconstructed myth is similar to the story of *Marduk's* battle with *Tiamat* in *Enuma Elish*.

Today, we know that these two ancient stories – the Israelite and the Mesopotamian – are only two versions of a popular myth which was known all over the ancient near East. Stories about the battle of a hero-god against the great sea are known from Syria, Egypt, and the ancient kingdoms of Hatti and Ugarit. We cannot go into details now. You may find some reading recommendations about this widespread myth on the course website.

The most remarkable aspect of the Israelite version of this myth is that it is an untold story. It was omitted from Genesis 1, and is nowhere else explicitly related. The only thing we have are fragmentary references, scattered throughout the Bible's poetic sections. Why can't we find the full myth anywhere in the Bible?

Many scholars believe that the answer to this question is related to the unique nature of biblical religion. Given its monotheistic nature, the Bible could not have accepted a mythological tradition that presented a war of divine agents against the God of Israel. The story was therefore omitted from biblical tradition. In Genesis 1 it went through a process of demythologization, and its mythical parts were hidden. However, traces of this myth which was once well-known among the ancient Israelites, still persist in the Bible. The prophets and poets borrowed images and phrases from the myth and integrated them into their work. In this way it continued to be transmitted, until its fragments were re-joined by modern scholars.

### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 1: Introduction

In the previous lessons, we examined similarities and differences between biblical and extra-biblical creation traditions. The connections between the biblical creation stories and those of the surrounding cultures are mainly indirect in nature. These connections indicate a common ancient Near Eastern background, or similar scientific and ideological perceptions, but not direct literary dependence.

This is not the case with the flood story. The flood story is considered one of the classic and most famous examples of a direct parallel between the Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature. The connections between the biblical and Mesopotamian flood stories are close and clear.

The first evidence of a Mesopotamian flood story was discovered by the British scholar **George Smith in 1872**. His discovery aroused a great deal of excitement among the public: He proved, that the biblical flood story had a very similar cuneiform parallel.

Dr. Jon Taylor: the story became famous thanks to this man, George Smith. The story goes that he was employed at a printing house, and in his lunch breaks he would come to the museum. He was very interested in these new discoveries that were coming to the museum, and after a while, the staff noticed that this young gentleman had taken a great interest and he seems to know what he was doing, and eventually they took him on the staff. They gave him a job putting together these fragments of tablets, and helping the department to publish them, essentially. This was a great stroke of luck because he seems to be one of the best cuneiform scholars who ever lived, and he did a remarkable job in the nineteenth century, for the first time sorting out this enormous number of fragments, and putting them back to more or less complete tablets. One of the groups of tablets he was working on – and this is one nice example – was a story of somebody that he knew as Izdua, but we now know it's Gilgamesh, and to his remarkable surprise, he found that one of these stories was about a flood, and it bore incredible similarity to the well known biblical flood story. This is a tablet that he pieced together from many-many fragments – you see just how complicated a job this was, and here on the end this bubbling from the destruction of library when the clay turned to glass essentially – so he has pieced this together from fragments.

The story goes, that such was his excitement once one of these fragments he was reading had been cleaned, and he could read for the first time this story, that to the amazement of everybody present, he undressed and ran around the room. If you look at how things were in Victorian England, this is probably: he undid his neck tie and got very excited. But still, it created a lot of drama at the time. You can imagine the excitement of being the first person to read this. It's an incredible story.

In **1872** he unleashed his discovery to the world, and in December, in London, at the society for Biblical Archeology, he gave a lecture, which was attended by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the sitting prime minister – the only time

a sitting British prime minister has ever attended an Assyriological lecture, hopefully not the last – and he amazed the world, it very soon was on the front pages of newspapers around the world: here was, essentially, the biblical flood.

George Smith has a very interesting life story, and it is a very tragic story. Because in 1873, the Daily Telegraph, amazed by his discoveries, pay for him to go back to Iraq to find the missing bit. Because you see from the tablets there are gaps in the story. And he was certain that he could find the missing bits. So they send him off, in 1873, he goes off to Iraq, and he digs at Nineveh, and he finds what he thinks is the missing piece of his flood story. Very excitedly, he reports back to the Daily Telegraph, who seem to have decided, now he's found this piece of clay, it's enough. So they cancelled his excavations, much to his disappointment: that wasn't quite the gist of the message that he sent. And on his way back, he contracts an illness and he dies.

Later, Smith's finding proved to be the first of many Mesopotamian and extra-Mesopotamian sources describing the flood.

Today, we know of several important sources related to the flood story. The most important are two famous Mesopotamian epics, known as **Atrahasis** and **Gilgamesh**. The epic known as Atrahasis describes the beginning of history from the creation of humankind by the gods to the story of the flood. The Epic of Gilgamesh could be considered the most important Mesopotamian literary work. This epic tells the story of the hero-king Gilgamesh, his close friendship with the wild man Enkidu, and his quest for eternal life. As part of this quest, Gilgamesh meets the only human being who survived the primeval flood, **Ut-napishtim**. Ut-napishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood and of his survival.

In addition to these two canonical works, the flood is also mentioned in other Mesopotamian sources. Among these are two recently-discovered sources, known as the 'ark tablet' and the 'flood fragment from Ugarit.' We will discuss them later. In addition, some works mention the flood briefly, as a well known event, while discussing other matters. A striking example is the text known as The Sumerian King List. This work lists the royal dynasties that ruled the world at the beginning of history, dividing them into those that ruled 'before the flood' and those that ruled 'after the flood.' The Sumerian King List is reminiscent of the lists of generations in the Book of Genesis, which detail the genealogy of early humanity in two different lists. One of these is dedicated to the ten generations preceding the flood (Genesis 5), the other enumerates the ten generations following it (Genesis 11). Because the *Sumerian King List* only mentions the flood but does not refer to it detail, we will not discuss it further. You may find more information about this text and its possible relation to the Bible in the syllabus.

### Unit 3: Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 2: The Flood Story in the Myths of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh Part I

We will begin our review of the Mesopotamian flood tradition with the two long epics known as Atrahasis and Gilgamesh. These are two seminal pieces of Mesopotamian literature. They each tell their own story. However, both integrate into the plot a 'chapter' which tells of the primeval flood. While the setting is very different in each myth, their descriptions of the flood itself are very similar, including small details. We will first describe the general storyline of each of these pieces, and then focus on how they portray the flood.

Dr. Jon Taylor: These two tablets belong to the Atrahasis story, another flood story. The tablets belong to the Old Babylonian period, and they date to the seventeenth century BC. It's a very long-lived story. Well over a thousand years, this flood story has survived in more or less the same form.

Atrahasis is an Akkadian myth known to us already from the Old Babylonian period. Atrahasis is the name of the protagonist of the story. The name means 'Most Wise'. The myth describes the beginning of history and includes the creation of humankind, followed by the flood story. Here is a summary of the main events which led to the flood as described in Atrahasis:

1,200 years after its creation, humanity had increased significantly. The noise made by humans disturbed the sleep of Enlil, the chief god of the Mesopotamian pantheon. In an attempt to diminish their numbers – and the noise they made – the gods brought a plague on humankind. The wisest person on earth, Atrahasis, looked for a way to remove the plague. The god of wisdom, Ea, advised him to have humans stop providing for the gods, and instead offer only to the god Namtar, directly responsible for the plague. Humankind, led by Atrahasis, heeded Ea's advice. Pacified, Namtar put an end to the plague.

The problem, however, repeated itself twice more. Humankind multiplied again and their noise disturbed Enlil. Enlil tried to diminish their numbers by means of a drought, and later by locking away all the water sources. Both attempts failed however, because the god Ea – again – secretly assisted humanity.

Following his three attempts to diminish humanity by relatively moderate means, Enlil decided on total annihilation by means of a flood. Enlil suspected Ea as having betrayed the gods to humankind. He therefore administered an oath to all the gods, forbidding them to reveal anything about the flood to the humans. Ea finds, however, an indirect way to warn Atrahasis of the flood, and advises him to build a boat in order to survive. From this point on, the flood story in Atrahasis is very similar to its counterpart in Gilgamesh. So, before continuing to relate this fascinating story, we should present a brief introduction to the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Gilgamesh Epic is the most important and influential myth in Mesopotamian culture. It describes the wonderful adventures of the ancient hero-king Gilgamesh, and is known to us in various versions from different periods.

Dr. Jon Taylor: These tablets tell perhaps the most famous story from all of Mesopotamia. This is the Gilgamesh story. We have a number of examples. You see they all share this three-column format. This tells you that it's Gilgamesh.

In most of its early versions, the Gilgamesh story did not include the flood story, but rather described various episodes relating to the exploits of Gilgamesh. However, in a later version of the epic, the flood was integrated into the wider story of Gilgamesh. This version, considered to be the canonical Epic of Gilgamesh, was composed, according to Babylonian tradition, by a gifted author by the name of Sîn-lēqi-unninni. The name means: 'Sîn (the moon god), accept my prayer!'.

The version composed by this author was based on many earlier texts combined together. It describes the history of Gilgamesh: his close friendship with a fellow named Enkidu, who was a domesticated wild man; the joint journey of the two friends to the legendary Cedar Forest to fight a terrible monster called Humbaba; and the tragic death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh's soul mate. The story of the flood is set in this version towards its end: The epic consists of twelve tablets, and the flood story appears on the eleventh tablet.

Following the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, Gilgamesh could find no rest. The terror of death awaiting him disturbed his peace. He decided to set out on a quest for eternal life. The object of his search was the legendary hero of the ancient flood who was granted eternal life by the gods after surviving the flood. Here, this hero is not called Atrahasis but Ut-Napishtim. The meaning of the name Ut-Napishtim is probably 'long life' although the etymology is somewhat complicated. You will find more details regarding this name on the course website. Gilgamesh is determined to find Ut-Napishtim so that he can reveal to him the secret of eternal life. He embarks on an exhausting journey to Ut-Napishtim's abode. During the journey, Gilgamesh encounters dangerous lions, fights human-scorpion creatures, and crosses a dark tunnel connecting the rising and setting of the sun. He then reaches a wondrous garden on whose trees precious jewels blossomed, and crosses the Sea of Death that kills those who touch its waters. Eventually, Gilgamesh finds Ut-Napishtim on the other side of the Sea of Death. To his disappointment, however, he discovers that eternal life has only been granted to Ut-Napishtim as a gift from the gods, a gift that no other mortal can attain. In order to describe to Gilgamesh the circumstances by which he came to merit eternal life, Ut-Napishtim tells him the story of the flood and how he survived it. In the next lecture, we will continue to tell the story of the flood according to these two sources.

### **Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context**

#### **Lecture 3:**

#### **The Flood Story in the Myths of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh**

#### **Part II**

When we related the plot of the Atrahasis myth, we left the hero at the point when the god Ea tells him of the flood and advises him to build a boat. We will now go through the remainder of the story. From this point on, we will follow the narrative as it appears in the Gilgamesh Epic, because its state of preservation is much better than the version appearing in Atrahasis. Just remember that the protagonist is here called Uta-Napishitim rather than Atrahasis.

The English translation which we will read is taken from the recent authoritative edition of the Assyriologist Andrew George. We shall skip some important parts; you are strongly encouraged to read the entire story in George's book.

Utnapishtim spoke to him, to Gilgamesh ... The boat that you are going to build, her dimensions should all correspond: her breadth and length should be the same, cover her with a roof, like the Apsu.' I (=Utnapishtim) understood and spoke to Ea, my master: 'I hereby concur, my master, with what you told me thus. I have paid attention; I shall do it.

Utnapishtim then asks for Ea's advice on how to present the enterprise of building the boat to his fellows in the city. Ea advises him to deceive them into thinking that he has to leave the earth and go down to the underworld:

Then also you will say to them as follows: 'For sure Enlil has conceived a hatred of me!

I cannot dwell in your city! I cannot tread [on] Enlil's ground! [I shall] go down to the Apsu, to live with Ea, my master ...'

Uta-Napishitim's fellows believe his explanation. Having no idea that the boat is designed to save him and his family from a huge flood while leaving them to die, they all assist him in building the boat:

The carpenter was carrying [his] axe, the reed-worker was carrying [his] stone...

The rich man was carrying bitumen, the pauper brought the[ ... ] tackle...For the workmen I butchered oxen...

Utnapishtim feeds the workers every day:

Every day I slaughtered sheep. Beer, ale, oil and wine [I gave my] workforce [to drink], like the waters of a very river! They were celebrating as on the feast-days of the New Year itself!

When the boat is ready, Utnapishtim loads it with property and animals, and invites his friends, family, and craftsmen aboard:



I loaded aboard it whatever silver I had, I loaded aboard it whatever gold I had, I loaded aboard it whatever seed I had of living things, each and every one. All my kith and kin I sent aboard the boat. I sent aboard animals of the wild, creatures of the wild, persons of every skill and craft.

When the appointed time comes, Utnapishtim goes into the boat, and the terrible flood begins:

I went into the boat and sealed my hatch ... At the very first light of dawn, there came up from the horizon a black cloud; within it Adad (= the storm god) did bellow continually.

The depiction of the flood itself is poetic and replete with mythological descriptions:

‘(The god) Errakal was ripping out the mooring-poles, (the god) Ninurta, going (by), made the weirs overflow...The still calm of the Storm God passed across the sky, all that was bright was turned into gloom ... like a battle [the cataclysm] passed(!) over the people. One person could not see another, nor did people recognize each other in the destruction.

Interestingly, the gods themselves suffer from the flood:

Even the gods took fright at the Deluge! They withdrew, they went up to the heaven of Anu (= god of heaven). The gods were curled up like dogs, lying out in the open.

After seven days, the flood was over:

For six days and seven nights, was blowing the wind, the downpour, the gale, the Deluge ... When the seventh day arrived, the gale *relented*. The sea grew calm ... the tempest grew still, the Deluge ended. I looked at the weather, and there was quiet; but all the people had turned to clay’.

The boat eventually lands on the top of a mountain:

On Mount Nimus the boat ran aground. Mount Nimus held the boat fast and did not let it move. One day, a second day, Mount Nimus held the boat fast and did not let it move; a third day, a fourth day, Mount Nimus held the boat fast and did not let it move; a fifth, a sixth, Mount Nimus held the boat fast and did not let it move.

After seven days, the protagonist sends three birds to see whether the waters have abated:

When the seventh day arrived, I brought out a dove, setting it free. Off went the dove ... No perch was available for it and it came back to [me.]. I brought out a swallow, setting it free: off went the swallow ... No perch was available for it and it came back to me. I brought out a raven, setting it free: off went the



raven and it saw the waters receding. It was eating, *bobbing up and down*; it did not come back to me.'

Utnapishtim then sacrifices to the gods. The hungry and thirsty gods, who were left without offering supply during the flood, gather around the offering:

I brought out an offering and sacrificed to the four corners of the earth. I strewn incense on the peak of the mountain. Seven flasks and seven I set in position, below them I heaped up (sweet) reed, cedar, and myrtle. The gods smelled the savour, the gods smelled the sweet savour, the gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.

Enlil, chief of the pantheon, finds out about Utnapishtim's survival. At first, he becomes angry, but later he is persuaded by Ea that the flood was an extreme move and his anger is appeased. Eventually, he blesses Utnapishtim and his wife:

Enlil came up into the boat, he took hold of my hands and brought me out. He brought out my woman, he made her kneel at my side, he touched our foreheads, standing between us to bless us: 'In the past Utnapishtim was (one of) mankind, but now Utnapishtim and his woman shall be like us gods! Utnapishtim shall dwell far away, at the mouth of the rivers!' They took me and settled me far away, at the mouth of the rivers.

With this, Utnapishtim concludes his first-person story-within-a-story about the flood. As we explained before, a very similar plot is told in the third person in the Epic of Atrahasis.

### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 4:

#### The Flood Story in Other Mesopotamian Sources

While following the plot of the flood story as it is depicted in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, you have probably noticed its close connections with the famous biblical flood story.

However, before we proceed to a comparative discussion, we should briefly refer to other Mesopotamian sources that describe the flood. Let's begin with the earliest mythological attestation of the flood, known as the Sumerian flood story.

The Sumerian version of the flood has only reached us in one fragmentary tablet. Because the tablet is broken, a full reconstruction of the myth is difficult. We can tell, however, that the text describes the creation of humankind and then the divine plan to annihilate humanity by means of a flood. In this version, the hero of the flood is called Ziusudra – in Sumerian: 'long life'. You may read an English translation of this ancient version of the myth online.

Another version of the flood story has only recently been found. This is an **Akkadian** report, probably dated to the Old Babylonian period. The tablet was deciphered in 2014 by the Assyriologist Irving Finkel, and since then has been known as the 'Ark Tablet'. Finkel discovered that the tablet includes instructions given by Ea to Atrahasis on how to build the boat. These specific instructions are unknown to us from other sources relating to the flood.

Dr. Jon Taylor: This is the famous ark tablet. It contains a version of the flood story, which is in some ways familiar, but in other details, rather new. The tablet itself first came to modern attention in the 1980s, when it was brought to the department by a visitor. Part of the service we offer in our department is that people can come and ask our opinions about things, and quite often they would bring objects, sometimes real, sometimes not, and ask us a little bit about them. This one has been in the collection of this gentleman's father for some time, and he didn't know what it was, and it just so happens it's a unique account of the flood story! So my colleague Irving Finkel, the man who first saw this tablet, and after many years finally was able to study it, made his own remarkable discoveries. The tablet itself, or if you like, the story in it, doesn't seem to fit exactly into any of the known big stories. It doesn't look like it's a copy of Gilgamesh or Atrahasis, but it's somehow part of that mix.

Below are some of the opening lines of the tablet, translated to English by Finkel:

Atrahasis, pay heed to my advice, that you may live for ever! Destroy your house, build a boat; spurn property and save life! Draw out the boat that you will make on a circular plan; let her length and breadth be equal ...

Following this is a detailed technical description of the boat's structure and method of construction. Later, we find remnants of the rest of the story, including the banquet held by Atrahasis for his relatives and friends. The tablet concludes at the point when Atrahasis' boat builder locks the door of the boat. The most interesting innovation

suggested by this version is the round shape of Atrahasis' boat, which differs from the square-shaped boat described in the Epic of Gilgamesh. It also differs from Noah's rectangular-shaped boat as described in the Bible.

Another innovation in this tablet, which is significant from a comparative point of view, is the mention of the number of animals that should be brought into the boat. Finkel deciphered the following lines of the tablet:

But the wild animals from the steppe ... **two by two** the boat did [they enter].

Following this discovery, Finkel reexamined the tablets of Atrahasis and was able to identify, among the broken signs, parts of the Akkadian words 'two by two'. This discovery adds a new point of similarity between the Mesopotamian flood tradition and the biblical account.

Finally, we will review a special version of the flood story found in an Akkadian tablet from **Ugarit**.

A short note about Ugarit: This ancient city is a highly important source for materials relevant for comparative study of the Bible and ancient Near East. We have mentioned Ugarit very briefly in our discussion of the creation traditions as one of the places where the battle between the storm god and the sea is documented. Ugarit was located on the Mediterranean coast of present-day Syria. The Ugaritic culture and language belong to the north-western branch of the Semitic cultures. This means that it was especially close to the Israelite culture, which is also northwest-Semitic. However, this background is not so relevant to the flood tablet from Ugarit because this tablet is not written in Ugaritic – it's written in Akkadian and it represents Mesopotamian tradition. The fact that it was found in Ugarit, on the periphery of Mesopotamian culture, is interesting. But for our purposes, we will treat this source as another Mesopotamian version of the flood.

This text describes how the hero of the flood, whose name is not mentioned in the few preserved lines, opens a window in the boat by means of a spade and axe, and then sends two birds to find land for him: a dove and a water-fowl. What is most interesting about this version is its mention of time: the tablet notes that the flood ended 'at the beginning of the month'. The Bible reflects a similar tradition when it mentions that the tops of the mountains were first seen on the first day of the month (Gen 8:5). Other Mesopotamian versions do not mention any dates in their descriptions of the flood.

In addition to these original Mesopotamian texts, the Mesopotamian flood story later appeared in various Greek versions. Several of these have ramifications for our understanding of the biblical flood story in its relation to the Mesopotamian stories. These will be discussed in the following lectures.

### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 5:

#### Mesopotamian and Biblical Flood Traditions: Similarities



In the previous lectures, we examined the central sources that preserve Mesopotamian flood traditions. You have probably noticed the strong resemblance between these Mesopotamian stories and the biblical flood story.

We will not read here the famous biblical version of the flood story. You are strongly encouraged to read the full story in Genesis 6–9.

Here, we will mention the most striking similarities between the two traditions, and quote some relevant biblical verses.

Both traditions describe a hero saved from the flood by an ark or boat, who brings into it animals – two of each kind:

And God said to Noah ... Make yourself an ark of gopher wood ... For My part, I will bring a flood, waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life ... And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. From birds of every kind, cattle of every kind, every kind of creeping thing of the ground of every kind, two of each shall come in to you to keep them alive. (Gen 6:13–20)

In both traditions, when the flood ends, the boat or ark comes to rest upon a high mountain:

And in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. (Gen 8:4)

In both traditions, the survivor sends birds – including a dove and a raven – to ascertain whether the waters had receded:

At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see whether the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no resting place for its foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for there was water over the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. Then he waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark. And the dove came in to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a plucked off olive leaf. Then Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. And he waited another seven days and sent the dove forth; and she did not return to him anymore. (Gen 8:9–12)

Later on in the story, the two traditions report that the survivor went out of the ark and offered sacrifices:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. (Gen 8:20).

The similarities we noted regard the general storyline, which is basically the same in both traditions. While reading the Mesopotamian sources, you might have noticed additional parallels, significant or minor. For an extensive list of similarities between the biblical account and the Mesopotamian tradition you may consult the bibliography on the website.

### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 6:

#### When and How did the Contact between the Flood Traditions Occur?

In the previous lectures, we saw that there is a strong, undeniable resemblance between the flood traditions in the Bible and Mesopotamian sources, in both the general storyline and the specific details. How are we to explain this obvious literary dependence?

Two main questions should be addressed. First, who influenced whom? Did the biblical scribes borrow a Mesopotamian story, or vice versa? Second, after we establish the direction of borrowing, is there any way to determine in what historical period it occurred?

The question of the direction of borrowing should be viewed in the broader cultural context. It is clear from our review of the extant materials that the flood tradition was deeply rooted in Mesopotamia. It is found in several different versions, in both Sumerian and Akkadian. It is integrated into the most important canonical works of Mesopotamian literature, as well as briefly alluded to in other texts, such as the Sumerian Kings List. This wealth of sources may imply that the flood story originated in a Mesopotamian environment.

In contrast, the biblical version of this story seems to betray some signs of foreign origin.

Here is one example. God instructs Noah:

And seal it from within and without with bitumen.

The Hebrew term כָּפַר in the sense of bitumen is unique to this text. This word was borrowed from the Akkadian word *kupru*. Use of bitumen for external and internal sealing of ships was common in Mesopotamia. Thus, both the word כָּפַר and the technology reflected in this verse seem to reflect a Mesopotamian rather than a local Canaanite environment.

Another detail in the biblical story that might indicate the Mesopotamian origin of the story is the mention of the Mount Ararat as the ark's resting place. The exact identification of these mountains is disputed among scholars. However the name is reminiscent of the famous toponym *Urartu*, which refers to a region north of Assyria, in present-day Armenia. Scholars generally assume that the biblical Mount Ararat should be located east of Canaan, in areas much closer to Mesopotamia.

In addition to these specific details, which accord better with Mesopotamia than Canaan, there is also the general setting. Some scholars argue that the very idea of a flood that sweeps away the earth was more likely to have arisen in Mesopotamia, a land of rivers prone to floods, than in the rocky land of Canaan.

Can we point, then, to a specific Mesopotamian flood text that stands in the background of the biblical flood story? The answer is generally negative. The biblical flood is probably not based exclusively on one of the Mesopotamian texts known to us. The parallels between the biblical story and the Mesopotamian sources do not concentrate in one particular Mesopotamian text. The plot of the biblical story is very similar to that described both in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh. However other details are known from different sources. For instance, the biblical reference to 'the first of the month' with regard to the end of the flood is only paralleled by a similar date in the

flood tablet from Ugarit. There are also other pieces of evidence that indicate that the biblical scribes were familiar with additional Mesopotamian flood stories that have not reached us. More information about this issue is found on the course website.

There remains the historical problem of when the Hebrew authors came into contact with Mesopotamian flood traditions. Any answers to this question must remain conjectural. We cannot rely on the dating of the flood story in the Book of Genesis, because we do not have hard data relating to the time when it was composed. Scholars have different opinions regarding this issue, which is connected to the general problem of dating the Pentateuch. But the various suggestions are all hypothetical – we cannot date the biblical flood story with certainty. What we have left are some archaeological hints.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Canaan was under some Mesopotamian influence. Akkadian language served as an international language and Mesopotamian culture spread westwards, towards the Hittite kingdom, Syria, Canaan, and Egypt. Thus, a fragment from the Epic of Gilgamesh was found in this period in the city of Megiddo in Canaan. There are also indications that Canaanite authors of the time were familiar with Akkadian literature. Some scholars therefore suggest that the flood story travelled from Mesopotamia to Canaan during the fourteenth century BCE and was adopted by the Canaanites. According to this theory, the Israelites did not inherit the story directly from the Mesopotamians, but rather via Canaanite mediation.

This is only one possible hypothesis; the fact remains that we simply can't tell precisely when and how the flood story found its way from Mesopotamia to Israel. For this reason, the next lectures will not focus on historical questions, but rather on questions of theology and thought, where we stand on safer ground.

The biblical story does not parallel one specific flood source.



### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 7

#### The Flood in Mesopotamia and the Bible: Differences

##### Part I

In the second unit of this course, we mentioned scholars who seek to emphasize the differences rather than the similarities between the Bible and the ancient Near East. We mentioned **Cassuto**, one of the most prominent representatives of this view. The case of the flood story is a classic example of this approach. The differences between the flood stories in Mesopotamia and the Bible are striking. A careful examination of these differences may reveal how the story was adapted and changed by the biblical scribes to fit the Israelite spirit and religion.

**The main difference between the two flood traditions relates to polytheism versus monotheism.** According to the Mesopotamian sources, the flood events involved disputes between the gods. The saving of one man and his family is the result of one god's decision to violate the oath of secrecy he took regarding the flood. The argument between the gods about the saving of humankind continues after the flood, and only after discussion do the gods agree about Utnapishtim's fate. The Bible, however, attributes both the decision to destroy the world by means of a flood and the decision to save one man to a sovereign god who acts independently. The Mesopotamian gods feel threatened by humankind. The increase in the number of human beings and the noise they make disturbs the gods until they are forced to take action. In contrast, the peace of the biblical God is not disturbed by human noise. His decision to destroy humanity by means of a flood is based on moral considerations. The flood is a punishment for the sins of humanity:

And the earth became corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with lawlessness. And God saw the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. And God said to Noah: 'The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them, and I am about to destroy them with the earth. (Gen 6:11–13)

Interestingly, the Bible sometimes uses human noise which disturbs God's peace as a metaphor for evil deeds. For example, in the story of Sodom, God decides to destroy the city because:

The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is exceeding grievous. I will go down now, and see whether they have done according to their cry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will take note. (Gen 18:20–21)

The cry here may be a biblical adaptation of the noise motif from the ancient flood stories. But it acquires a new meaning in the Bible: The cry that disturbs God and brings him to decree the destruction of Sodom is not mere noise but rather an expression of sins and evil deeds. This new interpretation of the noise motif suggests a different understanding of the motivation of divine actions.

A similar difference exists regarding the criteria for saving the hero of the flood. In the Mesopotamian flood tradition, the hero is saved thanks to his connections with the



god Ea. Others, not so fortunate to be as close to Ea, perished in the flood. In contrast, the Bible states that Noah was selected because of his righteousness:

Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.  
(Gen 6:9)

In addition to differences related to divine moral considerations, there are also other dissimilarities between the two traditions. We will discuss these in the next lecture.

### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 8

#### The Flood in Mesopotamia and the Bible: Differences

#### Part II

In the previous lecture, we presented some of the differences between the flood traditions in Israel and Mesopotamia. Most of the differences are related to the essence and behavior of the gods. We will now continue to review additional differences.

The Mesopotamian gods in the flood sources often behave like human beings. They are sometimes unstable or even impulsive. The biblical God is also characterized in human terms, but his conduct throughout the story of the flood is more rational and reasoned.

The Mesopotamian gods have limited ability to control the universe. During the flood, they understand its ramifications and regret their decision. However, they are unable to bring the flood to an immediate end. The gods are forced to seek refuge in heaven. In the biblical flood story, God's control over the forces of nature is portrayed as absolute. When He decides to end the flood, he does so immediately:

And God remembered Noah and every living thing, and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God made a wind to blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. (Gen 8:1).

An interesting difference is revealed when comparing the offering scenes that follow the flood. After they bring the flood about, the Mesopotamian gods realize that in destroying humanity they have also destroyed the providers of their offerings. They remain hungry and thirsty during the seven days of the flood. Only when the survivor exits the ark, they finally get some food:

The gods smelled the savour, the gods smelled the sweet savour, the gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.

This description resembles God's reaction to Noah's offering:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, and the LORD said in his heart, "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devising of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I ever again strike down every living being, as I have done." (Gen 8:20)

Just like the Mesopotamian gods, the God of Israel also smells the pleasing aroma of the sacrifice. However, in the Mesopotamian story, the starving gods then fall on the offering like flies. In the biblical narrative, God does not eat of the offering, he just **smells** it. In general, God is not physically injured by the destruction of humanity, and his hunger is not sated with the sacrifice of Noah. It seems that the Bible preserved the detail regarding the smelling of the offering but reinterpreted it in a manner that maintains God's independence.

It is interesting to note that this same verse – which was used by the biblical scribes to refine the concept of divinity by making God *less* human – was understood differently by later Jewish interpreters. From late antiquity onwards, the description of the smelling God was often perceived by Jewish commentators as an exaggerated anthropomorphism of God, and they attempted to soften it in various ways. These changes teach us that the monotheistic idea continued to develop in post-biblical times.

The omnipotent figure of God in the biblical story also redefines Noah. Unlike the Mesopotamian protagonists of the flood, Noah is not a mythological hero. He is not given exceptional wisdom like Atrahasis. He certainly does not receive eternal life. His greatness lies in his righteousness and devotion to God. Moreover, Noah is depicted as exceptionally passive. Throughout the story, most of his actions focus on following God's instructions. Many exegetes believed that this passive behavior is intended to contrast Noah with Abraham. However, it is also possible that it is intended to contrast Noah with God. The passive nature of Noah illuminates the absolute control of the almighty God over the events.

The last difference we will discuss regards God's blessing of multiplication. Upon their exit from the ark, God repeatedly blesses humanity so that they shall be fruitful and multiply:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." (Gen 9:1)

And you, be fruitful, and multiply; abound on the earth and increase on it. (Gen 9:7)

This blessing presents the positive attitude of the biblical God towards human procreation. Not only does it not threaten God by potentially disturbing His peace but He even finds it desirable and blessed. The Bible seems to present here an alternative to, perhaps even a polemic against, the Mesopotamian view of the relationship between the gods and human beings.

In the syllabus, you will find recommendations for additional reading regarding the differences between the two flood traditions.

### Unit 3. Biblical Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

#### Lecture 9:

#### Scope and Importance of the Differences between Flood Traditions

In the previous two lectures, we discussed the differences between the biblical and the Mesopotamian flood traditions. As presented above, these differences appear to be fundamental, exposing basic theological differences between the two cultures. Some scholars, such as Cassuto, even suggest that the changes made by the biblical scribes are deliberately polemic in nature, intended to emphasize the Israelite ideas of divinity and humanity. Other scholars, on the other hand, dispute this interpretation of the sources. They argue that the dissimilarities between the traditions should not be exaggerated and that the general picture should not be presented as too polarized. Let us briefly review some of these points of disagreement.

A central issue we discussed before is the reasons for the divine decision to bring about the flood. According to the Mesopotamian sources, the flood was not punishment for sins. However, several scholars interpret these sources differently.

At the conclusion of the Mesopotamian flood story, in a passage we did not read in full before, the gods Ea and Enlil argue over the justification for the flood:

Ea opened his mouth to speak, saying to the hero Enlil: “You, the sage of the gods, the hero, how could you lack counsel and cause the deluge? On him who commits a sin, inflict his crime! On him who does wrong, inflict [his] wrongdoing!” (George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 715:181–186)

Ea basically claims here that if Enlil wanted to reduce the number of human beings, he should only have punished the sinners. This argument seems to imply that the flood was a punishment for sins, implemented collectively on humanity as a whole. According to this interpretation, the noise human beings made at the beginning of the story is actually a revolt against the gods. The cause of the flood is thus a religious sin.

However, this metaphoric interpretation of the noise motif is problematic. A simple reading of the flood’s circumstances reveals that the noise is not perceived by the gods as a sin. Rather, they treat it as a mere physical disturbance. In fact, the idea that senior gods dislike noise and that they tend to destroy those making it is known from other mythological works, such as *Enūma Eliš*. Against this background, it seems that Ea’s claims against Enlil do not imply that the flood was a punishment. Rather, Ea argues that Enlil *should have* acted according to moral considerations, and that he *should have* killed only the sinners, instead of choosing the indiscriminative flood to solve to the noise problem.

You will find reading recommendations regarding this exegetical discussion on the course website.

There is yet another type of sources that suggest that the Mesopotamian gods brought the flood as a punishment for moral sins. These are flood stories from the Greek world. Greek culture inherited the flood tradition from Mesopotamia. Several Greek flood stories present a later and adapted version of this tradition. In at least one of these, the flood is caused by human sin. Here, prediluvian humanity is described as cruel and disdainful of traditional values.

We therefore see that the biblical moral perception of the flood has an external parallel in a later Greek version.

The origin of this development in Greek tradition is unknown. It may be a Greek adaptation of the Mesopotamian tradition, but it may also be an earlier idea that the Greeks inherited from the Mesopotamians. It is important to remember that the Mesopotamian material we possess probably represents only a small portion of the rich literary flood tradition. It is therefore possible that in the ancient world, maybe already in Mesopotamia itself, there existed a version that attributed the bringing of the flood upon the world to moral misconduct.

The disagreement among scholars regarding the extent of polarity between the Mesopotamian and biblical flood traditions is related to a bigger issue. Is biblical tradition unique among the ancient Near Eastern cultures, or is a natural part of a regional legacy? Does the Bible suggest a religious revolution? What is the relationship between continuation and change in biblical thought? We will discuss these issues in the next unit

### **Unit 4 Lecture 1: Introduction**

In the previous units, we examined extra-biblical parallels to the biblical stories of primeval history. We pointed to a number of similarities between the literary traditions of the Bible and of the surrounding civilizations, especially in the case of the Flood story. Alongside the similarities, we also identified many differences. Many of these differences are related to theology, that is: to the nature of the biblical God, his relationship with humans, and his interaction with the world. Many researchers have discussed these differences – we have made frequent reference to Umberto Cassuto, for instance. Cassuto represents a school of thought that emphasizes these differences. By means of comparative research, this school of research seeks to sketch the outline of the religious revolution of the Bible.

In this unit of the course, we will seek to widen our scope regarding the theological aspect of comparative research. We will examine the works of prominent researchers and thinkers who have discussed this topic. We will attempt to understand how the comparison between the Bible and extra-biblical materials can enhance our understanding of biblical religion.

## Unit 4 Lecture 2 : Yehezkel Kaufmann's Theological Model and the Comparative Research of Primeval Biblical History Part 1

While studying the previous unit that dealt with the Flood traditions, you probably noticed that the differences between the biblical and extra-biblical stories are related to different perceptions of the concept of divinity. We have seen that the different traditions have different viewpoints on issues such as:

The exclusiveness of God,

His sovereignty over the forces of nature,

and his rational manner of taking decisions.

These are important details, but they still do not supply us with a profound definition of the essence of biblical faith. Such a definition was proposed by the biblical scholar **Yehezkel Kaufmann**. Kaufmann, a brilliant and original thinker, devoted his life to describing Israelite religion during the biblical period, its nature and development. His approach to this issue is described at length in his seven-volume book *The History of the Israelite Faith*.

It is strongly recommended that you become familiar with Kaufmann's book, considered a milestone of biblical theology. You will find the bibliographic details on the course website.

In order to introduce some of Kaufmann's ideas, we will use quotes from his essay on Israelite religion in the Hebrew *Encyclopedia Biblica*. The quotes are translated from Modern Hebrew.

Kaufmann believed that the difference between monotheism and polytheism is not quantitative: we are not dealing here with the question how many gods there are, one or many. Rather, Kaufmann believed that:

"Monotheism is a unique creation, fruit of a special revelation ... it is a non-idolatrous perception of reality. It is a deep-rooted, fundamental contrast to idolatry, it is non-idolatry."

In the previous lesson, we saw that the Mesopotamian gods do not rule with absolute control over nature. After bringing a terrible flood upon the world, they can no longer stop it, and they themselves become its victims. Kaufmann was of the opinion that such perceptions stem from the fundamental principles of the idolatrous belief that the gods themselves are subject to the primeval power that is the law of nature:

"Divine life is also linked to a certain material development, and is subject to a system of essential-eternal laws. Divinity is not, according to the idolatrous perception, a prime source of existence, and the will of the deity is not the ultimate law of

existence. *There is a former, super-divine existence in which the deity is rooted and to the laws of which it is subject.*” (my emphasis, N.S.)

Note that Kaufmann preferred to refer to polytheism as “idolatry.” This choice of terminology will be discussed later.

When we studied the creation and Flood myths, we saw that the Mesopotamian gods often have human weaknesses. They need to eat and drink, and they may be involved in arguments, or make impulsive decisions. According to Kaufmann, these characteristics stem from a fundamental trait of ancient Near Eastern polytheism. Kaufmann believes that in essence, idolatry is nothing but a deification of natural phenomena. Just as every living being has physical needs, so do the gods:

“As life on earth, so too divine life that is dependent on material and on the vital forces hidden within it. The gods too need food and drink, on which their force of life depends.”

Just as the living world is dominated by variety and abundance, so too is the world of the gods:

“The natural existence abounds with characters and nuances ... The abundance of authorities and forces in nature reflects the abundance of authorities and forces in the sphere of the divine entity. There is a god of the heavens, and there is a god of the land, and there is a god of earth, and a god of water etc.”



### Unit 4 Lecture 3: Yehezkel Kaufmann's Theological Model and the Comparative Research of Primeval Biblical History Part 2

Another important point in Kaufmann's thought regards the concept of myth. In the previous lessons, we presented several myths about the history and exploits of the gods. Kaufmann claims that myth is a fundamental component of idolatry. The myth basically presumes that the gods have a life story that does not depend on their free will. Rather, the divine life story is subject to fate and to the forces of nature:

“And because the deity, according to the perception of idolatry, has no supreme rule, because it is dependent upon a higher existence above it and upon the system of its powers and laws... the gods are subject to the hand of fate. The gods have a life story, not subject to their will. Their history consists of events independent of them, that happen to them. They are born, they mature, age, die and are resurrected. They eat, drink, covet, are fruitful and multiply, fight, are victorious or vanquished. The story of the history of the gods is *the myth*. The myth is in essence a *life story that expresses the gods' dependence on a super-divine existence, a story of the fate of the gods*. Through the myth, the idolatry expresses its world-view, its explanation for phenomena as a divine occurrence that is rooted in a super-divine existence. **Every idolatrous religion is mythological.**” (my emphasis, N.S)

Because the gods are not external to nature but are rather subordinate to it, the story of the creation in polytheistic religions also describes the creation or birth of the gods:

“In every people's religion we find an element of Theogony – a story of the gods' creation. The idolatrous story on the creation of the world is also a story of the gods' birth. The world and the gods evolve from the ancient, super-divine existence. This evolvment is dominated by the imagery of reproduction by sexual mating that is to be found alongside the imagery of creation.”

Against these perceptions, Kaufmann stresses that the Israelite God stands above nature:

“The slogan of the Israelite religion throughout history is: *God is one!* The meaning of this declaration of faith must not be mistaken for expressing merely numerical unity, as many have understood it. Its fundamental significance is: absolute supremacy. God is one because he is absolute-supreme. This ideal frees the deity from the mythological-magic, idolatrous subservience to a super-divine existence, to a super-divine material and to a super-divine system. And it is this ideal that makes the Israelite religion a special and unique religion, a non-idolatrous religion in its roots and essence ...

**The concept of myth is therefore irrelevant to the Israelite religion:**

There is no myth in the Israelite religion: it contains no account of the life-story of God, of any occurrence in the divine sphere that happens to the deity as a process

independent of its will. Its first story (Genesis 1) is the story of the God's *action*: the creation of the world by His utterance. This is a story not of the history of God but rather, the beginning of the history of the world. The Book of Genesis is the book of human history, not the book of divine history.

Accordingly, the Biblical God has never been born or created:  
...The Israelite religion knows no theogony... God is not only 'one': He is also eternal and above any evolution. He was not born, He did not mature, He has no desires, He does not fertilize and father offspring, He does not die, He is not resurrected ..."

Kaufmann believed that, unlike in the idolatrous world, the figure of God in the Bible does not represent the variety and abundance of natural life. For this reason:

"Israelite religion knows no contradiction and battle between different divine entities ... The Bible contains no story of battles between gods ..."

#### **Unit 4 Lecture 4: Yehezkel Kaufmann's Theological Model and the Comparative Research of Primeval Biblical History Part 3**

When we discussed the Babylonian creation myth, we saw that divine and semi-divine entities such as the sea became inanimate in the biblical story. According to Kaufmann, this metamorphosis reflects the approach of the Israelite religion towards the very essence of nature:

“The ideal of the single-supreme god completely removed all of nature from the divine sphere. Nature was reduced to the level of an object, a creation, devoid of any divine element. There is no deification of the heavens, the earth, the sea and all therein in the Israelite religion. There is no deification of animals ... between God and the world there is an unsurmountable, fundamental separation.”

Creation traditions are a good example of this claim: In *Enūma Eliš*, both the god and the primordial sea stand on the same level. They both belong to the divine sphere, which itself belongs to the world of nature and is subject to its laws. Marduk wins the battle against Tiamat, but his advantage is not fundamental; there is no essential difference between these two divine creatures. By contrast, Genesis 1 distinguishes God from the primordial waters: God belongs to the supernatural sphere, while the waters are an inanimate element of nature. In philosophical terms, such a god is called a transcendent god, that is, external to nature.

In the previous unit, we saw that biblical Noah differs from his Mesopotamian counterparts. Noah remains human throughout the story. He is not elevated to the level of an immortal being. He does not even possess extraordinary attributes, such as remarkable wisdom or might. Some scholars believe that the Noah's passive behavior is designed to emphasize God's status as the sole ruler of creation. Kaufmann's doctrine places this insight within a broad philosophical framework. According to Kaufmann, the design of the human figures in the Bible is derived from the aspiration to establish a clear division between the divine and the human:

“[Idolatry] believes in apotheosis: in the elevation of humans to the level of deity. Idolatry knows not only gods but also demigods: human-gods. It deifies heroes and kings ... it deifies the ‘forefathers.’”

By contrast, according to Kaufmann, Israelite religion:

“... contains no apotheosis. There are no demigods. There is no blending of divine and human seed. There are no children of divine heroes or kings.”

This brief survey can be summarized in the words of another researcher, Binyamin Oppenheimer, in his article on biblical monotheism. The following quote is translated from Hebrew. A full reference is available on the course website.

“Idolatry is based on the belief that there exists an entity continuum between the gods, humankind, inanimate and even animate nature, while monotheism rejects this continuum ... in the biblical monotheism... the uniqueness (of God) lies in His absolute separation from the world, that is, in His sanctity, and in the supremacy of His will; He is beyond any constancy and beyond any phenomenon. His existence differs from that of man and of the world. The entity continuum between mortals and divinity is breached; an entity void gaps between heaven and earth.”

In summary: Kaufmann and his colleagues presented many fundamental differences between monotheism and polytheism. These differences basically regard the relation between God and Nature.

#### **Unit 4 Lecture 5: The Limits of Monotheism: How Exclusive is God?**

Kaufmann's thought constitutes the philosophical infrastructure for Cassuto's reading of the creation and Flood stories. Other scholars have also expressed similar views. On the course syllabus you will find some recommendations for the works of Sarna, Muffs, and Wright recommended, all of whom present a similar agenda. Generally speaking, these scholars believed that the Bible's ideas differ fundamentally from those of the polytheistic world. For them, the similarities between the biblical and extra-biblical traditions are a platform that enables the exposure of their essential differences, and the innovation of Israelite religion.

This approach, however, does not dominate biblical scholarship. Many scholars, including the founders of modern biblical study, adopt a different point of view regarding the nature of biblical religion.

Let's begin with Kaufmann's most important principle: the absolute exclusiveness of the God of Israel. Scholars have pointed to a number of biblical texts that acknowledge the existence of other gods. For example, the prophet Micah says:

For all the peoples walk each in the names of its gods, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever (Mic 4:5).

A similar idea, in even sharper expression, is expressed by Jephthah the Gileadite in his letter to the king of Ammon:

Is it not right that whatever your god Chemosh expropriates for you, you should possess; and that everything that Yahweh our God expropriates for us, we should possess? (Judg 11:24).

According to this verse, each god, to the best of his ability, takes care of his people's inheritance: Chemosh takes care of Ammon's inheritance, and the God of Israel is in charge of Israel's inheritance. Consequently, it can also be assumed that every people places its trust in its own national god and that this division is considered natural and legitimate.

The idea that gods control specific territory and guard those who inhabit it is also reflected in David's complaint:

For they have driven me out today from sharing in Yahweh's estate, saying, "Go serve other gods!" (1 Sam 26:19).

Interpreted literally, this verse claims that anyone not found in God's inheritance, that is, in the Land of Israel, passes on to another inheritance under the control of other gods. As a result, this person is required to worship the local deity in place of God.

These verses show that, at least in some parts of the Bible the existence of other deities is not completely denied. However, even when they are acknowledged, foreign deities are considered inferior to God. Here is an example from the Song of the Sea:

Who is like you among the gods, O Lord? (Exod 15:11)

This is a rhetorical question that presumes that there are indeed other gods in the world, even if they are inferior to the God of Israel.

Psalms 29 opens with a call for בני אלים, literally meaning “sons of the gods,” to praise the God of Israel:

Give to the Lord, O sons of gods, give to the Lord glory and strength (Ps 29:1).

The precise nature of the “sons of the gods” is unclear. One possible interpretation is that they are semi-divine beings but not gods *per se*, perhaps a type of angel.

However, many modern scholars are of the opinion that they are minor gods, subject to the God of Israel and required to accord him glory and strength.

Such quotes seem to challenge Kaufmann’s dogmatic view of Israelite monotheism.

#### Unit 4 Lecture 6: The Limits of Israelite Monotheism: Monotheism of Monolatry?



In the previous lecture, we saw that Kafmann's strict view of Israelite monotheism does not accord with several biblical quotes that seem to acknowledge the existence, and even the legitimacy, of other deities.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars attempted to formulate exact terms to describe the religious faith reflected in the texts which we read. Julius Wellhausen, often considered the founder of modern biblical studies, called it "monolatry" – "single worship," that is, a religious belief that acknowledges the existence of multiple gods but claims the supremacy of one deity above all others. Others proposed the term "henotheism" that similarly relates to a religious conception that focuses on the worship of one god, without absolutely denying the powers of other deities.

Many scholars believe that biblical religion began as monolatry and only later, apparently in the seventh or sixth century BCE, developed into monotheism. This is why distinctly monotheistic statements appear in later biblical books, such as Jeremiah:

O Lord, my strength, and my stronghold, and my refuge in a day of trouble, to You nations shall come from the ends of the earth and say: Surely our fathers have inherited lies, things that are futile and worthless. Can a man make gods for himself? No-gods are they! (Jer 16:19-20)

The nations in these verses acknowledge the exclusiveness of the God of Israel and deny the existence of the gods of their forefathers. The gods of the nations have no reality or power here. According to the approach of Wellhausen and others, this verse reflects a change in Israelite religious philosophy. It reflects the growth of monotheism that absolutely negates the existence of foreign gods. Kaufmann, on the other hand, believed that monotheism lies at the base of the biblical religion from its very beginning. This approach is sometimes called "Mosaic monotheism" – i.e. "The monotheism of Moses" – due to the extreme antiquity that it ascribes to Israelite monotheism.

It is important to observe, that the historical model of Wellhausen and others, according to which monotheism developed in Israel from approximately the beginning of the seventh century BCE, is based on a number of hypotheses regarding the dating of the biblical books, especially Deuteronomy and the last part of Isaiah. The validity of Wellhausen's evolutionary model depends on his theories about the dating of biblical literature. You can find more details about this issue in the syllabus.

According to Wellhausen, the Israelite religion in its ancient, monolatrous form was actually not very different from the beliefs of the neighboring peoples. Many cultures viewed their national god as superior to the other gods. In the *Enuma Elish*, for instance, Marduk is presented as the king of all gods. However in Mesopotamia, monolatry never matured into a real monotheism. The Mesopotamian world continued to be characterized by a polytheistic viewpoint.

## Unit 4 Lecture 7: The Limits of Israelite Monotheism: Is there no Mythology in the Bible?

In the previous lectures, we saw how several biblical verses challenge Kaufmann's **Mosaic monotheism**.

A similar challenge is posed by verses that depict God's battle with the ancient sea. In the second unit of this course, when we discussed creation traditions, we presented several hints to an ancient Israelite myth about God's battle with the sea at the beginning of history. We have seen that the full story is not related in the Bible, but its traces can still be identified in the poetic sections of the Bible.

Kaufmann maintains that there is no mention in the Bible of the battle between different divine entities, and that the God of Israel is never threatened by other divine forces:

"The biblical legend does not imagine *yam*, *liwyātān*, *tannîn* and *nāḥāš* (and certainly not *Rahab*) as primeval, "divine" forms of existence, that possess an independent root within the eternal existence. All are mentioned as *creations* of God and as being subjugated to Him... The biblical legend does not therefore perceive the battle as taking place between primeval divine forces fighting with each other for control over the world, but rather as a battle between *God* and His *creations*, who rebelled against Him, attacking His world in order to destroy it." (translated into English from *The History of the Israelite Faith*, Volume 1, p. 425)

Against this view, scholars have argued that in some texts, the sea and its creatures cannot be considered God's creations because the battle against them takes place **before** God creates the world. Here is an example from Psalm 74, where the battle against the sea creatures is mentioned first:

"You broke *yam* in pieces by Your strength; You shattered the heads of the *tanninim* in the waters. You crushed the heads of *Liwyātān*, You gave him to be food to sea creatures."  
(Ps 74:13–14)

The creation of the world only comes later:

"Yours is the day and yours the night, You have established luminary and sun. You have set all the borders of the earth, summer and winter – You made them." (Ps 74:16-17)

As depicted here, the rebellious divine creatures were not created by God. Rather, they are independent beings threatening God's control of the world. This control was therefore not always absolute. During the pre-creation days, it was even under real threat. Moreover, the mythological battle described here undermines Kaufmann's claim that there is absolutely no form of mythology in the Bible.



Before concluding this part, we should mention some additional claims against the uniqueness of Israelite monotheism. Several scholars have attempted to identify monotheism in other parts of the ancient Near East. A common theory attributes the beginning of monotheism to an Egyptian king named Pharaoh Akhenaten, who ruled Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE. We have not yet discussed Egyptian culture and its connections to the Bible. Later in this course, in our discussion of wisdom traditions, we will say a few more words about this issue. For now, we will just briefly remark on the religious revolution of Pharaoh Akhenaten. During the fourth year of his reign, this king instigated a religious revolution. He elevated the god of the sun – Aten – to the status of superior god. In the ninth year of his reign, Akhenaten declared Aten to be the only god. He commanded the destruction of the temples of Amun, the traditional superior god of Egypt, and clashed with the priests of the temples. Subsequent kings restored the old religion. Some scholars have suggested that the Egyptian Akhenaten is the father of monotheism and that the Bible borrowed this idea from him. This claim was first expressed by Sigmund Freud in his *Moses and Monotheism*, and later gained more supporters. A reverse direction of influence – from Israel to Akhenaten – was also proposed. You will find more information about this in the course syllabus.

To conclude:

The biblical quotes and historical evidence we discussed challenge the idea of Israelite monotheism from several aspects. They show that:

The religion of the Bible was not always purely monotheistic;

The religions of the ancient Near Eastern peoples were not always exclusively polytheistic;

and that Israelite monotheism may have developed gradually in Israel during the biblical period.

Do these claims undermine the very idea of biblical monotheism? This question will be discussed in the next lecture.

## **Unit 4 lecture 8: Conclusion and Evaluation: To What Extent is Biblical Thought Revolutionary?**

You have probably already sensed that the discussion of the uniqueness of biblical religion compared to the other ancient religions cannot be detached from the contemporary religious and political discourse. Scholars who have stressed the uniqueness of Israelite religion were often committed to a religious or national ideal regarding the distinctiveness of the Bible. On the other hand, scholars who sought to minimize the differences between the cultures also belong to ideological schools of thought that influenced their research perceptions.

The rhetoric adopted by scholars from different schools of thought is telling. We have seen that Kaufmann makes occasional use of the term “idolatry,” based on the biblical term “idol,” with its natural negative connotations. Scholars who do not emphasize the distinctiveness of biblical religion tend to prefer the more neutral term “polytheism.” Recommended readings regarding these social and political aspects of the scholarly discussion are found in the syllabus.

Regardless of the ideological background of the different scholars, if we want to define the nature of biblical religion we should try to evaluate both schools of thought. Let’s begin with Kaufmann.

Kaufmann’s scholarly enterprise attempted to present a monolithic and inclusive picture of Israelite faith. Such an ambitious project cannot escape certain hard-pressed claims or inaccuracies. The corpus we call the Bible encompasses centuries, dozens of genres and sub-genres, and many sources that represent different perceptions. It would be unrealistic to expect such a complex world to demonstrate complete unity in its religious philosophy.

What about the alternative approaches, represented here by scholars like Wellhausen? Wellhausen and his fellow scholars identify in the religion of the bible complex processes, historical developments, and a range of voices regarding the nature of divinity. They present Israelite faith in a more complex manner that enables attention to detail and historical development. However, they do not refute the fact that the Bible is, in general, a monotheistic work; and that by being basically monotheistic, it is distinguished from other ancient Near Eastern religions.

It seems that the main contribution of these critical discussions lies in the softening and broadening of the dogmatic philosophy proposed by Kaufmann and his colleagues, but not in its complete negation. Kaufmann’s fundamental observations about the essence of biblical monotheism are still valid for significant sections of biblical literature. Other sections, that do not conform to Kaufmann’s theological principles, are a reflection of the complicated process of the emergence of monotheism in Israel. All these enrich the general picture and render it more complex, without undermining it.

There is one more important contribution to the attempt to soften the polar distinction between the Bible and its surrounding cultures.

Later in this course we will indeed see that the parallels between the Bible and the ancient Near East do not in every instance yield an impressive set of fundamental theological differences, as in the Flood story. In other cases, the Bible's similarities to its surrounding environs are greater than the differences. In such cases, an approach that seeks to constantly enhance the differences between the cultures may mislead researchers and distort their findings. So, from a methodological point of view, it is important to take into consideration various approaches in order to sketch a more balanced picture of the relationship between the Bible and its environment.

## Unit 5. Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 1: Introduction

Chapters 1-11 of the Book of Genesis form an independent unit that describes the world's primordial history. This unit possesses special characteristics. One of these is the abundance of parallels to ancient Near Eastern sources in comparison with the rest of Genesis. We have discussed some of these parallels in previous lessons. Towards the end of this unit we find the short story usually referred to as the 'Tower of Babel':

וַיְהִי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים: <sup>1</sup> וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעָם מִקֵּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְּקֶעֶז בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: <sup>2</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבָּה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָּה וְהָיָה לָהֶם הִלְבְּנָה לָאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֹר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר: <sup>3</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבָּה נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נִפּוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: <sup>4</sup> וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: <sup>5</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אֶחָת לְכָל־ם וְהִנֵּה הֵחָלֹם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: <sup>6</sup> הִבָּה נִרְדֶּה וְנִבְלֶה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ: <sup>7</sup> וַיִּפֶץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֵת הָעִיר: <sup>8</sup> עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׂפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּמְשֶׁם הַפִּיצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ:

And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And as they journeyed from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another: 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for clay. And they said: 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower, with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men had built. And the Lord said: 'Behold, they all belong to one people, and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they plan to do. Come, let us go down, and confound their language there, that they may not understand one another's language'. So the Lord scattered them from there upon the face of the whole earth; and they ceased building the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because there the Lord confounded the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

Unlike the case of the creation and flood, here the Mesopotamian sources do not supply us with a parallel story. But while Mesopotamian *literature* does not offer any relevant parallel, the Mesopotamian *material* culture is of great importance for the understanding and interpretation of this fascinating biblical story. In the following lectures we will see how Mesopotamian civilization sheds light on the story's meaning and messages.

**Unit 5, Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context**  
**Lecture 2: The Background of the Tower of Babel Story:**  
**Mesopotamian Building Technology**

Our review of the Tower of Babel story in light of Mesopotamian civilization will begin with the depiction of the making of bricks.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הֵבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשֹׁרֶפֶת

And they said one to another: ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly’.

This verse describes how the builders of the city first invent the brick; or, according to a slightly different interpretation, how they use an existing technology of brick making.

Bricks were the most common construction material in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian bricks were made of **clay mixed with straw**. The bricks were dried in the sun and then used for building relatively simple structures. For the construction of more complex buildings such as temples, the Mesopotamians used kiln-baked bricks. Such bricks were more durable. At the same time, however, they were also more expensive to produce, due to the energy needed for their baking: firewood was not a widely available in Mesopotamia.

Construction with bricks was an efficient technology: it made good use of the abundant quantities of clay available in the rivers and canals of Mesopotamia. Preparation of bricks took place at the beginning of the summer. The prophet Nahum briefly describes the process of brick making in Mesopotamia:

בְּאֵי בָטִיט וְרִמְסִי בַחֲמֵר הַחַזִּיקִי מִלְבָּן:

Go into the clay, and tread the mortar, grasp the brick-mold!

(Nahum 3:4).

This verse describes an imaginary picture of the residents of the Assyrian city of Nineveh preparing bricks to fortify their city.

The process usually included the treading of the clay by foot, and the adding of straw in order to strengthen the mixture (this is not mentioned in this verse). The bricks were then put into a brick-mold and dried in the sun.

Another reference to this process in the Bible can be found in the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah likens the crushing of the enemies' bodies to the act of treading the clay by the brick maker:

וַיָּבֹא סֻגְגִימִים כְּמוֹ-חֶמֶר וּכְמוֹ יוֹצֵר יִרְמְסֵ-טִיט

And he shall come upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treads clay (Isaiah 41:25).

In order to stabilize the brick building, Mesopotamian builders used **bitumen**. Mesopotamia is rich in natural reserves of bitumen. This material was used for the strengthening and sealing of buildings, boats, etc.

In the Bible, bitumen is called חֶמֶר, **hēmār**. In the Land of Israel, bitumen was an uncommon material. Accordingly, the term *hēmār* is rare in the Bible. Outside the story of the Tower Babel, it occurs only twice.

Both these texts refer to special geographical areas outside the heartland of Israel. **In one of these cases, the Dead Sea area is described as full of “wells of bitumen”** (Genesis 14:10)—that is, pits of natural reserves of bitumen. This description fits the geological reality of the area.

**The second mention of bitumen occurs in the description of the sealing of Moses' cradle.** His mother is said to seal his small ark with bitumen and pitch (Exodus 2:3).

Here too, the setting is in Egypt, outside the Land of Israel.

In the next lecture, we will review the alternative building techniques used in Israel and show how this knowledge can illuminate the Tower of Babel story.

## Unit 5, Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context Lecture 3: The Background of the Tower of Babel Story:

### Building Technology in Israel

In the previous lecture, we briefly reviewed some of the common building technologies in Mesopotamia.

In Israel, especially in the hilly heartland, different technologies were used. The differences relate both to the building material itself and the cement used to put it together.

Rather than bricks, the most common building material in the hills of the Land of Israel was stone. This difference is naturally dependent on the availability of the appropriate raw materials. The Land of Israel's mountain area is abundant with stone. In the great rivers of Mesopotamia, on the other hand, clay is the most readily available material.

A similar difference occurs in relation to the adhesive material. In Israel, this was usually clay, sometimes combined with lime, which was used to strengthen and seal the building. In Mesopotamia, as we have seen before, bitumen was used for similar purposes.

This information enables us to properly interpret the second half of Gen 11:3:

וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלִּבְנָה לָאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֶר הָיָה לָהֶם לַחֲמֶר

And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for clay (Gen 11:3)

This verse presents the Mesopotamian building methods from an Israelite point of view. It tells us that those who dwelt in the kingdom that was eventually called Babylon, used brick for a purpose normally reserved for stone and bitumen rather than clay. In other words, instead of using stones for construction, as was customary in the Land of Israel, the Mesopotamians used bricks. And instead of sticking them together using clay, they did so with bitumen.

These descriptions demonstrate that the author is familiar with Mesopotamian building technologies, although he presents them from a local, Israelite point of view.

The most fascinating detail he mentions is the burning of the bricks. The very use of bricks was known here and there in ancient Israel, especially in the valleys. However the use of the more prestigious baked bricks was unknown in Israel until Roman times. The mention of baked bricks therefore reflects the author's first-hand familiarity with Mesopotamian civilization.

We have seen that kiln-baked bricks were not used for simple houses. The builders of the Tower seek to construct an impressive public structure. They therefore invested much capital and energy in the preparation of burned bricks. We will discuss the precise nature of this special structure in the next lecture.

简而言之,美索不达米亚用黏土烧制的砖块和沥青,以色列用石头和黏土石灰粘合。



## Unit 5, Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 4: The Background of the Tower of Babel Story: Ziggurats

After making bricks, the people of the Shinar Valley intend to use them to build  
“a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens.”

Modern excavations in Mesopotamia have supplied us with a key for understanding this mysterious tower. Most probably, it should be identified with the structure known as the *ziggurat*.

A ziggurat is a terraced step tower, similar in shape to a pyramid. Ziggurats were erected inside Mesopotamian temple complexes.

The word “ziggurat”—or more precisely *ziquqrat*—is derived from the root *zaqar*, meaning “to project” or “to stick up”. In this connection, it reflects the prominent and lofty nature of these structures.

Mesopotamian ziggurats reached an average height of about fifty meters, and their bases, on average, took up about two thousand square meters. Due to their height and unique shape, the ziggurat structures rose up above the skylines of most important Mesopotamian cities. The first ziggurats are known to us from roughly 2200 BCE, and the latest survived until as late as around 500 CE. This means that ziggurats were a trademark of Mesopotamian civilization throughout its history.

The core of most ziggurats was built from dried bricks, while the outer structure was made of fired bricks. Inside, there was a single large space rather than inner rooms. In some of the ziggurats, the top was reached via outer staircases, or a spiral ramp. In others, no means of reaching the top have been discovered. Some scholars have theorized that a cultic shrine for divine worship stood at the top of the ziggurat. However, there are currently no archeological remains to support this theory.

Sometimes, trees and bushes were planted along the slopes of the ziggurats for ornamental purposes.

Dr. Jon Taylor: This tablet is proof that sometimes the smaller tablets are more intriguing than the large and more impressive ones. What we have is a drawing of a tower, a ziggurat. On this side of the tablet we have three, maybe four stories preserved, and another two on the other side. The ones on the other side have a staircase. It might be an architect's drawing, like a scale model or something, of real, genuine practical purpose. It's rather intriguing to think that there might be a whole dossier of this architect's drawing somewhere. This appears to be a practical drawing of some source, with measurements, and it gives you what would have been the seven stories of a temple tower somewhere.

To date, the remains of more than thirty ziggurats have been discovered in Mesopotamia and its surroundings. None of them have survived to their full height. **The best preserved one is the Great Ziggurat of Ur.**

For our purposes, the most interesting ziggurat is that of the city of Babylon, because the biblical story tells us that the tower was located in the city of Babylon, in Hebrew: Babel. Only the foundations remain of the great Ziggurat of Babylon. Yet some information about this beautiful structure can be gleaned from textual sources. The name of the ziggurat of Babylon was E-temen-an-ki—in Sumerian: “House, foundation platform of heaven and underworld”. Scholars estimate that it was seven stories high. The ziggurat of Babylon was probably established at the end of the second millennium BCE. Over time, it was expanded and renovated by various Babylonian kings. **Nebuchadnezzar II**—known for the destruction of the first Temple in Judah—had the top part decorated with turquoise tiles. In Nebuchadnezzar's days, the Ziggurat of Babylon was part of a grandiose complex, which included a magnificent temple area, the famous Ishtar Gate, and the splendid “Processional Way” of Babylon.

The Ziggurat of Babylon was probably destroyed during the Persian era. Later, the Greek ruler Alexander the Great attempted to restore it. The first stage of the planned renovation involved the removal of all the old bricks and remains from the site. Unfortunately, the project was abandoned soon after completing this initial stage. Alexander's endeavor thus resulted in more harm than good. The high-quality bricks and tiles of the ziggurat's exterior were reused by the locals for other purposes. When modern archeologists excavated the site, they only found the foundations of this once-magnificent ziggurat.

## Unit 5, Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 5: Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Story:

#### The Centrality of Babylon

In the previous lecture, we saw that while the Ziggurat of Babylon was almost totally destroyed, references to it in textual sources can shed light on its shape and history. These textual sources include mythology. The Babylonian creation story Enuma Elish tells us that the city of Babylon, its temple and ziggurat were built by the gods at the beginning of history. The relevant verses are quoted here in the translation of Wilfred George Lambert.

After Marduk's victory over Tiamat, the gods wished to build him a temple as a mark of gratitude:

The Anunnaki opened their mouths and addressed their lord Marduk: “Now, lord, seeing you have established our freedom, what favour can we do for you? Let us make a shrine of great renown....” (W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 113).

Marduk rejoiced at this gesture, and commanded the gods to build Babylon:

“When Marduk heard this, he beamed as brightly as the light of day. “Build Babylon, the task you have sought Let bricks for it be moulded, and raise the shrine!” (W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 113).

The building project took two years: the first year was devoted to the making of bricks of sufficient quantity and quality for such a magnificent edifice. During the second year, the gods used these bricks to create two structures: The temple and the ziggurat.

The Anunnaki wielded the pick.

For one year they made the needed bricks.

When the second year arrived,

They raised the peak of Esagil, a replica of the Apsu.

They built the lofty temple tower of the Apsu

And for Anu, Enlil, Ea and him they established it as a dwelling.

(W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 113).

The temple built by the gods is called **Esagila** – Sumerian for “House whose top is lofty”. The ziggurat next to it is here called the “**Apsu Tower**”. This name hints that the ziggurat of Babylon represented the Apsu – the freshwater beneath the earth. The belief that the temple and ziggurat of Babylon were created at the beginning of history lent them a mythological status. Lambert has shown that the Babylonian temple is presented in Enuma Elish as the center of the universe, lying between heaven and earth. A similar cosmic view of this temple also appears in other Mesopotamian texts. The Babylonians perceived the city of Babylon with its temple and ziggurat as the center of the cosmos. The temple and ziggurat served as a replica of the heavens above and the watery depths below. This is also reflected in the Sumerian name of the ziggurat, which means – as we already noted – “House, foundation platform of the heaven and the underworld.”

This background now allows us to interpret verse 4 of the Tower of Babel story:

And they said: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower, with its top in the heavens”

The tower is most probably the ziggurat of the city of Babylon. Its top is described as reaching the heavens. This is in line with the Mesopotamian notion that this ziggurat is the point of contact between heaven and earth – or a reflection of the heavens. The nuances of the biblical text may hint not only at the ziggurat itself but also at the temple Esagila. We have seen that the name Esagila means “House whose top is lofty.” Thus, in Enuma Elish, the gods “raised the peak of Esagil”. Such descriptions reflect the view that the top of the entire temple-compound reached the heavens. The biblical phrase “with its top in the heavens” may therefore reflect familiarity with Mesopotamian mythology and ideology.

## Unit 5. Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 6: Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Story:

#### The Name Babel

In the previous lectures, we saw how the Mesopotamian material and textual evidence can shed light on the Tower of Babel story. In this lecture, we will see that the **Akkadian language** itself is another key to interpreting this fascinating story.

The Akkadian language used a special writing system. This system included what scholars call logograms. A logogram is a sign that expresses an entire word. It usually derives from a **graphic representation** of that word. For instance: the word for 'water' in Akkadian can be spelled syllabically, just as in English; But it can also be represented via a logogram that means "water": 𒂗. This sign evolved from a graphic depiction of flowing water. Other logograms represented 'head,' 'hand,' 'bread,' etc.

In Akkadian, the word "Babylon" is pronounced *Bābili*. This name was usually not written syllabically. Rather it was written using two logograms: one signifying 'gate,' and the second signifying 'god'. This way of spelling reflects how the Akkadian scribes interpreted the name of the city: Gate of the God, or better: **Gate of the Gods**. Indeed, *bāb* in Akkadian means gate, and *ili* means 'of the god'.

It is unknown whether this etymology reflects the original meaning of the name or a secondary interpretation. At any rate, it conveys Babylon's centrality in Mesopotamian culture, and the perception that it is the center of the universe. In contrast, the biblical interpretation of the name Babylon in Genesis 11 suggests a very different view:

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because there the **Lord confounded** (Heb: *balal*) the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

The Bible tells us here that the name Babylon should *not* be associated with divine presence as it was in Mesopotamia. Rather than splendor, it implies chaos: the confusion of languages and destruction of civilization. This change in the original meaning of the name is a key point for understanding the message of the entire narrative. We will discuss this message in the next lecture.

## Unit 5. Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 7: The Story's Message - Part 1

In the previous lectures, we have seen that knowledge of different aspects of Mesopotamian culture can help us interpret the Tower of Babel story. Against this background, we will now explore how this information illuminates the message of the story.

What is the meaning of this narrative? How does it use the information regarding Mesopotamian civilization?

Scholars have proposed a broad range of answers to this question. We will survey some of them in light of the comparative material we presented before.

Several exegetes have claimed that the story is designed to mock Mesopotamian culture and its ideas about the world, the gods, and humanity. As in previous cases, one of the leading advocates of this reading is Cassuto. Here are several quotes from his commentary on Genesis:

(The story) represents a polarically opposite attitude to that of the pagan peoples. We have before us a kind of satire on what appeared to be a thing of beauty and glory in the eyes of the Babylonians, a parody of their customary assertions and narrations... I have already indicated earlier how overweening was the boastful pride of the Babylonians in regard to their city, temple and ziqqurat. Our narrative regards all this vaunting and conceit with a smile... you, children of Babylon – in this, or similar vein ran the thoughts of the Israelites – you called your city Babel – *Bâb-ili*, “gate of god”, or *Bâb-ilâni*, “Gate of the gods” – and your tower you designated “House of the foundations of heaven and earth”. You desired that the top of your tower should be in *heaven*... and you did not know that God alone, not a human being, can determine where the “Gate of God” is... You did not understand that, even you were to rise the summit of your ziqqurat ever so high, you would not be nearer to Him than when you stand upon the ground, nor did you comprehend that He who in truth dwells in heaven, if He wishes to take a close look at your lofty tower, must needs *come down*... You did not consider the fact that you lack strong and durable material, that the nature of your country compels you to use *bricks* for *stone* and *asphalt* for *mortar*, and hence you could not hope that your buildings would long endure... You were proud of your power, but you should have known that it is forbidden to man to exalt himself, for only the Lord is truly exalted, and the pride of man is regarded by Him as iniquity that leads to his downfall and degradation – a punishment befitting the

crime... On account of this, your dominion was shattered and your families were scattered over the face of the whole earth. Behold, how fitting is the name that you have given to your city! It is true that in *your* language it expresses glory and pride, but in *our* idiom it sounds as though it connoted confusion – the confusion of tongues heard therein, which caused its destruction and the dispersion of its inhabitants in every direction. Such thoughts...are reflected in the Biblical story of the Generation of Division. (U. Cassuto, *A commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. I. Abrahams), Jerusalem 1961, Vol. 2, pp. 227–230).

Cassuto proposes that this narrative is satirical. The construction of the city and tower represents the arrogant ambition of the inhabitants of Babylon. The city represents political hubris: the Babylonians believe that they are able to build a city of such importance that all of humanity will live there. The tower represents religious hubris: the Babylonians believe that they are able to build a tower so marvelous that it will connect the heaven and earth. According to Cassuto, the story mocks the Babylonian etymology of the name Babylon. The story claims that *Babel* is not the gate of the gods; it is also not the point where heaven and earth meet and unite the cosmos. **Rather, Babel is a place of schism and confusion.** Accordingly, Cassuto believes that the comparison between Israelite and Mesopotamian building technologies was intended to mock the ziggurat structure –the jewel in the crown of Mesopotamian technology. **According to Cassuto, the story presents Mesopotamian building materials as inferior to those used by the Israelites.** It implies that the Babylonians lacked the basic material means to accomplish their ambitious project. The entire enterprise was therefore ridiculous. The tower is so far from the heavens that God above must “go down” (v. 5) in order to get a closer look at it. Similar interpretations have been proposed by many other scholars. Before we proceed to review a different reading of the story, it is worth noting that another episode in the book of Genesis has been understood as an **anti-Babylonian polemic: Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28.** You will find more information about the relation of this story to the current discussion on the course website.

## Unit 5. Biblical Tower of Babel Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 8: The Story's Message - Part 2

Cassuto's reading of the Tower of Babel story emphasizes the contrast between Babylonian and Israelite cultures. However, the narrative can be viewed from other perspectives as well. Some scholars have proposed that the choice of Babylon as the story's setting does not indicate any specific bias against Babylon. **Rather, it reflects the fact that Babylon was the symbol of civilization in the ancient world.** According to this interpretation, rather than picking out the people of Babylon in particular, the story criticizes human arrogance in general. This reading may find support in the narrative's wider context: The tower episode is the conclusion of a series of primeval stories that sketch out a kind of biblical prehistory. The focus of this prehistory, which also includes the creation and flood stories, is universal, not national.

Other details of the story also support this interpretation. The narrative describes an event that befalls – in the verse words – “the whole earth”, not just a specific nation. In fact, the story takes place *before* the concepts of nationality and language are born. God goes down to see the city and tower “which the children of men had built”—not that “which the *Babylonians* had built.” Language confusion and scattering also affect “the whole earth”. These details seem to indicate that the story depicts a universal event. The arrows of criticism are aimed at humanity at large. The narrative seeks to warn against the dangers of a human ambition that knows no boundaries. The best setting for such a plot is Babylon, the legendary seat of one of the most powerful cultures of the ancient world.

**Claus Westermann**, an important modern scholar of Genesis, writes:

The story ... was localized in Babylon in the land of Shinar. Such a localization in one of the great empires was necessary because the gigantic buildings there were well known. Israel knew of the huge towers in Mesopotamia, especially in the ancient city of Babylon ... the subject of this narrative is “the sons of man”, i.e., humankind. It is the story of a primeval event (C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: a Commentary* (trans. J.J. Scullion), London 1984, pp. 541–542).



According to this interpretation, many details of Mesopotamian culture bear a neutral rather than polemical connotation. The information about Mesopotamian building techniques should be interpreted as casual narration. It seeks to inform the Israelite reader of the building techniques common in Mesopotamia – those which led them to such tremendous architectural achievements. The story tells the reader how this advanced technology led the Babylonians to destruction. This reading does not identify here overtones of scorn. **Instead, the story rings with tones of wonder and warning: a warning about human technology, represented here by bricks, cement, and magnificent constructions.** Similarly, the etymology of “Babylon” does not necessarily mock the meaning common in Mesopotamia. It rather simply describes how Babylon was reduced from a symbol of power to a symbol of God’s triumph over human arrogance. In this light, the story represents a religious protest against the hubris of the first powerful civilization.

## Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Lecture 1: Ancient Near Eastern Law - Part I

In the previous units, we discussed the biblical accounts of primordial history and their relation to ancient Near Eastern literature. From this unit on, we will examine several central genres in the Bible in light of their extra-biblical parallels. We will only be able to address a small selection of these genres. The first topic we shall investigate is biblical law and its relation to the ancient Near East.

Like all human societies, ancient Near Eastern cultures had legal systems. Reflections of these systems appear in many ancient texts: written verdicts, court protocols, contracts, receipts, etc. All these sources reflect the laws of their time and place. It is difficult to identify any biblical parallels to the above-mentioned sources. The Bible is essentially a literary text; it does not preserve contracts, verdicts, or protocols. There is, however, one legal genre that forms an exception, namely: law collections. As a religious text, the Bible includes numerous laws. Most of these are organized in large collections. Similar legal collections are known from several places across the ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia.

Many ancient Near Eastern law codes are associated with specific kings. The king in these collections appears as royal legislator—and, more importantly, the source of law and the defender of justice. For this reason, many of the collections we will shortly present are named after kings. However, there are also other collections not attributed to a specific king. These collections are usually labeled according to their origin. We will now briefly present the main ancient Near Eastern legal collections known to us, in chronological order. Reading recommendations and more information about each can be found on the course website.

**1. Laws of Ur-Nammu:** this is the oldest known law code. It is written in **Sumerian**, and composed by the scribes of King Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Ur-III dynasty, around 2100 BCE.

**2. Laws of Lipit-Ishtar:** this law code was also written in **Sumerian**, around 1900 BCE, by the scribes of King Lipit-Ishtar who ruled the kingdom of Isin.

**3. Laws of Eshnunna:** this law code is a little later: it was composed around 1770 in Akkadian. The code is not attributed to a specific king. It is named after the city where it was written.

**4. Code of Hammurabi:** This is the best known law code. It is a long and neatly-organized collection. It was written in Akkadian at the court of the great Babylonian king Hammurabi. The Code of Hammurabi probably dates to around 1750 BCE. Laws from earlier periods arrived us on school tablets. However the Code of Hammurabi is mainly known from a large royal stele. The stele shows the king standing before Shamash, the Mesopotamia Sun-god, who also served as the god of justice, and was associated with the legal system. Beneath the relief are around 300 laws, with a prologue and an epilogue describing Hammurabi as the king of justice. Probably, additional monuments like the one known to us were erected throughout the kingdom, but they were never found. Parts of the Code of Hammurabi were also copied on clay tablets in schools across Babylon. This code was considered a classic. It thus continued to be copied for centuries after the time of its composition.

Dr. Jon Taylor: Here we have a couple of fragments of ancient law code. This one is from the laws of Hammurabi, this one is from the laws of another king – Lipit Ishtar. One of the most important duties of the king on earth was to ensure justice in the land, so Shamash – the god of justice, thus hands the road and the ring, the symbols of justice, to the king, and the king takes them and enacts on earth what Shamash ordains from heaven, effectively. We know actually the kings get involved in quite detailed level in sorting out who owns this sheep, or this bit of property. He is the highest appeal court in the land: you could go before the king and as the just king he would make sure everything is correct, nobody is abusing their position. Justice also manifests in a number of slightly more abstract ways, and the law codes are part of that.

**5. Middle-Assyrian Laws:** This collection is written in Akkadian and was probably composed during the fourteenth century BCE.

**6. Neo-Babylonian Laws:** These Akkadian laws were composed during the Neo-Babylonian period and do not appear to be attributed to a specific king. They date to around 700 BCE.

**7. Hittite Laws:** This collection comes from outside Mesopotamia, from the Hittite kingdom—also known as Hatti. In the previous units, we did not have a chance to look at this kingdom and its contribution to the comparative study of the Bible. Here are some basic details: Hatti was located in Anatolia. Its political and cultural peak occurred between the seventeenth and twelfth centuries BCE. The inhabitants of Hatti did not speak a Semitic language: they spoke and wrote Hittite, an Indo-European language written in cuneiform script. The Hittites had no direct contact with Israel during the biblical period. Yet several striking affinities exist between Hittite and biblical culture. Most of these parallels will not be discussed in our course, because they regard cultic and contract literature – two genres that unfortunately we do not have time to discuss. Yet some parallels appear in the field of legislation. The Hittite laws are, of course, written in Hittite. They were probably composed during the sixteenth century BCE and then copied repeatedly through to the twelfth century BCE.

We have briefly introduced seven important law collections from Mesopotamia and Hatti. In the following lectures, we will explore some of the ways in which they contribute to our understanding of biblical law.

## Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Lecture 2: Ancient Near Eastern Law - Part II

In the previous lecture, we presented the main ancient Near Eastern law collections known to us today. These collections are removed from one another in time and place. Surprisingly, however, they share many characteristics. The topics of all the collections – criminal and civil – are very similar. The basic formula of each law within the different collections is also identical: the formulation in general uses the pattern “If ... then”. This pattern is known as ‘casuistic’ among biblical scholars. All the collections are also eclectic: none of them systematically covers different areas of law. They also present similar norms and viewpoints. And above all – in several cases, we can identify specific parallels between them. All these factors suggest that these collections belonged to a common legal heritage.

Dr. Jon Taylor: We probably shouldn’t imagine that the code is like a modern code of law, where you can stand up in court and refer to “paragraph 3 says this, therefore”. It’s more a propaganda, or, not even really propaganda, it’s ideology that establishes, first of all, the king’s legitimacy for doing this, how he has been selected by the gods, and he has done all these wonderful things, ... this is what should happen in this kind of case, this is what should happen... so it’s not necessarily what actually happened in the day to day level, but a kind of a mission statement.

Scholars tend to doubt that the law codes reflect the law which was actually practiced. As Jon explained, many maintain that the collections did not serve as binding law books. This claim is supported by the fact that other legal documents, such as verdicts or contracts, do not use any law collection as reference books. Moreover, the ruling reflected in these documents sometimes **contradicts** the law found in the collections. Some scholars thus regard the law codes as collections of precedents from the royal court. Others believe that they are nothing but royal propaganda. A third approach classifies law codes as intellectual material produced by school scribes for literary purposes.



The Bible also contains law codes that are integrated into the canon. At least one of them seems to be referred to as a book on its own right. During the Sinai Revelation, Moses declares:

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנוֹ הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע

And he took the Book of the Covenant and read it out loud to the people.

And they said: All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and be obedient!

(Ex. 24:7)

What is this Book of Covenant? Scholars usually assume that it includes all the laws given to Moses from when he “approached God” (Exod 20:21) until he descended from Sinai (Exod 20:22–24:3). This is, in effect, a law code. It is considered among scholars to be the oldest of its kind in the Bible.

## Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Lecture 3: Mesopotamian and Biblical Goring Ox Laws – Similarities

We have mentioned before that the ancient Near Eastern legal collections share many formal and thematic characteristics. Generally speaking, this observation applies to the Bible too: biblical law resembles ancient Near Eastern laws in many ways. In the majority of cases, the affinities are of a general nature. However, in some instances specific parallels can be identified that seem to suggest a direct literary dependence. In this lecture, we will present one example of such a parallel.

The law we will discuss relates to the case of a goring ox.

The biblical Book of Covenant presents the **goring ox law** as follows:

וְכִי־יִגַּח שׁוֹר אֶת־אִישׁ אוֹ אֶת־אִשָּׁה וְמָת סָקוֹל יִסָּקֵל הַשּׁוֹר וְלֹא יֵאָכַל אֶת־בְּשָׂרוֹ וּבָעַל הַשּׁוֹר נָקִי:  
וְאִם שׁוֹר נִגַּח הוּא מִתְמַל שְׁלִשָּׁם וְהוֹעֵד בְּבָעָלָיו וְלֹא יִשְׁמְרֵנוּ וְהָמִית אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה הַשּׁוֹר יִסָּקֵל וְגַם־  
בְּעָלָיו יוּמָת: אִם־כֹּפֶר יוֹשֵׁת עָלָיו וְנָתַן פְּדִיָן נִפְשׁוֹ כָּל אֲשֶׁר־יִוָּשֵׁת עָלָיו: אוֹ־בֶן יִגַּח אוֹ־בַת יִגַּח  
כַּמִּשְׁפָּט הַזֶּה יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ: אִם־עֶבֶד יִגַּח הַשּׁוֹר אוֹ אִמָּה כֹּסֶף שְׁלִשִּׁים שְׁקָלִים יִתֵּן לֵאדֹנָיו וְהַשּׁוֹר יִסָּקֵל:

- 1) If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox is not to be punished.
- 2) But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not guard it, and it kills a man or woman—the ox shall be stoned and its owner, too, shall be put to death. If ransom is laid upon him, he must pay for the redemption of his life whatever is laid upon him. So, too, if it gores a man's son or daughter, he (= the owner) shall be dealt with according to the same rule.
- 3) But if the ox gores a slave, male or female, he shall pay thirty shekels of silver to the master, and the ox shall be stoned.

(Ex. 21:28-32)

These verses present three principal cases:

- 1) Goring by an ox that is not accustomed to behave in such a manner. The goring in this case is unpredictable.
- 2) Goring by an ox who is known for such behavior and whose owner has been warned about him but has failed to take proper precautions.
- 3) Goring of a slave by an ox known for such behavior.

The two types of oxen are known in rabbinic literature as the “innocent ox” and the “warned ox”.

A very similar set of laws occurs in the Code of Hammurabi. The English translation below follows the edition by Martha Roth; the same is true for other Mesopotamian laws we will read later.

250: If an ox gores to death a man while it is passing through the streets,  
that case has no basis for a claim.

251: If a man's ox is a known gorer, and the authorities of this city quarter notify him that it is a known gorer, but he does not *blunt* its horns or control his ox, and that ox gores to death a member of the *awīlu*-class, he (the owner) shall give 30 shekels of silver.

252: If it is a man's slave (who is fatally gored), he shall give 20 shekels of silver.

(M. Roth, *Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Atlanta 1997, p. 128)



These laws parallel the three cases addressed in the biblical law of the goring ox. They follow the same order: the innocent ox, the warned ox, and the warned ox that gores a slave.

The two laws also agree in some of their details. For example, the “warned ox” is defined in the Bible on the basis of three criteria:

- a) It has been accustomed to gore in the past
- b) Its owner has been warned
- c) But has not kept it in.

Exactly the same criteria appear in the Code of Hammurabi:

- a) The ox is a known gorer
- b) The authorities of this city quarter notify the owner that it is a known gorer
- c) But he does not blunt its horns or control his ox.

In fact, the very distinction between the “innocent” and “warned” oxen is a unique legal principle, unknown in other legal systems. It is therefore another feature that links the two sets of laws.

Later in the Book of Covenant, the case of an ox that gores another ox is addressed:

וְכִי־יִגָּף שׁוֹר־אִישׁ אֶת־שׁוֹר רֵעֵהוּ וַיָּמָת וּמָכְרוּ אֶת־הַשׁוֹר הַחַי וְהָצִו אֶת־כַּסְפּוֹ וְגַם אֶת־הַיָּמָת יַחְצִיּוּ:

And if one man's ox butts another's, and it dies, they shall sell the live ox and divide its price, and the dead beast also they shall divide. (Exod 21:35)

A precise parallel to this law occurs in the Laws of Eshnunna:

(53) If an ox gores another ox and thus causes its death, the two ox-owners shall divide the value of the living ox and the carcass of the dead ox.

(M. Roth, *Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Atlanta 1997, p. 67)

These two laws are strikingly similar. They both present a special and original legal convention: that the owners share the value of the remaining ox and the carcass of the dead ox equally. This convention does not take into consideration the fact that the oxen might have different values.

In addition to the striking thematic parallel, biblical law may also borrow its terminology from the Mesopotamian one. More details about this possible linguistic connection are found in the appendix to this lecture.

These impressive similarities between the Israelite and Mesopotamian law systems naturally raise the question of their origin. When and where did the contact between the traditions occur?

Some scholars believe that a literary dependence of the Bible upon Mesopotamian texts is involved here. Others think that we are dealing with a common ancient Near Eastern tradition, independently reflected in the different sources. None of these opinions is supported by hard data: as in other cases, we cannot point to the exact time and place of the cultural contact. Reading recommendations regarding this issue can be found on the course website.

In the following lectures, we will discuss the significance of the parallels we have presented here and ask: what can we learn from them about the biblical and Mesopotamian conceptions of law and justice?

## **Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,**

### **Lecture 4: Mesopotamian and Biblical Goring Ox Laws – Differences**

In the previous lecture, we examined the striking correspondences between the laws of the goring ox in three different sources: the biblical Book of the Covenant, the Code of Hammurabi, and the Laws of Eshnunna. We saw that the goring ox laws in the Bible parallel the two Mesopotamian sources. The parallels include structure, style, and legal principles.

But what about differences? If the Bible adopts material from a Mesopotamian – or general ancient Near Eastern – legacy here, does it also adjust this material to its particular worldview?

Indeed, the specifics of the goring ox law are not identical in the various sources. When examining the details, many differences are revealed. We will now present three such interesting differences.

The first difference we shall discuss regards the warned ox—that is, an ox known for its goring habits which has now gored to death again. Both the Bible and the Code of Hammurabi hold that the owner should be punished because he failed to take precautions. However the punishment is presented differently. In the Code of Hammurabi:

The owner shall give 30 shekels of silver.

In the Bible, the case is more complicated:

The ox shall be stoned and its owner, too, shall be put to death. If ransom is laid upon him, he must pay for the redemption of his life whatever is laid upon him.

We see that in the Code of Hammurabi, the owner of the warned ox must pay money for the person killed. Biblical law, on the other hand, imposes a death sentence on the owner—and then says that, in practice, this may be mitigated to paying a ransom fee, if such is “laid upon him”.

Before attempting to explain the meaning of this difference, I would like to introduce two more interesting disparities between the law systems.

A striking difference appears regarding the punishment of the ox. In the Bible, both the “innocent” and “warned” ox are stoned if they have killed a person. This rule applies to all cases of an ox that kills, regardless of the owner’s degree of responsibility. The Bible also emphasizes that the stoned ox must not be eaten. This legal concept is foreign to the Code of Hammurabi. In Hammurabi’s laws, only the human owner is held responsible for the goring; the ox itself is not a “party” in the dispute.

A third interesting disparity appears in relation to the identity of the victim of the warned ox. In the Code of Hammurabi, he is defined as “a member of the *awīlu*-class”. We do not have time to discuss the exact meaning of the term *awīlu* in the Code of Hammurabi. Reading recommendations are found on our website. The important point for us here is that there are no further clarifications, apart from the fact that the victim is an *awīlu*. The Bible, however, adds a further specification:

So, too, if it gores a minor, male or female, [the owner] shall be dealt with according to the same rule.

This is clearly a biblical addition to the original law. Why did the Bible find it necessary to stress that if the victim is a minor—male or female—the same rule still applies? Isn’t it obvious? What does it add to what has already been stated? We shall discuss these questions, and the significance of the other differences we presented, in the next lecture.

**Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,**  
**Lecture 5: The Goring Ox Laws and Moshe Greenberg's Theory**  
**Part 1**

In the previous lecture, we presented three interesting differences between the biblical and Mesopotamian laws regarding goring oxen. These differences have been explained by scholars in various ways. In the current lecture, we will focus on the interpretation suggested by the biblical scholar **Moshe Greenberg**. During the 1980s, Greenberg published several influential articles on biblical law.

In his studies, Greenberg argues that an essential difference exists between Israelite and Mesopotamian law. While in Mesopotamia, the *king* is the legislative authority, in the Bible it is God. According to Greenberg, this basic difference has significant implications. In his words:

... No Israelite king is said to have authored a law code ... The only legislator the Bible knows of is God... The entire normative realm, whether in law or morality, pertains to God alone. ... The effect of this divine authorship of all law is to make crimes sins, a violation of the will of God... God is directly involved as legislator and sovereign.

(M. Greenberg, "Some postulates of biblical criminal law", in: M. Haran (ed.), *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem 1960, p. 11)

In Greenberg's view, the divine source of the biblical law defines the degree of its stringency:

... The way is thus prepared to regard offenses as absolute wrongs, transcending the power of men to pardon or expunge. This would seem to underlie the refusal of biblical law to admit of pardon or mitigation of punishment in certain cases where cuneiform law allows it. (p. 12)

This definition of the legal philosophy of the Bible may explain why, in the Bible, the owner of the “warned ox” is essentially sentenced to death. According to Greenberg, this capital punishment reflects the biblical attitude towards taking life as being an “absolute wrong”. The only suitable punishment is thus the death of the person who took the life of another. Greenberg writes:

In the earliest law collection, the Covenant Code of Exodus, it is laid down that murder is punishable by death ... though here the law allows the owner to ransom himself with a sum fixed by the slain person’s family. This is the sole degree of culpability in which the early law allows a ransom ... A ransom may be accepted only for homicide not committed personally and with intent to harm. For murder, however, there is only the death penalty. These provisions contrast sharply with the other Near Eastern laws on homicide ... All Near Eastern law recognizes the right of the slain person’s family to agree to accept a settlement in lieu of the death of the slayer ... The sense of the invaluableness of human life underlies the divergence of the biblical treatment of the homicide from that of the other law systems of the Near East. There the law allows and at times fixes a value on lives ... (pp. 13-14)

Greenberg argues here that the conversion of the death sentence into a ransom payment in the case of the warned ox owner is a one-time exception in biblical law. As a rule, the Bible regards murder as an offence against God. Consequently, it does not recognize the principle of payment for a man’s life. This is a fundamental divergence between the biblical and Mesopotamian law: The Bible basically requires: “its owner, too, shall be put to death”, while the Mesopotamian law imposes a fine of 30 shekels on him. The biblical comment that the death sentence can be commuted to ransom, is a very exceptional rule. This exception derives from the fact that the owner himself did not kill the person, and that his only fault was criminal negligence. However, when we examine the biblical system as a whole, it basically allows no ransom, because it regards killing as an “absolute wrong”, directed towards god, the source of law.

Greenberg's argument may find support in the ideas of another bible scholar, **Jacob Finkelstein**. Finkelstein noticed that the Bible defines the ransom in question as "the redemption of his life". This means that the ransom redeems *him* – the owner – from being sentenced to death. It is not a financial compensation for the death of the *victim*. The Bible thus stresses the basic idea there is no compensation for lost human life. Even in the exceptional case of ransom, the ransom is for the life of the owner, not for the life of the victim.

As we will see in the next lecture, Greenberg seeks to explain other differences according to the same principle.

**Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,**  
**Lecture 6: The Goring Ox Laws and Moshe Greenberg's Theory**  
**Part 2**

In the previous lecture, we presented Moshe Greenberg's theory regarding the essential differences between biblical and Mesopotamian legal philosophy. We saw that these different viewpoints may account for the disparities between the law regarding the warned ox's owner in the Bible and the Code of Hammurabi. Greenberg attempts to explain in a similar way other discrepancies between Mesopotamian and Israelite goring ox laws.

We have seen that in the Bible, the goring ox is stoned, while in the Mesopotamian law he is not considered part of the legal process. Greenberg suggests that this divergence derives from the Bible's distinctive understanding of homicide:



Man was made in the image of God ... Of all creatures, Genesis 1 relates, he alone possesses this attribute, bringing him into closer relation with God than all the rest and conferring upon him highest value ... a beast that kills a man destroys the image of God and must give a reckoning for it. Now this is the law of the goring ox in Exodus: it must be stoned to death. The beast is laden with guilt and is therefore an object of horror.

(M. Greenberg, "Some postulates of biblical criminal law", in: M. Haran (ed.), *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubil ee Volume*, Jerusalem 1960, p. 15)

The third disparity we presented before regards the biblical addition to the law of the warned ox: "So, too, if it gores a minor, male or female, [the owner] shall be dealt with according to the same rule." Greenberg interprets this curious addition according to a similar principle:

This clause, a long-standing puzzle for exegetes, has only recently been understood for what it is: a specific repudiation of vicarious punishment in the manner familiar from cuneiform law. (p. 23)



The term “vicarious punishment” refers to a type of retaliation, which assumes that if a man injures the son or daughter of another man, he has to pay for them with his own son or daughter. As Greenberg notes, this legal principle is known in Mesopotamian laws:

There (= in Mesopotamian law) a builder who, through negligence, caused the death of a householder’s son must deliver up his own son; here (= in the Bible) the negligent owner of a vicious ox who has caused the death of another’s son or daughter must be dealt with in the same way as when he caused the death of a man or woman, to wit: the owner is to be punished, not his son or daughter.  
(p. 23)

Greenberg essentially claims here that the biblical emphasis “a minor shall be dealt with according to the same rule” is in fact a polemic against a specific type of Mesopotamian penal system. The Mesopotamian use of ‘vicarious punishment’ is rejected here.

Greenberg applies the same approach to biblical law in general:

This principle of individual culpability in fact governs all of biblical law. Nowhere does the criminal law of the Bible, in contrast to that of the rest of the Near East, punish secular offenses collectively or vicariously. Murder, negligent homicide, seduction, and so forth, are punished solely on the personal of the actual culprit. (p. 23)

## Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Lecture 7: Criticism of Greenberg's Theory

You have probably noticed that Greenberg's approach is in line with the views of scholars who stress the distinctive nature of Israelite religion. We have discussed this research school in some of the previous units.

Greenberg's article, parts of which we read before, was first published in Yehezkel Kaufmann's Jubilee Volume. You probably remember that Kaufmann was one of the leaders of the research school under discussion. Greenberg himself noted at the beginning of the article:

Among the chief merits of Professor Kaufmann's work must be counted the tremendous impetus it has given to the study of the postulates of biblical thought. The debt that the present paper owes to this stimulus and to the lines of investigation laid down by Professor Kaufmann is patent. (M. Greenberg, "Some postulates of biblical criminal law", in: M. Haran (ed.), *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem 1960, p. 5)

Like Kaufmann, and others in his wake, Greenberg has been criticized by fellow scholars. The criticism not only relates to the specific case of the goring ox but also to the essential issue of the distinctiveness of biblical law.

Some researchers have criticized Greenberg's claim that biblical law regards murder as a crime against God Himself rather than a crime against the family of the victim. They claim that this idea is incompatible with the biblical concept of the "blood avenger". The blood avenger appears several times in the Bible in connection with homicide. He is considered the representative of the victim's family. In some biblical contexts, he is given the right to execute the death sentence imposed on the murderer. This indicates that biblical law views murder—at least to a certain degree—as a private matter between the murderer and the victim's family.

Greenberg also claimed that Mesopotamian law never considers murder a sin against the gods. This argument has been disputed, too. Some scholars claim that Greenberg's database is too limited and that he should have included not only law codes but also Mesopotamian religious texts—such as the praise hymns for the gods. Religious texts from Mesopotamia often regard criminal offenses, such as robbery, murder, and adultery, as transgressions against the god.

**Unit 6. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,  
Lecture 8: Biblical Law and Ancient Near Eastern Law – A New Assessment**

In the previous lectures, we presented Moshe Greenberg's theory regarding the uniqueness of the biblical legal philosophy and some of the arguments of his opponents. In this lecture, we will attempt to assess the different views and suggest a new, more balanced appreciation of the relationship between biblical law and cuneiform law.

Greenberg has shown that, in some cases, the Bible adapts Mesopotamian law in a way that seems to reflect a different legal view. But how extensive is this phenomenon? Does it cover the entire legal system of the Bible?

An answer to this question was suggested by a leading scholar of ancient Near Eastern law, **Raymond Westbrook**. Westbrook was one of the giants in this field, who has published dozens of detailed studies on ancient Near Eastern law. In his studies, Westbrook has demonstrated that the ancient Near East—including Israel—possessed a common legal legacy. Westbrook found numerous examples of this common legacy, including many legal principles shared by all the ancient Near Eastern legal traditions known to us. We cannot go into detail here. To give you a general sense of this common legacy, we will briefly mention a few cases that exemplify Westbrook's conclusion:

1. A law regarding an injured person's right to medical compensation. This law is known in the Bible, the Code of Hammurabi, and the Hittite laws.
2. Laws relating to pregnant women who suffer blows that cause them to miscarry. These appear in the Bible, the Lipit-Ishtar Laws, the Code of Hammurabi, the Middle Assyrian laws, and the Hittite laws.
3. A law regarding the rape of a betrothed girl that differentiates between two cases—rape in the field and rape in the city—occurs in both the Bible and Hittite laws.

You are encouraged to read more about each of these examples, and about many others, —in the bibliography recommended for reading at the end of this unit.

Westbrook's findings are diverse and detailed. They show that the features common to Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern legal systems outweigh the disparities between them.

In light of this data, it would be a mistake to portray biblical law as a unique system that fundamentally differs from those of the surrounding cultures. The Israelite legal system, including both its philosophy and details, generally belongs to a global ancient Near Eastern tradition. Only on the basis of this understanding can we now address its exclusive characteristics, as identified by Greenberg and others.

Of all the distinctive features noted by Greenberg, the most striking appears to relate to the point of the origin of the law. Here, Greenberg's insight is eye-opening: the Bible repeatedly stresses that the only source of law is God rather than any Israelite king. A prominent expression of this idea appears in the following widespread formula which introduces legal passages throughout the Bible:

And God spoke to Moses saying.

We shall conclude this unit with the words of the biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld, who commented on the topic of the source of law as follows:

In contrast to ancient Near Eastern law, Israelite law does not recognize the king as legislator ... the king is subject to the law in the same manner as his brethren and subjects ... Israelite law comes to prove that it is God rather than the king who is the righteous judge who gives "just statutes and ordinances." This unique and exceptional phenomenon was noted as early as Diodorus the Sicilian, who writes that the Jews attribute the law of Moses to God Himself. A stark contrast thus exists between the Mesopotamian and Israelite view of the law. The former forms part of a royal, secular system, the latter part of a religious-sacral system ... Rather than a royal edict, as across the ancient Near East, Israelite law is a divine command.

(M. Weinfeld, "Israelite and Non-Israelite Concepts of Law" (Heb.), *Beth Mikra* 17 (1964), p. 63)

## Unit 7. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Part II

### Lecture 1

#### Casuistic and Apodictic Law in the Bible

The current lesson, like the previous lesson, will be dedicated to the genre of law. We shall address two main issues:

1. The *formulation* of biblical law from a comparative point of view;
2. The contribution of Mesopotamian legal sources to the understanding of biblical narrative.

In the previous lecture, we discussed the correspondences and disparities between the biblical and cuneiform law systems. We presented the scholarly debate regarding the extent of the uniqueness of biblical law. So far, our discussion has been based on the *content* of several laws. In the following few lectures, we will refer to the *forms* and *patterns* of laws in the various law codes. These have been extensively discussed by scholars from a comparative point of view.

In 1934, the German biblical scholar **Albrecht Alt** published an influential article on biblical law. In his article, Alt distinguished between two law patterns in the Bible. He labeled these patterns “casuistic” and “apodictic”.

The casuistic pattern is basically a conditional clause, based on an “if... then...” formula, or, in a slightly different wording, a “when... then...” formula. Here is one biblical example:

וְכִי־יִמְכַר אִישׁ אֶת־בִּתּוֹ לְאָמָה לֹא תֵצֵא כַצֹּאֵת הָעֶבְדִּים:

When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. (Exod 21:7)

The apodictic pattern consists of a direct command. For example:

מְכַשְׁפָּה לֹא תֵחִיָּה:

You shall not permit a sorceress to live! (Exod 22:17)

Alt has noted that the difference between the two patterns is not restricted to the technical question of formulation. He identified several important qualities that characterize each pattern.

Casuistic laws are often interested in the small details of each legal case: they present cases and sub-cases, referring to specific sets of circumstances. The goring-ox law discussed in the previous unit is a good example. It presents a different rule for specific sub-cases: an ‘innocent’ ox; a ‘warned’ ox; an ox goring a slave. The apodictic law has a different attitude: it is brief and decisive, without sub-clauses. According to Alt, this concise style reflects its definitive character.

More importantly, casuistic law usually relates to non-religious issues. Biblical casuistic law tends to cover criminal and civil law. Its typical themes include slavery, finances, capital cases, etc. Apodictic law often focuses on religious affairs. The best example of apodictic law is the Ten Commandments: “You shall not murder! You shall not commit adultery! You shall not steal!, etc.

This type of law addresses the Israelites directly. It contains a categorical command and refrains from any detailed or lengthy discussion of specific cases. This categorical style accords with the ethical-religious tendencies of apodictic law.

How does the distinction between two types of biblical law relate to comparative study?

We shall discuss this issue in the next lecture.

characteristic of casuistic law:

1. It introduces cases and sub-cases.
2. It focuses on the small detail of each legal case.
3. It uses an "if ... then ..." formula.

## Unit 7. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Part II

### Lecture 2

#### Casuistic and Apodictic Law: A Comparative Look

In the previous lecture, we presented Alt's distinction between two forms of law in the Bible: casuistic and apodictic. When Alt examined the ancient Near Eastern law codes, he noted that they almost exclusively follow the *casuistic* pattern. Here are some examples, taken from the beginning of three Mesopotamian law codes. The translation was made by the Assyriologist Martha Roth:

Lipit-Ishtar laws 2: "If a man dies without male offspring, an unmarried daughter shall be his heir."

Code of Hammurabi 3: "If a man comes forward to give false testimony in a case but cannot bring evidence for his accusation, if that case involves a capital offense, that man shall be killed."

Middle-Assyrian laws 7: "If a woman should lay a hand upon a man and they prove the charges against her, she shall pay 1,800 shekels of lead; they shall strike her 20 blows with rods."

We therefore see that the Mesopotamian legal system is based primarily on casuistic law. Alt concluded that in the Bible, casuistic and apodictic patterns derive from two independent sources. Casuistic law is an ancient Near Eastern inheritance. Apodictic law, in contrast, is an Israelite innovation.

Assuming that Alt is right, and that apodictic law was invented by biblical scribes, what is the meaning of this fact? Does it have any significant implications? Many scholars who followed in Alt's footsteps believe it does. The biblical scholar Shalom Paul writes:

Though these apodictic formulations deal primarily with moral and religious commandments, the question still remains as to why they are part and parcel of biblical jurisprudence and are noticeably absent from all Mesopotamian corpora... Israelite society was founded on a covenantal agreement based on the will of God, who expressed His demands in covenant law declared publicly to the entire community. By making his will personally and directly known to man, an I-Thou relationship is established which characterizes the unique features of this newly-founded nation. Moral and religious prescriptions are directed to each and every member of this nation in categorical imperatives. The constitution for this new polity (i.e., covenant law) incorporates and emphasizes both customary civil law (i.e., casuistic formulations) and moral-ethical admonitions together with religious-cultic obligations (i.e., apodictic formulations). However, whereas casuistic law deals with precedent and what is, apodictic commandments express what must and ought to be. It (=apodictic law) addresses man *a priori* as to what is right or wrong. It is prescriptive not descriptive, proscriptive not retrospective, absolute not relative, categorically imperative and obligatory not conditional, subjective and personal ("Thou shalt [not]," i.e., I-Thou) not objective and impersonal ("If a man ...")—God's will not man's. Its purpose is to shape a society, not to state cases and provide remedies.



This articulation of the significance of apodictic law brings us back to the issue of uniqueness. As in the case of Greenberg's studies, here too some scholars regard apodictic law as an original Israelite trademark, a sign of a unique way of thinking about God and man. And, as with Greenberg, this interpretation has been criticized.

Against the idea that apodictic law was unknown outside Israel, some scholars argued that Alt's database was too limited. You may remember that a similar argument was used against Greenberg, as we saw in the previous lesson. In the case of Alt, his opponents maintain that while legal literature from the ancient Near East does not employ **the apodictic pattern, it occurs extensively in other genres.** Thus for instance,

diplomatic contracts between emperors and vassal kings include commands such as: "Do not do evil against My Majesty"! Other examples appear in the genre known as wisdom instructions. These instructions often take the form of direct apodictic advice: "Do not speak arrogantly to your mother! Do not question the words of your god!" And so forth. We shall discuss wisdom in the last lesson of our course.

Some scholars have suggested that the biblical apodictic pattern was borrowed from one of the genres in which apodictic orders are prevalent. There is no way to prove or disprove this hypothesis. At any rate, even if this type of law originated outside the Bible, its adoption as a legal form in the Bible seems to be significant. It corresponds to the biblical tendency to present God as the source of law, and reflects the biblical idea that law is a direct obligation imposed by God. In this sense, it may be added to the other unique features of biblical law we presented in the previous lesson. Yet these points of uniqueness should not overshadow the fact that biblical law is an integral part of the general ancient Near Eastern legacy, as we already saw.

## Unit 7. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Part II

### Lecture 3:

#### Law in Biblical Narrative and its Mesopotamian Background: The Case of Sara and Hagar, Part I

In the previous lectures, we saw how legal material from the ancient Near East illuminates biblical law. But the same materials are also helpful for the interpretation of biblical *narrative*. The rest of this lesson will be dedicated to this aspect of comparative study. We shall explore one case-study that exemplifies how ancient Near Eastern law may shed light on biblical narrative, especially when it describes social norms and customs. Our case study will be the relationship between Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah as depicted in Gen 16:1–6.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to with my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant... and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I put my maid in your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt! May the Lord judge between me and you!". And Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her (Gen 16:1–6).

With the discovery of the Code of Hammurabi, scholars noticed the affinities between this story and Hammurabi law no. 146:

If a man marries a *nadītu*, and she gives a slave woman to her husband, and she (the slave) then bears children, after which that slave woman aspires to equal status with her mistress—because she bore children, her mistress will not sell her; she shall place upon her the slave-hairlock, and she shall reckon her with the slave women (Code of Hammurabi, 146. Translation: Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Atlanta 1997, 109).

This law deals with a case very similar to that of Sarah and Hagar: a woman gives her husband her slave-girl to bear him children; the girl's status within the household is changed; the wife treats her badly. The Mesopotamian law details the wife's rights and obligations: she cannot sell the slave girl because she has already provided the husband with offspring. She can, however, highlight her inferior status via accepted social conventions: she may cut her hair in slave-style and "reckon her with the slave women".

When the affinities between this law and the story of Sarah and Hagar were first noted, some scholars suggested that it may supply Sarah with a justification for her behavior. Her harsh treatment of Hagar, as described in the biblical text, may allude to a deliberate form of humiliation designed to put Hagar in her proper place. Sarah

seems to act here in accordance with the same custom reflected in the Code of Hammurabi.

This application of the Mesopotamian law to the biblical story has a problematic aspect, however. The Hammurabi law does not refer to *any* woman but specifically to a *nadītu*. *nadītus* were priestesses who lived outside the patriarchal family. You will find more information about them in the appendix to this lecture. For our purposes, however, if we want to contextualize the story of Sarah and Hagar in relation to established practice in the ancient Near East, we must turn to laws that apply to ordinary women. We shall discuss these in the following lectures.

## Unit 7. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Part II

### Lecture 4

#### Law in Biblical Narrative and its Mesopotamian Background: The Case of Sara and Hagar, Part II

In the previous lecture, we saw that Hammurabi law 146 partially parallels the story of Sarah and Hagar. Since the identification of this parallelism, other legal sources that may help us contextualize this story have been discovered. These sources show that bringing in a slave-girl as a solution for childlessness was a common Mesopotamian custom in various times and places.

Here is one example, from an Old Assyrian marriage contract:

Lāqīpum took (in marriage) Hatala ... If within 2 years she has not procured offspring for him, she herself may buy a maid-servant ... (J. Lewy, "On some institutions of the Old Assyrian Empire." *HUCA* 27 [1956], 9–10).

This contract relates to a woman named Hatala. It states that if she does not give birth within two years after the wedding, she is allowed to give her husband a slave-girl. Or perhaps: the husband is allowed to take a slave-girl, but the wife is allowed to take care of the purchase and pick a specific woman. These two possible readings of the contract reflect two social concepts: one assumes that bringing in a slave girl is in the wife's interest, the other assumes that it is in the husband's. Both views are reflected in our sources. Hammurabi law 146 assumes that it is the wife who is interested in obtaining a slave girl. This is because, as a *nadītu*, she can't have children of her own. The children in this case are considered hers. In the biblical story, Sarah expresses the same idea: "It may be that *I* shall obtain children by *her*." This social concept is also reflected in the story of Jacob's family in Genesis 30. There, Rachel and Leah give their servants to Jacob and the sons born are considered theirs. In other sources, however, taking a slave girl is considered the husband's right. Here is one example from the Old Assyrian Period:

If Ištar-lamassi (= the wife) does not behold an infant within 3 years, he will buy a maid-servant and take her (as concubine). [J. Lewy, "On Some Institutions of the Old Assyrian Empire," *HUCA* 27 (1956), 6–8]

Here, the choice of marrying the slave girl lies in the husband's hands. The husband thus protects his right to offspring.

Our third example comes from a Mesopotamian city called Nuzi, which flourished in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE. A marriage contract found at Nuzi states:

Kelim-ninu (= the bride) has been given in marriage to Shennima (= the groom). If Kelim-ninu bears (children), Shennima shall not take another wife; but if Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu (= the bride) shall acquire a woman of the land of Lullu as wife for Shennima, and Kelim-ninu (= the bride) may not send the offspring away. (J.B. Pritchard and D.E. Fleming, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, New Jersey 2001, 188)

Here too, the barren wife must provide her husband with another woman: this is in the husband's interests. The other woman's offspring are also protected: the wife cannot cast them out. This detail is significant from a biblical point of view. In the story about Sarah and Hagar we read before, Hagar ran away because of Sarah's harsh treatment of her. However, in a later story, in **Genesis 21, Hagar is banished by Sarah:**

And she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."  
(Gen 21:10)

Sarah is following here the same custom that was forbidden in the Nuzi contract: she initiates the expulsion of the other woman's son. We therefore see that the Mesopotamian documents supply us with various points of view regarding Sarah's behavior: while the Hammurabi law seems to justify her harsh treatment of Hagar, the Nuzi contract forbids her later banishment of Hagar.

To summarize, the sources we have discussed contextualize Sarah and Hagar relationship. In giving Hagar to Abraham, Sarah acted in accordance with an accepted social convention. In acting arrogantly towards her mistress, Hagar followed a well-known pattern. In treating Hagar harshly and later demanding Hagar's and Ishmael's banishment, Sarah adopted common sanctions.

We also saw, however, that the Mesopotamian sources differ in their *judgment* of the mistress's actions. There was no one prevalent rule governing whether the mistress is allowed to treat the slave badly or whether she may cast out her offspring. The attitude towards these social conventions differed according to time, place, and circumstances. Even the treatment of the question of whether the obtaining of a slave girl represents the wife's or husband's interests varies.

**The Mesopotamian texts thus supply us with the general background of Sarah and Hagar's relationship.** Yet they cannot tell us whether Sarah's behavior was considered morally or legally justified. The answer to these questions, if it exists, must be sought within the biblical narrative itself.

## Unit 7. Biblical Law Literature in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context, Part II

### Unit 7 Lecture 5

#### Law in Biblical Narrative and its Mesopotamian Background: The Case of Sara and Hagar, Part III

In the previous lectures, we saw that Sarah and Hagar's relationship can be explained in light of Mesopotamian sources. The sources we discussed included: the laws of Hammurabi; Old Assyrian contracts; and a contract from the city of Nuzi. What they all have in common is that they are relatively old: they all date to the first half of the second millennium BCE.

Some scholars believe this fact to be highly significant. These scholars have attempted to use the Mesopotamian sources not only to illustrate the biblical story but also to prove its historicity. If the patriarchal stories find specific parallels in social customs of the *second* millennium BCE, this means that they are authentic: they reflect the reality of the time of the patriarchs, dated by many scholars to the second millennium BCE.

The documents from Nuzi are especially important in this regard. The ancient Near Eastern scholar **Cyrus Gordon** argued that the legal texts found in the city of Nuzi exhibit many parallels to the patriarchal stories. For instance, in Genesis 15:3 Abraham declares that if God gave him no offspring, his steward would be his heir. Gordon found a similar practice in the Nuzi texts, where slaves were adopted by childless couples. Gordon also identified parallels to Esau's selling of his birthright to Jacob (Gen 25:31–35) and the legal relationship between Jacob and Laban, and so on. The Nuzi contract discussed in the previous lecture played a major role in Gordon's theory because it parallels Sarah's banishment of Hagar.

Gordon, and others in his wake, took these parallels as proof of the historical authenticity of the patriarchal stories. Another prominent scholar who developed this theory was Ephraim Avigdor Speiser. In his influential commentary on Genesis, he discussed various parallels to the Nuzi texts.

Gordon, Speiser, and their colleagues all address the broad problem of the dating of the patriarchal stories. We cannot discuss this issue at length here: you will find reading recommendations on our website. We will limit ourselves to the case of the barren woman who gives her husband a slave girl. Can this specific custom, documented in second-millennium texts, prove that the **patriarchal** stories are early?

The biblical scholar John Van Seters, who opposed Gordon's view, has shown that the answer to this question is negative. Van Seters identified parallels to the Sarah and Hagar case in legal texts from *later* periods. Here is an example from a seventh-century BCE Neo-Assyrian marriage contract:

If Šubetu (= the bride) does not conceive and bear (children), she shall buy a slave-girl in her stead and set her in her place and (so) bring sons into existence. The sons (will be) her sons. If she loves the slave-girl she shall keep (her), if she hates her, she shall sell her.

This contract reflects all the basic components of the custom in question: a woman unable to bear children giving a slave girl to her husband; the children being considered her own; she is allowed to sell the slave girl at her will. We see again that the rules governing the mistress's obligations and her relationship with the slave and

the offspring are different in each case. But the important point for the historical discussion is that this custom was not limited to the second millennium BCE. Van Seters concludes that the patriarchal narratives were composed during the first millennium BCE.

Yet it seems that the very aspiration to draw historical conclusions from the legal sources is rather far-fetched. What we have are various texts from different periods that provide us with the social and legal context for understanding the Sarah–Hagar relationship. These sources point to a custom known throughout the ancient Near East, according to which a wife unable to bear children could give a slave girl to her husband. All the details of the biblical story—from Sarah’s bringing Hagar into her house to her decision to send her away, are well-based in this ancient Near Eastern practice, which was common in different times and places. These insights are important in their own right. Yet when it comes to the historical question, we simply can’t point to a specific time period when the custom under discussion was most prevalent. As in many other cases of comparative study, the legal materials we examined may teach us a great deal about the cultural background of the biblical story. They cannot serve however as a basis for dating the biblical material.

## **Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy**

### **Lecture 1 Introduction**

Prophecy is a central element of biblical history and thought. Prophets are regarded as significant figures. Prophetic writings stand at the center of biblical literature. The Bible alludes on several occasions to the existence of non-Israelite prophecy; A prominent example is Balaam. The Bible also tells us of prophets of other deities, such as the prophets of Baal and Ashera in the days of Queen Jezebel. When ancient Near Eastern cultures began to be deciphered, it became apparent that these civilizations were familiar with prophets and prophecy. In the current unit we shall examine biblical prophecy in light of what we know of this phenomenon amongst Israel's neighbors, primarily Mesopotamia.



## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 2

#### Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A General Background

Divination was a well-known profession in the ancient Near East, especially in the great cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt. It was customarily based on the deciphering of a variety of items. Diviners read stars, meteorological phenomena, land formations, oil poured on water, incense smoke, flowing water, and bird flight. But the most common method was reading the internal organs of animals – primarily a lamb's liver. Divination was regarded as a science. Its practitioners were skillful professionals who made use of detailed manuals explaining how to reveal the future by interpreting the relevant object. Here is an example from a Mesopotamian guide to reading animal livers:

If there are two Paths (i.e., specific parts of the liver) and they are drawn parallel: A stable foundation, living in peace.

If there are two Paths and the second one is bent and points to the normal one: Weapons that were not brought inside will attack the prince.

If there are two Paths and the second one is bent and points to the normal one and a Hole is placed between them: The foe will be defeated in battle.

If there are two Paths and the second one is placed in the middle of the normal one: Someone in your auxiliary troops will change his mind. (U. Koch-Westenholz, *Babylonian Liver Omens*, Copenhagen 2000, pp. 186-187).

The guide instructs the liver-reader to closely inspect all the parts of the organ. The technical term 'path' refers to a specific part of the liver.

The diviner usually attempted to predict military success or defeat. An echo of this role is found in the Bible:

כִּי־עָמַד מֶלֶךְ־בָּבֶל אֶל־אֵם הַדֶּרֶךְ בְּרֹאשׁ שְׁנֵי הַדְּרָכִים לְקֶסֶם־קֶסֶם קִלְקַל בְּחַצִּים שָׁאַל בְּתַרְרָמִים רָאָה בְּכַבֵּד

“For the king of Babylon stood at the fork of the road, at the head of the two ways, to perform divination: He has shaken arrows, he consulted with images, he inspected the liver.” (Ezek 21:26)

This verse, written by a prophet who lived in Babylon and was familiar with local practices, describes the various forms of divination the king employed – via his diviner – in order to decide which way his army should march. These divination practices included liver reading. The importance of this practice in Mesopotamia is attested by three-dimensional liver-models inscribed with signs and instructions for the diviner. Such models were found at several Mesopotamian sites. Biblical law also recognizes divination, and forbids Israelites to practice it:

לֹא תִנְחָשׁוּ וְלֹא תַעֲוִיבוּ:

“You shall not practice divination or soothsaying.” (Lev 19:26).

This brief survey is presented here only to demonstrate that divination *differs* from prophecy. The prophets of the ancient Near East did not consult manuals: they delivered the god's words directly and spontaneously, generally as part of an ecstatic experience.

They also usually possessed a different status to diviners. Prophets were not practitioners of a skilled profession; they had no intellectual qualifications, and they belonged to different classes of society.

Diviners were often intimate with the kings, and frequently served in the royal court. Prophets, on the other hand, gave their prophecies in diverse places, often far-removed from the palace. Their prophecies were then reported to the king by his officials, as we shall see below.

Several types of ancient Near Eastern texts relate to prophets. Administrative texts sometimes apply the title “prophet” to someone listed in the document, but because their focus is on administrative issues they do not supply us with further details. However, these texts are still important for understanding prophecy, because they shed light on the place of prophets in society and the different titles they bear.

But the most important texts are of course those which include the prophecies themselves. Such texts were found in several sites across the ancient Near East. Let’s begin with Mesopotamia.

Two main Mesopotamian sites supply us with texts related to prophecy: the cities of Mari and Nineveh. Each of these cities was active in a different era of Mesopotamian history. The prophecies from Mari date to the eighteenth century BCE. The prophecies from Nineveh are much later: they largely come from the seventh century BCE.

The limited scope of the attestation of prophecy is significant, especially when compared to the practice of divination, which is known in many areas and time periods. The reasons for the limited distribution of prophecy will be discussed later in this unit. In the next lectures, we will present some prophetic texts from Mari and Nineveh and discuss their nature, their background, and their contribution to the understanding of biblical prophecy.

## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 3 Prophecy in Mari

The city of Mari lay on the banks of the Middle Euphrates in what is today Syria . It was accidentally discovered in nineteen thirty three, and then excavated by French archaeologists. Mari turned out to include a large and impressive royal palace of over 300 rooms (!) and vast archives of clay tablets. Since the initial excavations, more than twenty-five thousand tablets have been unearthed. The tablets teach us that Mari ruled over an important kingdom of the same name during the Old Babylonian period and that finally it was destroyed by the Babylonian king Hammurabi in seventeen sixty BCE. The majority of these tablets are written in Akkadian, and they shed light on various aspects of the kingdom and its rulers: political and military events, the royal court and its officials, and religious and daily life. Once the tablets had been deciphered, scholars discovered that the ruling dynasty and many inhabitants of Mari were Amorites rather than Akkadians.

The Amorites were sheep-herding nomads belonging to the West-Semitic genealogical branch. They lived a typically nomadic tribal lifestyle in regions bordering Mesopotamian urban centers. However, from the end of the third millennium BCE they began to penetrate urban space itself. Gradually, they became city dwellers and the dominant ethnic component of Mari during this period. This is how Amorite elements came to govern many cities and kingdoms across Mesopotamia. As nomads, the Amorites wrote nothing in their own language: as far as we know, no written texts in the Amorite language exist. However, elements of Amorite language and society found their way into the existing Akkadian culture, and gave it a distinctively Amorite color.

The identification of Amorite elements in the culture of the kingdom of Mari is of particular significance for biblical studies. As West-Semites, the Amorites exhibit striking affinities with Israel. Because the Amorites and the Israelites come from a common branch of the Semitic genealogical lineage, they are more closely linked together than the Eastern-Semitic cultures of Mesopotamia and Israel. Despite the lack of any original Amorite documents, the Akkadian Mari texts reveal many of the hallmarks of Amorite culture, thus shedding light on biblical institutions and customs.

One of the most interesting affinities between Mari and the Bible relates to prophecy. Several letters from Mari and its environs deal with prophecy. Most of these letters were written during the days of the last three kings of Mari. The letters were addressed to the king, reporting to him the words of prophets who worked either in Mari itself or throughout the kingdom. The letters were sent to the king by his officials, his royal representatives, and even by ladies of the court. We know today of only one letter whose sender was the prophet himself. This fact is important, because it may imply that the prophecies were not cited verbatim. The authors of the letters probably paraphrased the prophecies and perhaps even shortened them by selecting those parts that they considered important.

Mari prophets were known by several epithets. The most widespread is *muhhû(m)* for prophets or *muhhūtum* for prophetesses. This term means “ecstatic” and it refers to their state while prophesying. This epithet recalls the biblical association between

prophecy and madness. A famous example is King Saul's behavior when the spirit of God came upon him:

וַיֵּלֶךְ הָלוֹךְ וַיִּתְנַבֵּא... וַיִּפְשֹׁט גַּם־הוּא בְּגָדָיו וַיִּתְנַבֵּא גַם־הוּא לְפָנָי שְׁמוּאֵל וַיִּפֹּל עָרֶם כָּל־הַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְכָל־  
הַלַּיְלָה עַל־כֵּן יֹאמְרוּ הַגִּם שְׂאוֹל בְּנִבְיָאִם:

“And he walked on, and prophesied... and he stripped off his clothes also, and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay naked all that day and all that night. Wherefore they say: ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’” (1 Sam 19:23–24)

Other Mari prophets were known as *āpilum* in the masculine or *āpiltum* in the feminine, “the answerer”. Some scholars believe that this epithet points to the practice of answering human questions, perhaps like the biblical Urim and Thummim.

There are also other, less frequent epithets for prophets in Mari. An interesting one is *nabû*, which is known today from one text only. Many scholars think that this is an etymological parallel to the biblical title נביא, prophet.

In the next lecture, we shall read some Mari prophecies.

## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 4

#### Mari Prophecies and the Bible: Politics

The prophecies from Mari frequently relate to state security and the king's welfare. Many letters predict that the king will overcome his enemies, or warn him against taking a bad course of action. Some of the prophecies refer to the alliance of Mari with the kingdom of Eshnunna. Several prophets objected to this pact: they argued that the inhabitants of Eshnunna were not real peace-seekers. The king Zimri-Lim seems to have exhibited a great interest in these prophecies. In one letter, he explicitly commands an official to report every prophecy delivered in his territory. Here is a report of such a prophecy, authored by one of the king's officials:

Lupaḥum, prophet of Dagan, arrived here from Tuttul ... (and transmitted a message to the king from the god): "Wherever you go, joy will always find you! Battering ram and siege tower will be given to you, and they will travel by your side; they will be your companions." ... To me he spoke: "Wh[at] if the king, without consulting God, will engage himself with the man of [Esh]nunna! ... This is the message Lupaḥum spoke to me. Afterwards, on the following [da]y, a prophetess of Dagan of T[erqa] came and spoke [to me]: "Beneath straw water ru[ns]. They keep on send[ing to you] messages of friendship, they even send their gods [to you], but in their hearts they are planning something else. The king should not take an oath without consulting God." She demanded a *laḥarûm*-garment and a nose-ring, and I ga[ve them to] her. ... The repo[rt of the words that] she spoke to me I have hereby sent to my lord. Let my lord consider the matter and act in accordance with his great majesty. (M. Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2003, 30–31)

The official reports the words of a prophet and prophetess that reached him within the space of one day. Both prophets adopted a militaristic tone. They assure the king of victory over Eshnunna, and advise him not to make an alliance with this kingdom without consulting the god. One of the prophecies contains a popular idiom or proverb: "Beneath straw water ru[ns]". The prophetess compares the conduct of the Eshnunna kingdom to straw floating on water. The straw hides the flow of the water and misleads the observer into thinking that there is firm ground beyond it. The crosser thus loses his footing. In other words, Eshnunna cannot be trusted. At the end of his report, the official reports that he paid the prophetess the fee she requested.

The prophetess delivered the same prophecy on two other occasions. Another letter quotes her words as follows:

The peacemaking of the man of Eshn[unna] is false: beneath straw water runs! I will gather him into the net that I knot. I will destroy his city and I will ruin his wealth, which comes from time immemorial. (M. Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2003, 28)

Several details of this prophecy recall biblical prophecies. First, the prophecy addresses the political situation of the time. This issue was also central to biblical prophecy. Biblical prophets frequently referred to current policy and approved or disapproved of political alliances. Examples of such prophecies are scattered throughout the Bible. Here is one example. In Isaiah 30, the prophet warns against an alliance with Egypt:

הוֹי בְּנֵי סוֹרְרִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עֲצָה וְלֹא מִנִּי וְלִנְסֹךְ מִסִּכָּה וְלֹא רוּחִי לְמַעַן סְפוֹת חַטָּאת עַל־חַטָּאת: <sup>2</sup>  
הַהֹלְכִים לָרֶדֶת מִצְרַיִם וְפִי לֹא שָׁאָלוּ לְעֹז בְּמַעֲוֹז פְּרָעָה וְלִחְסוֹת בְּצֹל מִצְרַיִם:

Oh, disloyal children, says the LORD, taking counsel – but not of me, and weaving schemes – but not of my spirit, thereby piling sin on sin. Who walk to go down to Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to seek refuge with Pharaoh's stronghold, strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! (Isa 30:1–2)

Isaiah reproves the people for making an alliance with Egypt without consulting God, just as the Mari prophetess cautions the king against allying himself with Eshnunna without consulting the prophet.

Mari prophecies are relatively simple in style. They lack the high language and the poetic richness of biblical prophecy. Perhaps this style reflects the original prophecy; but it is also possible that the extant text is a simplified paraphrase composed by an official who was more interested in the prophecy's political implications than in its literary value. Yet, several examples of literary language occur in the Mari letters. Two examples appear in the letters we have just noted: the image of the straw floating on water and the metaphor of the net. The floating straw image is somewhat similar to a famous biblical idiom. Rabshakeh, the Assyrian messenger to Judah, employs a similar metaphor to support his claim that Judah should not make an alliance with Egypt:

הִנֵּה בַטָּחָת עַל־מִשְׁעָנֹת הַקֶּנֶה הָרָצוּץ הִנֵּה עַל־מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִסְמְךָ אִישׁ עָלָיו וּבָא בְּכַפּוֹ וּנְקָבָה בּוֹ פְּרָעָה מִלֶּךְ־מִצְרַיִם  
לְכָל־הַבְּטָחִים עָלָיו:

See, you are relying that broken reed of a staff – on Egypt, whereon if a man leans, it will go into his hand, and pierce it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. (Isa 36:6)

Like the straw floating on water, the broken reed serves as a metaphor for a shaky political alliance. The alliance may appear solid, but it cannot be trusted. The net metaphor is also paralleled in various biblical prophecies.

## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 5

#### Mari Prophecies and the Bible: Cult and Ethics

In the previous lecture, we saw that Mari prophets, like Israelite prophets, were very interested in political issues. However, **some of their prophecies refer to other issues.** Several prophecies relate to cultic themes, especially to the state of the royal temples. The prophets urge the king to take care of these temples properly. A letter written by an official to King Zimri-Lim says:

[Another matter], concerning the [build]ing of a new city gate, the prophet [... cam]e to me some time ago [full of an]xiety, [sayin]g: “[You shall be]gin [the building of] this [city ga]te!” [When] I sent this tablet [to] my lord, this [pro]phet once more spoke to me [and] gave me [str]ict orders as follows: “[If] you do not build this city gate, there will be a [dis]aster and you will [n]ot succeed.” [Th]is is what the prophet [sp]oke to me. I am now [in]volved in the harv[est] and cannot dive[rt] my [ser]vants. [If] my lord could give an order for [help to co]me here (i.e., send more manpower) ... (M. Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2003, pp. 56–57)

In other letters, the prophets demand that the king fund offerings or contribute precious objects to the temples. In one case, the king is asked to consecrate his daughter as a temple priestess. The prophetic rhetoric in these instances combines an assertive tone with promises of reward if the king fulfils the request.

Two letters are of particular interest for comparative study of the Bible. These letters make ethical demands of the king. Here is one example:

Abiya, prophet of Adad, the lord of Alep[po], came to me and said: “Thus says Adad: ... I restored you to the th[rone of your father’s house], and the weapon[s] with which I fought with the sea I handed you. I anointed you with the oil of my luminosity ... Now hear a single word of mine: If anyone cries out to <you> for judgment, saying: ‘I have been wr[ong]ed,’ be there to decide his case; an[swer him fai]rly. [Th]is is what I de[sire] from you. If you go [off] to war, never do so [wi]thout consulting an oracle. [W]hen I become manifest in [my] oracle, go to war. If it does [not] happen, do [not] go out of the city gate.” This is what the prophet said to me. No[w I have sent the hair of the prophet] and a fri[n]ge of his garment to my lord.” (M. Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2003, pp. 21–22)

The prophet stresses here that the current king sits on the throne by god’s grace, and that his kingship is dependent on obeying the divine will. Then he makes two demands on the king: 1) that he judge fairly and take care of the oppressed; and 2) that he consult the god before going out to battle.

These two themes stand at the heart of many biblical prophecies. Here are some examples of the frequent prophetic demand for justice:

רְחֲצוּ הַזְכוֹ הַסִּירוּ רָע מֵעַלְלֵיכֶם מִנֶּגֶד עֵינֵי הַדָּלוּ הָרָע: לִמְדוּ הַיָּטֵב דְּרָשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁרוֹ תִּמְצֹץ שִׁפְטוֹ יָתוֹם רִיבוֹ אֶלְמָנָה:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, uphold the rights of the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isa 1:16–17)

הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מִה־טוֹב וּמִה־יָהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצָּנֶעַ לָכֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you. Only to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your God. (Mic 6:8)

Sometimes, the Israelite prophets address their call for justice directly to the king. For instance:

אָבִיךָ הָלֹא אָכַל וְשָׁתָה וְעָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה אִז טוֹב לוֹ: דָּן דִּין־עָנִי וְאַבְיּוֹן אִז טוֹב הָלֹא־הָיָה הַדַּעַת אֹתִי נְאֻם־יְהוָה:

Indeed, your father ate and drank, and did justice and righteousness—then it was well with him! He upheld the rights of the poor and needy—then it was well. That is truly knowing me, says the Lord. (Jer 22:15)

In the next lecture, we will look at prophecies from other places in the ancient Near East and discuss their relationship to Israelite prophecy.



## **Unit 8. Prophecies from Other Places in the Ancient Near East**

### **Lecture 6: Neo-Assyrian Prophecies and the Bible**

Until now, we have discussed prophecies from eighteenth-century BCE Mari. We will now examine later prophecies from Nineveh and its surroundings. As we shall see later, the nature and historical context of this group of prophecies makes them especially relevant for biblical studies.

Nineveh was an important city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It is also a very important city for modern scholarship, because it is the site where the famous library of King Ashurbanipal was discovered. This ancient library contained about twenty-four thousand tablets in cuneiform script. The tablets cover a wide range of genres – from ancient dictionaries to religious and literary texts. Ashurbanipal's library is the richest and most significant source of our knowledge of Akkadian literature. Among the many texts found there, scholars also identified prophetic texts. A few additional prophetic texts were found in the area of Nineveh.

Dr. Jon Taylor: These are fragments of ancient prophecy. They date to the Assyrian Period, around the seventh century BC. Communication with the gods, of course, is not just a one-way process: it's not just you praying, but you can send messages in the other direction. In this case what we have is communications for the benefit of the Assyrian kings. We have people who communicate with the goddess. The goddess sends them messages, they put this into human words, write it on tablets and send to the king. They send very important messages of encouragement, perhaps warning, telling them that this is going to happen in their reign. The great goddess told them that they will vanquish their enemies and crush their bones and this kind of things, very dramatic.

To date, ninety-five prophecies from Nineveh and its surroundings have been found and published. Their most common addressee is the Assyrian king, and their typical theme is the king's welfare. Here is one example:

[Esarh]addon, king of the lands, fear [not]! What is the wind that has attacked you, whose wings I have not broken? Like ripe apples your enemies will continually roll before your feet. I am the great Lady, I am Ishtar of Arbela who casts your enemies before your feet. Have I spoken to you any words that you could not rely upon? I am Ishtar of Arbela. I will flay your enemies and deliver them up to you. I am Ishtar of Arbela, I go before you and behind you. Fear not! ... By the mouth of Issar-la-tashiyat, a woman from Arbela. (Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2003, pp. 102–103)

As this text indicates, this prophecy was given by a prophetess from the city of Arbela—the modern-day capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The prophetess speaks in the name of the goddess of Ishtar of Arbela. Ishtar was a prominent goddess in Mesopotamia, associated with fertility, love, and war. Due to her central status, she took the form of many diverse goddesses across Mesopotamia. One of these was Ishtar of Arbela, the patron goddess of the city of the same name. Ishtar, in different embodiments, stands behind most of the Neo-Assyrian prophecies. In this tablet, the prophetess delivers her words of encouragement to King Esarhaddon. She promises him, in poetic language replete with imagery, that he will defeat his enemies.

An important feature of this prophecy is its literary framework. Unlike in Mari, this is not a letter that reports a prophecy but a prophetic text *per se*, which reminds us of biblical prophecies. This fact may perhaps mean that the Assyrian prophecies are closer to the original formulation than those cited by officials in the Mari letters.

Dr. Jon Taylor: this is just a single prophecy, here – a collection of prophecies from these prophetesses is in the city of Arbela, modern Arbil in Iraq, and they are all collected on a single tablet for reasons we are not quite sure, but it tells us what each one has to say, and it gives you the name of the prophetess, even where they are from. So, a kind of compendium of the messages sent to the king. It's taken really seriously indeed.

Neo-Assyrian prophecies appear on two types of tablets: large tablets that contain collections of several prophecies; and smaller tablets with a single prophecy on each. Scholars believe that the smaller tablets served as drafts: they were used for recording the words as the prophet spoke them. Then, only those prophecies considered important were assembled, copied on larger tablets, and archived. The care that was taken to collect and preserve them indicates that they were regarded as a valued religious legacy. Such prophecies gained a canonical-like status.

According to the rabbinic view, a similar principle existed in ancient Israel:

Many prophets arose for Israel, double the number of those who came out of Egypt”. However, a prophecy which was relevant for future generations was written down, and that which was not relevant for future generations was not written down. (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 14a)

And here is another example of a Neo-Assyrian prophecy. This one is exceptional, as it is addressed to the people as a whole rather than just the king. At this point it is similar to biblical prophecy. Yet its contents relate to the king:

[Lis]ten carefully, O Assyrians! [The king] has vanquished his [e]nemy! [From] sun[set to] sun[ris]e, [from] sun[ris]e [to] sun[se]t [you]r [king] has trodden his enemy [underf]oot! ... Ashur has given him the whole world. From the place where the sun rises to where it sets there is no king to set beside him. He is bright like sunshine! This is the oracle of peace [*shulmu*] placed before Bel-Tarbasi and before the (other) gods. (Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2003, p. 119)

This prophecy is classified as peace oracle – in Akkadian, *shulmu*. This word is a cognate of the Hebrew word *shalom*. Several *shulmu* oracles are known among the Neo-Assyrian prophecies. The term refers to the content of the prophecy, which predicts peace and prosperity. In fact, many prophecies that are not explicitly labeled as *shulmu* deal with similar topics. They present the Assyrian king as the elect son of the goddess Ishtar, and promise that the kingdom will remain stable for coming generations. In some cases, they even depict the kingdom's future in florid terms of cosmic harmony between heaven and earth. This feature is known from some biblical prophecies.

## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 7

#### Prophecies from Other Places in the Ancient Near East and the Bible

In addition to Mari and Nineveh, sources from outside Mesopotamia also refer to prophets and prophecies. A very interesting prophecy, ascribed to the prophet Balaam who is known to us from the Bible, was found in what is today Jordan. Unfortunately, the prophecy is very fragmentary and difficult to comprehend. We know nothing about its authors or background, and even the language in which it is written is still an enigma. We shall therefore not discuss it here in detail, but you are encouraged to read more about this very interesting extra-biblical reference to Balaam. You will find reading recommendations on the course website. Another interesting report of a prophecy, which is less close to the Bible, appears in an Egyptian text which describes how an Egyptian god rescued a prince by revealing his message through a prophet. Details on this text too are found on our website.

The last corpus of texts which mentions prophecy and will not be discussed here is a collection of letters from the city of Lachish, located in Judah. The letters were written just before the destruction of the kingdom of Judah. They were written in Hebrew by Judeans, and three of them mention a prophet. A word of explanation is needed here: you may ask yourselves, why don't we discuss the Lachish letters in detail – they are much closer to the Bible than all other sources presented thus far! The main reason is that prophecy is mentioned very briefly in these letters, and its context is too obscure to tell us anything decisive. In one letter, it is reported that a message came from a prophet, whose name is not mentioned. The prophetic message, as quoted in the letter, includes one word only: **"Beware!"** The circumstances of this dramatic warning can only be guessed. Many scholars believe that it has to do with the forthcoming fall of Judah to the Babylonians, and connect it to political events described in the Book of Jeremiah. But until more evidence is discovered, the interpretation of this very short prophecy remains uncertain. You are strongly encouraged to read more on the Lachish letters and on the prophet they mention.

We have reviewed the main corpuses which refer to prophecy in the ancient Near East. Before proceeding to discuss their contribution to the understanding of biblical prophecy, we should briefly address the question of the distribution of prophecy. We have seen that outside Israel, prophecy is documented mainly in eighteenth-century BCE Mari; seventh-century BCE Nineveh; and some additional isolated places. How are we to explain these patterns of distribution? Why haven't we found prophecies from across all of Mesopotamia, and from various periods?

The early scholars who studied the Mari prophecies believed that prophecy was known precisely in Mari and Israel because these two cultures belong to the West-Semitic culture. According to this theory, prophecy – as opposed to divination – was a West-Semitic phenomenon. However, the rich findings from the Neo-Assyrian Empire refute this theory. The culture of the Assyrian Empire is Eastern-Semitic, and the Neo-Assyrian prophecies are even more similar to biblical prophecies than the ones from Mari.

Other scholars suggest that the discovery of texts relating to prophecy at Mari and Nineveh is just chance, owing to the fact that these two cities housed the largest archives to have been found in Mesopotamia thus far. According to this explanation, prophets may have existed in Mesopotamia in many other places and times, but they left no trace of their activity: Perhaps their prophecies were only delivered orally, or the written material documenting their work did not survive. We should also keep in mind that, unlike divination, prophecy was not considered an academic discipline, and was not associated with the scribal institution. Rather it was an oral phenomenon, which was only sporadically documented in written sources.

In the next lecture, we will discuss the contribution of the various sources related to prophecy to the understanding of biblical prophecy.

## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 8

#### Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy: Affinities and Disparities

In the previous lectures, we reviewed findings from the ancient Near East related to prophecy. Against this background, we can now attempt to assess how this material contributes to a better understanding of biblical prophecy in its context.

Let's begin from the scope of the phenomenon of prophecy. There is no doubt that biblical prophecy stands out from Mesopotamian prophecy in terms of distribution, centrality, and theological development. According to our current knowledge, prophets did not play a prominent role in Mari or Assyria as they did in Israel. Israelite prophets exerted great influence on the people and king. Biblical prophecy established a long-standing literary school, which was responsible for a rich theology. It covers various themes, such as human fate, particular and universal mission, human-divine relations, royal duties, international relations, etc. The limited documentation of Mesopotamian prophecy that has reached us does not indicate a similar rich prophetic tradition in Mesopotamia. We should still keep in mind, however, that Mesopotamian prophecy was probably an oral institution, which lacked the necessary tools to establish itself as a solid literary-religious tradition.

What about the topics addressed by the prophets? In the previous lessons, we saw that many Mesopotamian prophecies deal with the welfare of king and country. This feature is especially striking in the Assyrian prophecies. We have seen that such prophecies are often called *shulmu* prophecies – that is, peace prophecies. Such prophecies are also known to us from the Bible, where they are called *shalom* prophecies. Here are two examples:

הַנְּבִיאַ אֲשֶׁר יִנְבֵּא לְשָׁלוֹם בָּבֶא דְּבַר הַנְּבִיא יִדְעֵה הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח יְהוָה בְּאַמָּת:

As for the prophet who prophesies peace (Heb: *shalom*), when the word of that prophet comes true, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord has truly sent him. (Jer 28:9)

נְבִיאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנְּבִאִים אֶל-יְרוּשָׁלַם וְהַחֲזִים לָהּ חֲזוֹן שָׁלוֹם וְאִין שָׁלוֹם נָאֻם אֲדָנִי יְהוָה:

The prophets of Israel who prophesy concerning Jerusalem and see visions of peace (Heb: *shalom*) for it, when there was no peace, says the Lord God. (Ezek 13:16)

In these verses, Jeremiah and Ezekiel refer to prophecies that promise peace and prosperity. Just as in the Mesopotamian sources, these prophecies are called “peace prophecies.” Jeremiah and Ezekiel both criticize these prophecies and ascribe them to “false prophets.” However, not all the biblical “peace prophecies” were delivered by false prophets. Many were uttered as words of comfort by important biblical prophets. For example:

שָׁלוֹם שָׁלוֹם לְרָחוֹק וּלְקָרוֹב אָמַר יְהוָה וּרְפָאתִי

Peace, peace (*shalom shalom*), to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I shall heal them. (Isa 57:19)

Nevertheless, the principal focus of Israelite prophecy lies on reproving the people and the king. This agenda of biblical prophecy stands in contrast to Mesopotamian prophecy, at least according to the extant material. How important is this difference? We will discuss this question in the next lecture.

## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 9

#### Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy: Affinities and Disparities Part II

In the previous lecture, we mentioned an interesting difference between prophecy in the Bible and Mesopotamia: Biblical prophecies often focus on reproach and criticism, while the Mesopotamian prophecies which have reached us are peace prophecies.

Avraham Malamet, one of the first students of Mari culture, believed this to be a significant difference. He writes:

In contrast to the Bible with its prophecies of doom and words of admonition against king and people, the messages at Mari were usually optimistic and sought to placate the king rather than rebuke or alert him. Such prophecies of success and salvation ... coloured by a touch of nationalism, liken the Mari prophets to the false prophets of the Bible. (A. Malamet, *Mari and Israel*, Jerusalem 1991, p. 136; translated from Hebrew)

Indeed, several biblical passages describe court prophets who proclaimed peace prophecies in an attempt to please the king. A typical example occurs in 1 Kings 22. This narrative tells of the court prophets of King Ahab, who promise him victory over the Arameans. However his partner, King Jehoshaphat, suspects the peace prophets:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשָׁפָט אֶל־מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל דִּרְשׁ־נָא כִּי־וְיִקְבֹּץ מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַנְּבִיאִים כְּאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו עַל־רֵמֶת גִּלְעָד לְמִלְחָמָה אִם־אֶחָדָל וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲלֶיהָ וַיִּתֵּן אֲדָנִי בְּיַד הַמֶּלֶךְ: <sup>7</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשָׁפָט הֲאֵין פֹּה נְבִיא לַיהוָה עוֹד וְנִדְרָשָׁה מֵאוֹתוֹ: <sup>8</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוֹשָׁפָט עוֹד אִישׁ־אֶחָד לְדִרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה מֵאֹתוֹ וְאֲנִי שָׁנְאֹתִיו כִּי לֹא־יִתְּנָא עָלַי טוֹב כִּי אִם־רָע מִיִּכְיָהוּ בֶן־יִמְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשָׁפָט אֶל־יֹאמֵר הַמֶּלֶךְ כֹּן: <sup>9</sup> וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־סָרִיסִים אֶחָד וַיֹּאמֶר מִהֲרָה מִיִּכְיָהוּ בֶן־יִמְלָה... וְהַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־הִלָּךְ לִקְרֹא מִיִּכְיָהוּ דָּבָר אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה־נָא דְבָרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים פֶּה־אֶחָד טוֹב אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהִי־נָא דְבָרֶיךָ [דְּבָרֶיךָ] כְּדָבָר אֶחָד מִקֵּם וְדִבַּרְתָּ טוֹב: <sup>14</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מִיִּכְיָהוּ חִי־יְהוָה כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֹאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי אֹתוֹ אֲדַבֵּר: <sup>15</sup> וַיָּבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵלָיו מִיִּכְיָהוּ הַגִּלְעָדִי עַל־רֵמֶת גִּלְעָד לְמִלְחָמָה אִם־נִחָדָל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו עֲלֶיהָ וְהִצֵּלַח וְנָתַן יְהוָה בְּיַד הַמֶּלֶךְ: <sup>16</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ עַד־כַּמָּה פְּעָמִים אֲנִי מִשְׁבַּעְךָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִדְבֹר אֵלַי רַק־אֲמַת בָּשֶׁם יְהוָה: <sup>17</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר רְאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל נִפְצִים אֶל־הַהָרִים כְּצֹאן אֲשֶׁר אֵין־לָהֶם רֹעֶה

But Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Inquire first for the word of the Lord." So the king of Israel gathered the prophets, about four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall I march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or shall I refrain?" They said, "March; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there no other prophet of the Lord here through whom we may inquire?" The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is still one other through whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only misfortune." Jehoshaphat said, "Let the king not say such a thing." So the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah."... The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, "Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably." But Micaiah said, "As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak." When he came before the king, the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or shall we refrain?" He answered him, "March and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." But the king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the

truth in the name of the Lord?" Then he said, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd (I Kings 22:5–17).

It might be argued that Ahab represents here the prevalent ancient Near Eastern view of the relationship between king and prophet: the prophet must side with the king and encourage him before battle; the prophet who predicts a bad outcome antagonizes the king and arouses his hatred. Jehoshaphat, on the other hand, prefers the prophet to remain independent, thus allowing him to speak the truth.

Malamat goes on to suggest additional examples:

... (the) prophets of peace served the "establishment" and expressed its interests ... In contrast to Mari, the Bible is replete with prophecies unfavorable to king and country; their heralds, the so-called prophets of doom (or "true" prophets) were constantly harassed by the authorities. One well-known case is that of Amos who, at the royal sanctuary at Bethel, foretold of King Jeroboam's death and the exile of the people (Amos 7:10–13). In reaction, the priest Amaziah, by order of the king, expelled the prophet to Judah in disgrace. Jeremiah provoked an even more violent response, in the days of both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. When confronted by the prophet's words of wrath, Pashhur (the priest in charge of the temple in Jerusalem) "beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the house of the Lord" (Jeremiah 20:2). (A. Malamat, *Mari and Israel*, Jerusalem 1991, pp. 136-137)

In the next lecture, we will discuss Malamat's ideas regarding the relation between these two traditions of prophecy, and present other scholarly approaches in this regard.



## Unit 8: Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy

### Lecture 10

#### Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and Biblical Prophecy: Affinities and Disparities, Part III

In the previous lecture, we saw that Mesopotamian prophecy can shed light on the Israelite court prophecy as described in the Bible.

Another relevant issue is the fee paid to the prophet. In one of the letters we quoted before, the prophet is said to be paid by the king's official:

Afterwards, on the following [da]y, a prophetess of Dagan of T[erqa] came and spoke [to me]: "Beneath straw water ru[ns]. They keep on send[ing to you] messages of friendship" ... She demanded a *laharûm*-garment and a nose-ring, and I ga[ve them to] her.

Evidence of palace officials paying prophets for their work is found in several administrative texts. The same convention is associated with the peace prophets in the Bible. The prophet Micah describes it in a mocking tone:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים הַמְתַּעֲבִים אֶת־עַמִּי הַנִּשְׁכָּחִים בְּשִׁנְיָהֶם וְקִרְאוּ שְׁלוֹם וְאָשֶׁר לֹא־יִתֵּן עַל־פִּיהֶם וְקִדְּשׁוּ עָלָיו מִלְחָמָה:

Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths. (Mic 3:5)

Can we then conclude that biblical prophecy is unique within the ancient Near East in its independent and critical approach toward the king? Many scholars believe that the picture is more complex. Several of the Mari letters in fact betray traces of prophetic opposition to the king. One example is the letter cited in lecture 5. This letter describes the prophet's wrath when he insisted that a gate should be built to the temple. The prophet even threatened future disaster if his demands were not met. The official reporting this incident does not protest against the boldness of the prophet. Rather, he writes to the king to make sure that the task was completed.

This letter raises again the question of whether the prophecies we have in our hands can be considered a representative sample. Is it possible that many Mesopotamian prophecies which might have changed our view have been lost? Did Mesopotamian prophets call for social justice or criticize the king, but their prophecies did not survive? We cannot answer these questions with certainty.

In summary, if we do try to conclude anything on the basis of the texts we have, we should probably describe the relationship between biblical and Mesopotamian prophecy in terms of **evolution rather than revolution**. The typical trademarks of biblical prophecy are its rich poetic language, its criticism of the people and the palace, and its theology of social justice. These characteristics are evident here and there in Mesopotamian prophecy. However, they only come to full blossom in the Bible. Israelite prophecy arose in Israel as part of a broader ancient Near Eastern phenomenon. However in Israel, prophecy took on a sophisticated form, and became the central platform for Israelite theological and literary creativity during the First Temple period.

## Unit 9. Biblical Wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 1

#### Biblical Wisdom Literature and Comparative Study

In the previous lessons, we encountered various biblical genres, such as narrative, law, and prophecy. Our current, and last, lesson is dedicated to the genre known as wisdom literature. The term “wisdom” usually refers to two main types of literature. The first is **practical wisdom**: it includes sayings and advice, like those appearing in the Book of Proverbs. These sayings deal with daily life—proper social behavior, desirable and undesirable personal traits, the right use of money and property, etc. Here are some examples:

אָגַר בְּקִיץ בֶּן מִשְׁכִּיל נִרְדָּם בְּקַצִּיר בֶּן מִבִּישׁ

He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame. (Prov 10:5)

טוֹב אֶרְחַת יֶרֶק וְאַהֲבָה־שֵׁם מִשׁוֹר אָבוֹס וְשִׂנְאָה־בוֹ:

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it. (Prov 15:17)

מִקְלֵל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ יִדְעֶה נֵר׃ בְּאַשּׁוֹן חֹשֶׁךְ

One who curses his father or mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness. (Prov 20:20).

The second type of wisdom is often referred to as **contemplative wisdom**: it deals with philosophical issues such as the problem of evil and theodicy or the question of the meaning of life. This kind of wisdom is best represented by the biblical books of Job and Qohelet.

Scholars believe that these three biblical books: Proverbs, Job and Qohelet, reflect a specific sapiential literary tradition. In Hebrew, this tradition is known as חכמה (*hokmāh*), wisdom. The people who transmit it are called חכמים, (*hākāmim*), the wise.

Wisdom literature has many special traits which set it apart from other biblical genres. One of these is its tendency to address individuals rather than collectives. The values of wisdom are relevant to everyone, **not only the Israelites**. The proverbs we have just presented are universal and the philosophical issues Job and Qohelet deal with are pan-human. This characteristic makes biblical wisdom literature especially prone to external influence. Indeed, the Bible explicitly refers to wisdom literature as enjoying close contact with other cultures. Proverbs quotes the words of non-Israelite sages (cf. Prov 30:1). Job and his friends are presented as foreigners. The wisdom of the wisest man in the Bible – King Solomon – is also placed within an international context:

וַיִּתֵּן אֱלֹהִים חֲכָמָה לְשֹׁלֹמֹה וְתְבוּנָה רַבָּה מְאֹד וְרָחֵב לֵב כַּחֲזוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיָּם: וַתֵּרֶב חֲכָמָת שֹׁלֹמֹה מִחֲכָמַת כָּל־בְּנֵי־קָדֶם וּמִכָּל חֲכָמַת מִצְרַיִם: וַיִּחַפֵּם מִכָּל־הָאָדָם מֵאִתּוֹ הָאֲזֻרְחִי וְהַיָּמִן וְכָל־כָּל וַיִּרְדֵּעַ בְּנֵי מַחֲזִיק וַיְהִי־שֵׁמוֹ כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם סָבִיב:

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom surpassed

the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than all other humans: wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame spread upon all the surrounding nations. (1 Kgs 4:9–12)

The cosmopolitan flavor of wisdom literature creates fertile ground for the comparative study of this genre. In the following lectures, we will explore some examples.

## Unit 9. Biblical Wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 2: Biblical and Egyptian Practical Wisdom

Many texts belonging to wisdom literature have been discovered across the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Proverb collections similar to the biblical Book of Proverbs are known to us in Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, and Aramaic. Contemplative wisdom compositions similar to Job and Qohelet have also been found. Some of them bear specific resemblances to their biblical counterparts.

The framework of this course does not allow us to survey all these fascinating parallels. We will focus on proverb collections and the way they illuminate the biblical Book of Proverbs.

Interestingly, in the field of practical wisdom the most significant parallels come not from Mesopotamia but from Egypt. This is exceptional. As a non-Semitic culture, the literary and cultural legacy of Egypt is generally far removed from that of Israel. The most significant points of contact between Egyptian and biblical literature occur in the field of practical wisdom.

The Egyptians developed a long-lasting wisdom tradition. Collections of sapiential instructions and proverbs were composed and transmitted throughout Egyptian history. These collections were usually presented as the good advice of a king to his son. They are similar to biblical proverbs in many ways. Firstly, they deal with similar topics, such as how to behave in the royal court; proper table etiquette; how to keep a distance from one's enemies, and so forth. Secondly, the two traditions have similar agendas and values. Both seek to educate the younger generation in to how to succeed in life. Both recommend integrity and decency, but endorse this recommendation on utilitarian grounds. Thirdly, in some cases linguistic links between the two traditions testify to their close connection. Here is one example:

In the biblical Book of Proverbs, the seat of thought and consciousness is sometimes referred to by the Hebrew phrase *בֵּטֶן הָדָרִי*, literally: “chambers of the belly”. For instance:

יְהוָה ה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם הִפֵּשׁ כָּל-חֲדָרֵי-בֶטֶן

The Lord ploughs the spirit of man, and examines all the chambers of the belly.

Yet this expression is foreign to biblical phraseology. The Bible usually assigns the seat of consciousness to the **heart** rather than the **belly**. In Egypt, however, wisdom was thought to arise from the belly. The occurrence of this expression in Proverbs probably reflects the influence of Egyptian wisdom.

In fact, as we have already noted, the Bible itself points to Egypt as a major center of wisdom:

וַתֵּרֶב חֵכְמַת שְׁלֹמֹה מִחֵכְמַת כָּל-בְּנֵי-קֶדֶם וּמִכָּל חֵכְמַת מִצְרָיִם:

Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt (1 Kgs 4:10)

In addition to these general connections between biblical and Egyptian wisdom, there are also cases of specific parallels. We will look at these in the following lectures.

## Unit 9. Biblical Wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 3:

#### The Biblical Collection “Words of the Wise”

In the previous lectures, we looked at the general affinities between Egyptian and biblical wisdom literature. From this lecture onwards, we shall discuss one striking case of close contact between the two traditions.

The biblical passage we shall explore is known as the “Words of the Wise” (Prov 22:17–24:22). This title follows the statement at the head of the passage:

הִטְ אָזְנוֹךָ וּשְׁמַע דְּבַרֵּי חֲכָמִים

Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise (Prov 22:17).

The Book of Proverbs provides us with no hint regarding the identity of these wise men. The sayings themselves also present the reader with exceptional terms and exegetical problems. This enigma remained unsolved for many centuries, until the modern discovery of an Egyptian parallel. Let us take a closer look at some of the exegetical problems.

The introductory note refers to the sayings collected in this anthology using the Hebrew word *šālîšîm*:

הֲלֹא כְתַבְתִּי לָךְ שְׁלִישִׁים בְּמוֹעֶצַת וְדַעַת

Have I not written for you *šālîšîm* of admonition and knowledge?  
(Prov 22:20)

The Hebrew word *šālîšîm* is clearly out of place here: it means something like “military officials” or, in other contexts, a form of measurement or musical instrument. None of these meanings has anything to do with wisdom sayings.

Another problem lies in what the wise teacher promises to teach his young student:

לְהוֹדִיעַךָ קִשְׁטֹת אֲמָרֵי אֱמֶת לְהַשִּׁיב אֲמָרֵי אֱמֶת לְשֹׁלְחֶיךָ

...to teach you what is right and true, to give answer to those who sent you (Prov 22:21).

The second half of this statement is very difficult. To whom should the student give answer? Who sent him and why?

Another exegetical problem in this passage relates to the identity of the person described in v. 29:

הֲזִיתָ אִישׁ מְהִיר בְּמַלְאֲכָתוֹ לְפָנֵי-מְלָכִים יִתְנַצֵּב בְּלִי-יִתְנַצֵּב לְפָנֵי חֲשָׁכִים

Have you seen a man diligent in his work? He will stand before kings. He will not stand before obscure men. (Prov 22:29)

In what kind of profession is this person engaged? Why does he stand before kings? The verse does not clarify further.

In the following lectures, we will show how comparative study can provide solutions for these problems.

## Unit 9. Biblical Wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 4

#### The Biblical “Words of the Wise” and Egyptian Instructions of Amenemope Parallels

In the previous lecture, we presented several exegetical problems in the wisdom collection known as the “Words of the Wise.” Generations of commentators have suggested diverse answers to these and other difficulties. However none of them were fully resolved until the discovery of the Egyptian wisdom text known as the **Proverbs of Amenemope**.

This is a collection of sayings delivered by an Egyptian sage named Amenemope to his young son in order to teach him the “path of life.” It contains thirty chapters, each devoted to a specific topic. The themes and values reflected in the book are typical of Egyptian wisdom. According to Amenemope, the ideal man is self-controlled and god fearing.

The Proverbs of Amenemope were first published in **1923**. A year later, the Egyptologist **Adolf Erman** noticed striking similarities between this collection and the biblical “Words of the Wise.” It turns out that every single verse in the first part of ‘Words of the Wise’ has an Egyptian parallel. Here are some representative examples. The translation of the texts follows that made by the biblical scholar Michael Fox.

One of the parallels is an admonition against stealing from the oppressed. The Book of Proverbs warns:

אַל-תִּגְזֹל-דָל כִּי דֹל-הוּא וְאַל-תִּדְכֹּא עֲנִי בִשְׁעָרָי: כִּי-יִהְיֶה לְרִיב רֵיכָם וְקָבַע אֶת-קִבְעֵיהֶם נָפֶשׁ:

Do not rob a lowly man, because he is lowly, and do not oppress the poor man in the gate. For Yahweh will contend on their behalf, and will steal away the life of those who steal from them. (Prov 22:22–23)

Amenemope says:

Beware of robbing the wretched, of oppressing the weak. (Amenemope 4:4–5)

Another parallel regards ancient boundaries. The “Words of the Wise” cautions:

אַל-תִּסָּג גְבוּל עוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ... אַל-תִּסָּג גְבוּל עוֹלָם וּבְשָׂדֵי יְתוּמִים אַל-תִּבְא: כִּי-גֹאֲלָם חֲזָק הוּא יִרְיֵב אֶת-רֵיכָם אִתָּךְ:

Do not encroach on the ancient boundary, which your ancestors made ... Do not encroach on the ancient boundary, nor enter the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong. He will contend against you on their behalf. (Prov 22:28, 23:10–11)

The parallel in Amenemope similarly warns:

Do not displace the marker on the boundaries of the fields ... Beware of encroaching on the boundaries of the fields ... Do not traverse another’s furrow ... (The encroacher) will be caught by the powers of the Moon. (Amenemope 7:19, 8:9–17)

(Note that the quotes have been re-ordered here to stress the parallel to the biblical source.)

Our third example regards table etiquette and diplomacy. The “Words of the Wise” teaches:

כִּי־תֵשֵׁב לֶלְחֹם אֶת־מוֹשֶׁל בֵּין תְּבִין אֶת־אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֶיךָ: וְשָׂמַת שֵׁכִין בְּלִעָךְ אִם־בָּעַל נָפֶשׁ אָתָּה: אֶל־תִּתְּאוֹ לְמִטְעָמוֹתָיו וְהוּא לֶחֶם קְנָבִים:

When you sit to dine with an official, look carefully at what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are a voracious man. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceitful bread. (Prov 23:1–3)

A similar advice in Amenemope instructs:

Do not eat food before an official while eating at length before (him?). Look at the bowl that is before you, and let that serve your needs. (Amenemope 23:13–18)

An interesting parallel refers to the human aspiration for wealth. The “Words of the Wise” warns:

אֶל־תִּיגַע לְהַעֲשִׂיר מִבִּינְתְּךָ חֲדָל: הִתְעִיר עֵינֶיךָ בּוֹ וְאִינָנוּ כִּי עָשָׂה יַעֲשֶׂה־לוֹ כְּנָפִים כְּנֶשֶׁר יַעוּף הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Do not strain to get rich. Leave off your staring! If you but let your eye fly on it, it is no more, for it will surely make itself wings like an eagle’s and fly off to the sky. (Prov 23:4–5)

The Egyptian parallel also employs the bird as a metaphor:

Do not cast your heart after wealth. Do not throw your heart outward. Do not strain to seek a superfluity. Should their (= ill-gotten gains) place be seen, they are (there) no longer. They have made themselves wings like a goose and have flown to the Sky. (9:10–10:4)

Another saying in the Hebrew collection cautions against dining with a stingy person. The wise teacher explains that misers are hypocritical; they only pretend to be willing to share their meal:

אֶל־תֵּלַחֵם אֶת־לֶחֶם רָע עֵין וְאֶל־תִּתְּאוֹ לְמִטְעָמוֹתָיו: כִּי כְמוֹ־שֹׁעֵר בִּנְפֹשׁוֹ כֹּה־הוּא אָכַל וּשְׁתָּה יֹאמַר לֵךְ וְלִבּוֹ בִּלְעָמָה: פֶּתֶחַ־אֲכִלְתָּ תִקְיֹאֲנָה...

Do not eat the bread of the stingy man, nor desire his delicacies. For it is like a gate in the throat: “Eat and drink!” he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You eat your morsel, you vomit it up... (Prov 23:6–7).

The Egyptian sage offers a somewhat different version of the same instruction:

Do not covet a poor man’s property, nor hunger for his bread. Do not be greedy for the property of a great man, nor fill your mouth rashly with a big

bite of bread. The property of a poor man – it is a blockage in the throat, and it makes the gullet vomit. The big mouthful of bread you swallowed, you vomit it up. (Amenemope 14:15–17)

The concentration and prominence of the parallels suggest a direct literary dependence. In the following lectures, we will discuss the origins, nature, and exegetical implications of this finding.



## Unit 9. Biblical Wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 5

#### The Biblical “Words of the Wise” and Egyptian Instructions of Amenemope: Exegetical Insights

In the previous lecture, we presented the main parallels between two proverb collections, the biblical “Words of the Wise” and the Egyptian Instructions of Amenemope. The close correspondences between the two works suggest that they are genetically related to one another. The anonymous “wise” man after whom the collection is named can now be identified: at least one of them is probably the Egyptian sage Amenemope.

We will now discuss some of the main implications of this discovery. The most important contribution of the comparison between the Hebrew and Egyptian material is the new exegetical light it sheds the biblical text. The Egyptian analogies elucidate some of the difficult sayings in the Hebrew collection. Let us examine how the exegetical problems we addressed before can be resolved in light of the Egyptian source:

We noted the difficult word שְׁלִישִׁים, *šālîšîm*, in the introductory passage of the collection:

הֲלֹא כָתַבְתִּי לָךְ שְׁלִישִׁים בְּמוֹעֶצַת וְדַעַת

Have I not written for you *šālîšîm* of admonition and knowledge? (Prov 22:20)

The parallel verse in the Egyptian text seems to solve the problem:

Look to these thirty chapters: they divert, they instruct. (Amenemope 27:7–9)

The Instructions of Amenemope does indeed consist of thirty chapters. The Egyptian parallel thus suggests that the Hebrew word should not be read שְׁלִישִׁים, *šālîšîm*, but rather שְׁלוֹשִׁים, *šlôšîm*, in Hebrew: **thirty**. Originally, this verse probably stated that the “Words of the Wise” contains thirty wisdom sayings. This division of the collection is inspired by the Instructions of Amenemope.

But does the Hebrew collection really comprise 30 units? This division is not explicitly marked in the biblical text. Yet when attempting to count the instructions, many scholars have concluded that the collection does indeed contain 30 instructions, probably under the inspiration of the Instructions of Amenemope.

To clarify: the Hebrew collection is significantly shorter than the Egyptian source. The Hebrew collection possibly consists of thirty sayings; the Egyptian collection includes thirty chapters. This specific connection relates to the number of units rather than their length or content.

Another exegetical issue we presented before regards the vague reference to sending the young man somewhere and asking him to give an answer to someone:

לְהוֹדִיעַךָ קִשְׁטִי אֲמַרִי אֶמֶת לְהַשִּׁיב אֲמַרִים אֶמֶת לְשִׁלְחֶיךָ

To teach you what is right and true, to give answer to those who sent you.  
(Prov 22:21)

The parallel saying in the Instructions of Amenemope clarifies this issue:

To know how to return an answer to one who says it, to bring back a message to the one who sends it. (Amenemope 1:5–6).

Amenemope is talking here about an envoy sent by a king or notable who is expected to report back on his mission. This verse therefore states that one of the sage's goals is to train royal officials. One of the skills the young man should master is how to be a loyal and efficient envoy. The theme of the loyal messenger is central in Egyptian and biblical wisdom. Ancient Near Eastern bureaucratic systems were heavily dependent on loyal men to deliver oral and written messages. Several sayings in Proverbs address the qualities of good and bad envoys. "To give answer to those who sent you" is probably one of these, now better understandable in light of the Egyptian text.

Another problematic verse we looked at before deals with a skillful man who stands before kings:

הֲזִיתָ אִישׁ מְהִיר בְּמַלְאָכָתוֹ לְפָנֵי-מְלָכִים יִתְנַצֵּב בְּלִי-יִתְנַצֵּב לְפָנֵי חֲשָׁכִים

Have you seen a man diligent in his work? He will stand before kings. He will not stand before obscure men (Prov 22:29).

The Egyptian parallel may assist us in identifying this mysterious functionary:

As for the scribe adept in his office, he will be found worthy to be a courtier. (Amenemope 27:16–17)

The person referred to in Proverbs is thus most probably a well-trained scribe. Thanks to his diligence, he would "stand before kings"—that is, attain a position in the palace.

In addition to these specific exegetical insights, the analogies between the Hebrew and Egyptian texts are significant in many other ways. We will discuss some of these in the next lecture.

## Unit 9. Biblical Wisdom in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

### Lecture 6

#### The Biblical “Words of the Wise” and Egyptian Instructions of Amenemope – The Nature and Significance of the Parallels

After presenting the analogies between the Egyptian and biblical texts and discussing their contribution to the interpretation of the Hebrew proverbs, we can now proceed to estimate the broader significance of the parallelism.

We should first address the fundamental issue of the direction of the influence: who inspired whom? Several features suggest that the Hebrew scribe borrowed from the Egyptian material rather than *vice versa*. The first indicator is the enigmatic quality of the Hebrew text, which was obscure in numerous places before the discovery of the Egyptian source. Secondly, several of the motifs and images in the biblical passage are prominently Egyptian in nature. Here is one example. The Hebrew sage recommends memorizing his advice in the following words:

For it will be pleasant if you keep them in your belly, (that) they may all be secure on your lips. (Prov 22:18b).

As we mentioned in lecture 2, the idea that wisdom resides in the belly is an Egyptian notion. The natural Hebrew metaphor would have been ‘keep them in your heart.’ Indeed, the parallel verse in Amenemope uses the belly metaphor:

Let (my words) rest in the casket of your belly. (Amenemope 3:13)

The question of the time and place in which the Israelite borrowing from Egypt occurred is a complicated one. We cannot discuss it here; you will find reading recommendations on the course website.

We shall rather close the subject with a brief examination of an issue that has preoccupied us throughout the course: to what extent are there not only affinities but also significant differences between the Hebrew and Egyptian sources?

The topics we have addressed throughout the course demonstrate essential disparities that shed light on the distinctiveness of Israelite religious ideas. Does the same apply to the current case?

An in-depth look at the material reveals several differences. Here are two prominent examples. In the Hebrew proverb about fleeting wealth, the sage compares possessions with an eagle:

אַל־תִּיגַע לְהַעֲשִׂיר מִבִּינְתָּךְ חֲדָל: הִתְעִיר עֵינֶיךָ בּוֹ וְאַיִנָּנוּ כִּי עָשָׂה יַעֲשֶׂה־לּוֹ כְּנָפִים כְּנֹשָׁר יָעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Do not strain to get rich. Leave off your staring! If you but let your eye settle on it, it is no more, for it will surely make itself wings like an eagle's and fly off to the sky. (Prov 23:4–5)

The parallel Egyptian proverb likens property to a different winged creature:

Do not cast your heart after wealth. Do not throw your heart outward. Do not strain to seek a superfluity. Should their (= the ill-got gains) place be seen,

they are (there) no longer. They have made themselves wings like a goose and have flown to the sky. (Amenemope 9:10–10:4)

The Hebrew author replaced the goose with an eagle. The reason for this seems to relate to his geographic and zoological environment: while the goose is a water-bird characteristic of the Nile and the Egyptian landscape, the eagle is common in the Land of Israel and was thus more familiar to the Israelite reader.

Another slight difference occurs in the realm of social customs. Both the Hebrew and Egyptian collections include a warning against moving boundary stones:

אל-תסג גבול עולם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ... אֶל-תִּסַּג גְּבוּל עוֹלָם וּבְשָׂדֵי יְתוּמִים אֶל-תִּבְא: כִּי-גֹאֲלָם  
תִּזְק הוּא-יִרְיֵב אֶת-רֵיכָם אִתָּךְ:

Do not encroach on the ancient boundary, which your ancestors made... Do not encroach on the ancient boundary, nor enter the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong. He will contend against you on their behalf. (Prov 22:28, 23:10–11)

Do not displace the marker on the boundaries of the fields... Beware of encroaching on the boundaries of the fields... Do not traverse another's furrow ... (The encroacher) will be caught by the powers of the Moon. (Amenemope 7:19; 8:9–17)

(Note that the quotes have been re-ordered to stress the parallel with the biblical source.)

Both admonitions supply a similar rationale: the trespasser will be punished by a divine power. Yet the choice of words is telling. The Hebrew verse says: “for their redeemer is strong. He will contend against you on their behalf.” This reflects a distinctively biblical notion. The Bible, especially the Book of Leviticus, has a distinctive perspective on the ownership of real estate. According to the biblical ethos, one's estate belongs to one for one's whole lifetime. If a man is forced to sell his land, his relatives must redeem it on his behalf and then restore it to him. The rationale given in Proverbs points to God as the mighty redeemer of oppressed orphans. God will personally plead the orphans' case and ensure that their property is restored to them. Here, we see how a specific biblical concept has been introduced into the more general advice given in the Egyptian original.

Other divergences occur here and there in the Hebrew collection. For instance, the Hebrew editor substitutes God for the names of Egyptian deities. This anonymous editor seems to have attempted to make small changes in order to make the text fit Israelite culture. Yet the big majority of the material was left untouched. The biblical scribes generally take a favorable attitude towards their Egyptian source. Unlike other cases we have observed in this course, the biblical editor here is not critical of the ideas and content of the culture from which he borrowed. He does not attempt to correct or censure them with a heavy hand. Rather, he appears to have viewed borrowing from other wisdom traditions as a natural and acceptable convention. The only required changes, in his view, were small adaptations to make the material suit the Israelite environment. This attitude is in line with the universal and cosmopolitan nature of Israelite wisdom literature.

It seems appropriate to close our course on this note. Throughout the course, we have observed the various types and ways in which external material has been

assimilated into the biblical world. These different methods of dealing with other cultures and beliefs gave rise to biblical thought as we know it today.