

The World of the Bible: Indispensable Context in the Study of the Old Testament

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Abstract

The Bible was not originally written for the modern reader, but the testimony of the Church is that it continues to speak God's word to readers/hearers today. However, many modern Bible readers come across texts that need further explanation because the biblical authors did not offer clarification of their writings. They assumed the readers of their time were familiar with the background and could understand the reported events without further explanation. To achieve a "legit" interpretation of Old Testament texts, we first need to understand Scripture correctly, meaning that the biblical text must be read in its narrower and broader context. Only within a context does it become clear what the author meant to say. The main argument of this article is to exhibit that the Bible can only be fully understood against the backdrop of the Ancient Near East (ANE). The broader context consists of the knowledge of surrounding nations during Bible times (i.e., Hebrew Bible). By examining ANE texts and archeological findings we achieve a more complete and enriched comprehension of a given scriptural text or passage. This article exhibits through some concrete examples how archeological findings, inscriptions, and Ancient Near East texts can aid in understanding the broader context of the Old Testament world. In return, the wider context of the Bible world can enlighten or clarify a difficult, incomprehensible, or ambiguous biblical text and henceforth scriptural interpretation become more accurate and closer to the original message and meaning.

Keywords: Old Testament, interpretation, OT texts, Ancient Near East, ANE texts, archeology, archaeological findings and inscriptions, biblical text, context, ancient worldview, surrounding nations

Introduction

It seems that the average modern Christian is not very proficient in quality biblical study and comprehensive Bible reading, or to say it plainly—biblical literacy has drastically declined in most churches today.¹ One of the problems that inevitably arise from this is that “[a]ncient documents, like the Bible, are often subject to uninformed interpretation, based on modern misconceptions or biases. Devotional and doctrinal interpretations may also slant the meaning of the text or harmonize stories to eliminate inconsistencies or contradictions” (Matthews and Moyers 2012, 26–27). Biblical literacy does not mean just reading the Bible, it means being able to understand (the original meaning) and master the use of that comprehended biblical message in everyday life. It simply means to go further than biblical knowledge toward biblical literacy. It is not only knowing the content but also gaining realization on the meaning in the magnificent truth of Scriptures—not only for ourselves but for the sake of our churches.

We must be aware that we are removed in time and space from the biblical world hence we are not able to grasp the fullness and the primordial significance of the text correctly. The problem becomes evident when the average modern Bible reader and earnest student comes across passages depicting certain social or cultural customs, laws, religious practices and beliefs, and geographical locations that are unknown to them. Walton (2017, chap. 1) gives us the crux of the problem modern Bible readers face: “The authors of Scripture operate in a high-context setting. They share a worldview, a history, and a set of experiences with their audience and can assume a lot of common ground. But when we come to the

- 1 See some articles on biblical illiteracy: “The Bible and Spirituality: the Decline in Biblical Literacy among Evangelicals and the Future of the Quiet Time.” (https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/19-2_099.pdf?_cf_chl_managed_tk__=pmd_qvNr8Wnjr9L7fmTO7xaGA.YDgcUmbGhcTRfDA1nN_MM-1631104258-0-gqNtZGzNAtCjcnBszOjil); “Biblical Illiteracy in US at Crisis Point, Says Bible Expert.” (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/biblical-illiteracy-in-us-at-crisis-point-says-bible-expert.html>); “Biblical illiteracy is ‘biggest problem’ facing global evangelicalism.” (<https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/biblical-illiteracy-utmost-problem-facing-global-evangelicalism/60809.htm>); “Biblical illiteracy is a big problem—for Christians.” (https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jaysondbradley/2019/02/bible-literacy/#disqus_thread); “Discipling in an Age of Biblical Illiteracy.” (<https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/07/10/discipling-in-an-age-of-biblical-illiteracy/>).

Old Testament as readers, we enter a low-context audience, even as we are trying to interpret a high-context communication. Thus, the theological substance of the Old Testament is not just embedded in literature; it is embedded in culture.”²

Without diving deeper into additional information about the surrounding nations, and their culture, and religions we will always be deprived of the more accurate and better understanding and hence interpretation of Scriptures.

The purpose of this article is to address the significance of understanding the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures in the pursuit of reconstructing the milieu of the Old Testament world for a more informed biblical reading and interpretation (hereafter personal theology) which will result in a more successfully lived Christian life based on a richer and deeper understanding of the divine story and teachings of the Bible and how they interrelate. This will be accomplished first, by discussing the importance of ANE culture and its impact on and implications for ancient Israelite culture. Second, we will show the correlation and differentiation in worldview and religion between ancient Israel and the surrounding nations illustrating it with a few specific samples. Finally, in the third part, we will demonstrate how clarity can be achieved about incomprehensible social traditions in some biblical texts by putting them against the ANE backdrop.

1. The Culture Issue

Certain practices in the Hebrew Bible, whether cultural, social, or religious, are difficult to understand or even to accept today. Even so, as Christ-followers we are called to understand and live out God’s will, so we must not forget that the Old Testament (OT) lays the foundation for the teachings and events of the New Testament (NT). The Bible is an ongoing revelation and the NT can only be fully grasped if we understand the basis of the events, characters, laws, the sacrificial system, the covenant, and the promises of the Hebrew Bible.³ The NT presup-

- 2 Similar, today globally most people share the same knowledge and experience about the Internet (Wi-Fi connection), social media, and smart phones, no explanation is needed. Still, there are places in the world that are far away from civilization, they have no electricity and are disconnected from technology. Those people do not share in global knowledge about the Internet etc. They need explanation and teaching about those things to correctly understand what Internet and social media is, what significance it has in developed society, what influence on global culture, and what a smart phone is and how to use it. They simply do not share the same context with the rest of the world.
- 3 The expression “Hebrew Bible” is used in some places in this paper instead of the “Old Testament.” Both are terms that designate the thirty-nine books constituting the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible and the Protestant canon of the Old Testament.

poses knowledge of Jewish traditions and religion simply because Jesus and his followers were Jews and lived in Jewish culture. Accordingly apt comprehension as to why the Jews expected a Messiah, or why Jewish spiritual rules acted as they did, or how OT prophecy makes sense in the NT, one must be knowledgeable about the OT and its world. The root of Christianity lies in the Hebrew Bible, without which it cannot be rightly understood at all; hence our NT theology must be informed by proper OT theology. The Hebrew Bible allows us to learn how to love and serve God and it shows more about God's character. It shows through repeated fulfilled prophecies why the Bible is unique among the holy books — it alone can confirm that it is actually what it claims to be: the inspired word of God. Our ethics are also deeply rooted in the OT. Even many attitudes that are regarded as typically "Christian," such as grace towards strangers/enemies and the struggle for the rights of the weak, are already founded in the texts of Israel (e.g., Exod 22:20-26; 23:6; 2 Kgs 6:22; Prov 25:21-22). We inevitably can conclude that our theology stems from the way we look at and understand God, which is impossible if we do not know and truly does not comprehend his word. Consequently, our revised theology will determine our (theological) practice in daily life.

The problem is that Western culture and ignorance color comprehension and interpretation of Scriptures and how we view and apprehend God, his character, and his message. The same is true in contemporary culture; the Bible is differently interpreted in Western culture (emphasis on the individual) and the Eastern mindset (community-oriented). Walton (2006, 234) explains that we "cannot read the Hebrew Bible as if it were journalistic or academic history such as might be written today. Such reading would compromise the intentions, presuppositions, values, and poetics of the literature and its authors." If our goal is to understand the original intent of an author, we need to understand the "environment" in which certain events are recorded in the text occurred. Learning about the Old Testament world by examining ANE texts and archaeological findings that illuminate everyday life, family and social customs, religious practices, and beliefs can aid in the quest for a more accurate and meaningful understanding of the biblical message which advances how we live out God's plan in this world as Christians. For example, prophetic messages in the Hebrew Bible "of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others gain in power and urgency as the current affairs of those days are understood, and this only becomes possible as the stories of the other nations are uncovered" (Hoerth, Mattingly and Yamauchi 1994, Preface).

The main tools in this quest, per Walton (2006, 18) are comparative studies which is a "branch of cultural studies in that it attempts to draw data from different segments of the broader culture (in time and/or space) into juxtaposition with one another to assess what might be learned from one to enhance the un-

derstanding of another.”⁴ The Hebrew Bible is in many places under its ancient context but breaks radically out of this context in at least as many places.⁵ Meaning we cannot parallel all texts but we can attain elucidation when grasping the cultural context and detecting resemblance or divergence (Hess 2014, 7–12).

In literary terms, knowledge of the ancient forms and genres of literature, as well as research into ancient languages, contribute immensely to the understanding of sacred writings.⁶ As to ancient languages, often the biblical text uses different or specific words to express a concept or something else (e.g., prophetic titles or terms) (Mead 2014, 263–265). In cases like these, the etymology of certain words or phrases in ancient languages (like Hebrew, Akkadian, Aramaic, Syriac,...) can help to get a sense of what notion has been tried to convey and thus the meaning of Scripture verses or passages become often clearer.⁷ Related to genres of literature, rhetoric varies in hymns/prayers and a historical narrative.⁸ For instance, in researching the attributes of deity in the ANE, Walton (2006, 99–100) educates that deity is differently depicted: (1) as an individual (e.g., hymns and wisdom); (2) within the group (e.g., mythology); and (3) “when the god is seen in relation to gods from other groups (often in royal inscriptions or treaties).” Hence, various genres offer a richer understanding of how a deity was viewed and grasped in the ANE, which can then be contrasted to God’s image in related

- 4 There are many scientific methods (i.e., various criticisms) which help in the pursuit to reconstruct the original meaning and purpose of a biblical narrative. “The competent exegete attempts to determine no more no less than what the text can tell us, and this process should not be influenced by speculations or creative interpretation (i.e., exegesis)” (Matthews and Moyer 2012, 27).
- 5 It is true that “even if literary dependance were occasionally determinable, the Old Testament would recontextualize the ancient literature with which it was interacting,” asserts Walton (2017, chap. 1).
- 6 “Understanding the genre of a piece of literature is necessary if we desire to perceive the author’s intentions. Since perceiving an author’s intentions is an essential ingredient to the theological and literary interpretation of a text, we recognize that understanding genre contributes to legitimate interpretation” (Walton 2006, 22).
- 7 See for such a case in Greengus 2014, 91–92.
- 8 For example, Pope Leo XIII states rightly in article 40 of the encyclical (1943): “Let those who cultivate biblical studies turn their attention with all due diligence towards this point and let them neglect none of those discoveries, whether in the domain of archaeology or in ancient history or literature, which serve to make better known the mentality of the ancient writers, as well as their manner and art of reasoning, narrating and writing. In this connection Catholic laymen should consider that they will not only further profane science, but moreover will render a conspicuous service to the Christian cause if they devote themselves with all due diligence and application to the exploration and investigation of the monuments of antiquity and contribute, according to their abilities, to the solution of questions hitherto obscure” (The Holy See, 1943). Further information on the Roman Catholic view of reading Scriptures see in the encyclicals, (1893) by Pope Leo XIII and (1950) by Pius XII.

genres in the Old Testament. Hereafter, we must pay attention and strive to comprehend what is recorded in the biblical writings concerning the background of the language and genre used in biblical times and biblical lands. The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 are such a case, where the modern reader tends to understand them as a modern scientific explanation rather than a narrative in the context of the ancient worldview.

Furthermore, ambiguous, challenging, or unclear passages in the Hebrew Bible can be enlightened when we delve into the broader historical background (Greenwood 2015, chap. 2). One way to obtain information about life in biblical Israel is by examining the research of relevant archaeological findings.⁹ There have been enormous developments in that area, and experts have uncovered “details about their settlements, living arrangements, kinship structures, domestic life, food production and preparation, health and illness, attire, song and dance, and writing materials” (King and Stager 2001, xviii). Archaeological experts and scholars blend all this biblical and extra-biblical information to depict a “realistic” environment and life of ancient Israel, thereby revealing details that help us put a particular OT text in the proper historical setting. We get a better sense of people’s lives, what their world most likely looked like and what was, so to speak, “in” or “out” at that time. There are several benefits from an archeological investigation in the pursuit of an ANE framework. Archeological bits and pieces of new information aid in liberating our minds from the modern western mindset. It is crucial to submerge our minds into the Semitic mentality because the Hebrew Bible is set and written, in the ancient past and a foreign language.

Additionally, in connection with Israel and Judah’s history, archeology relieves the theological texts of the Bible from being misused or misunderstood as primary historical sources, even if they are and remain historical sources of their time. We obtain two independent, separate, and complementary images—theology and history. Also, with supplementary data and the possibility of seeing pictures (or visiting the actual places/museums) of excavated materials or places, we ultimately can envision a more accurate picture of the past: settlements/houses, cities, and inscriptions, various tools, adornments, and art. Lastly, we obtain new data and/or confirmation of the historicity of a biblical text.¹⁰ A couple of ex-

9 Matthews and Moyer (2012, 15–16) emphasize the significance of archeological work and argue that “in particular, archeology enhances our understanding of the written text with physical evidence. ... [A]rcheology has revolutionized the study of the text of the Bible. ... Archeological evidence provides some of the best information on everyday living conditions, architecture, industry and agriculture, religious practice, and social customs in ancient times.”

10 Some of the information archeology has been obtaining: “what crops the Israelites and their neighbors grew, what they ate, how they built their cities, and with whom they traded.” Some of the cities we find in the Bible have been excavated and identified, the same is true for “their neighbors the Philistines, Phoenicians, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. In a

amples will illustrate this point. The enumerates Sennacherib's exploits and listed among them is the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. Ancient "official" writings or annals often are on one hand a combination of fact and on the other hand ideological propaganda (Fant and Reddish 2008, chap. The Taylor Prism). This Assyrian account of the attack on Judah and Jerusalem from their point of view considerably verifies the biblical story in 2 Kings 18-19 and thus its historicity. Column 3 of states:

'As for Hezekiah, the Judean, I besieged forty-six of his fortified walled cities and surrounding smaller towns, which were without number. Using packed-down ramps and applying battering rams, infantry attacks by mines, breaches, and siege machines, I conquered (them). I took out 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, cattle, and sheep, without number, and counted them as spoil. He himself, I locked up within Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthworks, and made it unthinkable for him to exit by the city gate. His cities which I had despoiled I cut off from his land and gave them to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Silli-bel, king of Gaza, and thus I diminished his land. I imposed dues and gifts for my lordship upon him, in addition to the former tribute, their yearly payment. He, Hezekiah, was overwhelmed by the awesome splendor of my lordship, and he sent me after my departure to Nineveh, my royal city, his elite troops (and) his best soldiers, which he had brought in as reinforcements to strengthen Jerusalem, with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, choice antimony, large blocks of carnelian, beds (inlaid) with ivory, elephant hides, ivory, ebony-wood, boxwood, multicolored garments, garments of linen, wool (dyed) red-purple and blue-purple, vessels of copper, iron, bronze and tin, chariots, siege shields, lances, armor, daggers for the belt, bows and arrows, countless trappings and implements of war, together with his daughters, his palace women, his male and female singers. He (also) dispatched his messenger to deliver the tribute and to do obeisance' (Fant and Reddish 2008, chap. The Taylor Prism).

The confirmation of many kings of Israel and Judah mentioned in the Old Testament can be observed in various ANE inscriptions. So does an inscription of the king of Moab state that Omri (see 1 Kgs 16:20-23; Mic 6:16) is the founder of an Israelite dynasty – "House of Omri" or originally (Kitchen 2003, 16–17). Additionally, Kitchen (2003, 18–19) informs us that on a stela¹¹ the name of a Judean king "J(eh)oram II" (see 2 Kgs 8:16) and his son "Ahaziah of Judea" were found, as were the famous seal "Shema servant (=minister of state) of Jeroboam" belonging to the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (see 2 Kgs 14:23). A royal inscription from Tel Dan states "David" as the ruler of the southern kingdom and men-

few cases, inscriptions and signet seals have been discovered that can be directly connected with individuals mentioned in the biblical text" (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001, 5).

11 An engraved or craved surface—usually some kind of stone (tablet, obelisk, pillars, ...).

tions the “House of David” which is the first Davidic reference ever found in the ANE literature (Fant and Reddish 2008, chap. Tel Dan Inscription).¹²

Nevertheless, caution is necessary since archaeology is a science, and like all sciences, it has its shortcomings; “archaeology has [not] proved the biblical narrative to be true in all of its details” (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001, 5). First, the archaeological sources we have so far are incomplete because only a small percentage of the ANE has been excavated and studied. Second, scientific accuracy according to today’s standards was not the biblical author’s goal. Since most of the archaeological findings and inscriptions allow various possibilities of interpretation, they do not always provide ultimate clarity, however, they do contribute to creating a more complete picture of the Bible. Third, many finds involve artifacts without accompanying inscriptions. So, interpretations of artifacts are often speculative (Steiner 2019, 10).

Culture is not the sole domain we can compare and contrast to surrounding ancient societies, but worldview and religion too which will undeniably improve knowledge about ancient Israel and the Scriptures.

2. Worldview and Religion

Worldview and religion, the peculiarity of the religious theories, and modes of behavior of ancient Israel can only be worked out within the framework of ancient Near Eastern religious history:¹³

Naturally, ancient Israel and Judah were part of this ancient cultural milieu. We know from the biblical text, as well as from extrabiblical data, that Israel had contact with their surrounding nations. They lived at times in Egypt, Babylon and the Persian Empire. Their kings made marriage alliances with Phoenicia (1 Kgs. 16:31) and Egypt (2 Kgs. 3). They engaged in battle with numerous nations and kings. They welcomed foreigners into their community (Lev. 19:34; Josh. 6:22-25; Ruth 4:13-15). They even participated in many

12 More data on that subject, see in Kitchen 1997, 22–47; Ortiz 2014, 233–234; and Kitchen 2003, 92–93.

13 On such instance we find in Genesis 1:26, where the biblical writer uses a plural referring to God. Traditionally this is interpreted to stand for the Trinity. Yet considering the ANE backdrop, current scholarship will interpret this plural form to stand for a council of lesser beings similar to the ANE councils of gods or divine council. This kind of understanding would fit exactly to the mindset of the ancients and their metaphysics, which greatly differ to the contemporary metaphysics (Walton 2017, 42). Other five possible interpretations could fit the ancient worldview of the divine realm, and none of those ancient views are in contradictions with the later developed theology of the Trinitarian God (Arnold 2004, 28). Still “one needs only a moderate level of historical understanding to recognize that the writer of Gen. 1 would not have had the Trinity in mind,” writes Moberly (1999, 463).

of the same cultic practices as their neighbors, such as building idols (1 Kgs. 16:25-33), offering child sacrifices (2 Kgs. 16:3) and practicing sorcery (2 Kgs. 21:6) (Greenwood 2015, chap. 2).

It is imperative to keep in mind that the ancient worldview is quite divergent from the current Western—postmodern perspective. For instance, the ancient people believed that absolutely everything was connected (gods, universe, nature, people, death,...) and all existence was the ultimate result of the supernatural. Dualism between sacred and secular did not exist. The Ancients were not reason-oriented, nor did they try to explain why things were as they were. Religion was a system to serve the gods—the purpose of life, to name just a few from Walton’s list in his book, .¹⁴ “It would be difficult to discuss with ancients the concept of divine intervention because in their worldview deity was too integrated into the cosmos to intervene in it. For the most part, the deity is on the inside, not the outside. All experience was a religious experience, all law was spiritual, all duties were duties to the gods, all events had deity as their cause. Life was religion and religion could not be compartmentalized within life” (Walton 2006, chap. 4).

Taking the ANE worldview into account, it is not too surprising to find that the Hebrew’s belief in God YHWH as the only God was slow to develop and was not monotheistic in the beginning.¹⁵ Walton (2017, 117) reminds us that:

God begins with relationship rather than law. This order makes perfect sense once we recognize that the function of the law is to help Israel to know how to live in the presence of God. The law would not be relevant to Abram and his family at this stage because God’s presence had not yet been established. Likewise, God does not begin with doctrine—a set of beliefs to which one must agree in order to be in relationship. **He does not ask Abram to believe in anything except in Yahweh’s trustworthiness to deliver the benefits that he has offered.** Initially, Abram needed to act (leave behind what God asked him to leave), and his action surely demonstrated belief. **But specifically, Yahweh did not begin by demanding loyalty or worship of him alone. No mention is made about monotheism, or even monolatry or henotheism.**¹⁶ **No prohibition against images is front-loaded. Instead, we find that Yahweh has constructed a scenario that will create a vacuum that he can later fill** (emphasis added).

14 Compare additionally in Kaufmann 1961, 37–38.

15 For a more detailed discussion and a somewhat divergent view on the topic of “Israelite religion” see in Kaufmann 1961, Part One: The Character of Israelite Religion, 7–149.

16 Another form of theistic belief is henotheism. “This way of thinking still does not claim that only one god exists, but it insists that only one god is truly worthy of worship. Other gods are considered pretenders to deity, imposters, charlatans, incompetents, or simply inferior beings incapable of exercising divine authority. And henotheism is the view that permeates most of the Old Testament as it talks about the powerlessness of the other gods, prohibits their worship, and pronounces them frauds” (Walton 2017, 31).

The people around Israel worshiped many gods. Numerous archaeological finds like idol statues in houses (e.g., Baal, the Asherah, or bull figures) reinforce that the ancient Israelites also worshiped several gods in the beginning (see Gen 31:19, 32, 34).¹⁷ As a result, many significantly diverse cultic practices developed in Israel, while some practices were identified during the same period. Ultimately, monotheism prevailed in Israel—the form of religion that accepts the existence of only one God and, thus, denies other gods' existence. We can determine that the main point of distinctiveness between Israel and the surrounding nations was the covenant and the Torah. There is nothing parallel to the covenant agreement in Israel and their neighbors. In contrast to other ANE covenants only the biblical divine covenant has a mix of secular and religious rules (e.g., law, moral conduct, worship rules,...), and “all these were components of the divine covenant linking Israel with God, the divine sovereign” (Greengus 2012, 108).¹⁸ The covenant is the foundation of the Israelite community. That covenant (between God and the whole nation) is based on a unique experience and revelation of God. So, the core of Israelite thinking is always connected to the Ten Commandments, which are at the center of the Torah. “Whatever obligations Yahweh has to Israel come not because they serve his needs, but because of the covenant agreement. The people serve Yahweh by faithfulness to the covenant expectations” (Walton 2006, 140–142). YHWH gave his people the covenant and a new identity—a priestly role, enabled a human/divine relationship, and a clear understanding of his plans and will. In contrast, the ANE gods sought humans to be their “slaves,” serving their every whim (Kaufmann 1961, 53–54). Still, people had no certainty if their servanthood was enough to please the gods and prosper in life.

It is therefore not surprising that we also find accounts in the Bible that are reminiscent of magical rituals (e.g., 1 Sam 28:7-20), albeit baffling for the modern reader because we associate magic with tricks or modern fictional accounts like Harry Potter. Walton (2006, 264, 266) explains this topic by saying that from “the beginning, magic in the ancient world cannot be dissociated from the category of religion... In [some] roles magic was recognized as generally beneficial for society, although it could be abused for antisocial ends. Thus, the specialist in the performance of incantations was engaged in an honorable profession and was to be distinguished from the necromancers or those who cast spells.” King and Stager (2001, 79) attest to the same fact, claiming that the “healing described [in 1 Kings 17:21 and 2 Kings 4:18-37] is known as ‘contactual magic,’ which was commonly practiced in the ancient Near East.”

17 Archaeological finds attest to Israelite's spiritual adultery also during the monarchy period, see in Kitchen 2003, 214–221.

18 See also in Kaufmann 1961, 233–234. “Renewal covenants are found only in the Bible. They were organized by a leader of the people who acted as a representative of God, inviting the people to reaffirm obligations deriving from earlier divine covenants” (Greengus 2012, 118).

By being familiar with the ANE background, we can make sense of why casting lots was accepted in Israel. In ancient times when immediate divine guidance was needed for a specific situation (e.g., war), the divination was a vehicle (Walton 2006, 142, 256). And in Israel, the means used by priests (or the population) were the Urim and Thummim (see Judg 18:5-6; Num 27:21; 1 Sam 28:6). Possible confirmation for the active use of the Urim and Thummim by Israelite priests can be found, for instance, amongst the excavations of the ancient city Tel Dan. “Near the alter room [in a temple] lay other cultic objects, among them a large die made of blue frit or faience” (King and Stager 2001, 329–330).¹⁹ Through these examples, and there are many more, it becomes apparent that knowing the broader context (OT world) is useful and of considerable help.

Being acquainted with the ancient background can also enlighten the Israelite’s traditions, social practices, and behavior, which may be somewhat odd or alien to the modern mind, consequently making Old Testament interpretation challenging.

3. Social Concepts and Practices

The way we read and interpret particular OT texts can be positively impacted if ancient concepts and practices are correctly understood. Much of what we read in the Scriptures, and especially in the Hebrew Bible, might be very strange to us. Therefore, we must read thoroughly and understand the actions and behaviors described by people and the circumstances of their lives against the cultural background of the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Egypt of that time. Even in the Hebrew Bible writings, different cultural backgrounds come into play, for example, when we read about a nomadic people’s events and then about life in the pharaonic kingdom of Egypt. The cultural backdrop of the reports about King David’s time and his kingdom is somewhat different from that which we encounter later during the exile in Babylon.

Many ancient social conventions make us wonder why it was traditional in biblical society for the firstborn to have special privileges (see Gen 27:19; 49:3; Exod 13:2; Num 8:17), for parents to choose their son’s spouse²⁰ (e.g., Gen 21:21; 24:4; 38:6) or for a man to have more than one wife—polygyny (e.g., David, Salomon). Other traditions that may seem unusual are also the importance of hos-

19 Frit is a “ceramic composition that has been fused, quenched to form a glass, and granulated. Frits form an important part of the batches used in compounding enamels and glazes.” Ancient Egypt used blue (or green) colored frit. Faience is “originally the French name for the earthenware made at Faenza, Italy, in the 16th century; the ware had a tin opacified glaze” (Dodd and Murfin 1994, 113, 134).

20 For more details and illustrations see in Matthews 2015, chap. 1 – “Marriage Customs.”

pitality and sharing food (i.e., sacred duty rooted in Lev 19:33-34) and the concept of “kinsmen-redeemer” (see Num 35:19-27; Lev 25:25-33, 48-49). It seems evident that the Israelites shared in their way numerous social conventions with the surrounding nations and how complex culture formation and influence on culture is, describes Walton (2006 332):

The common cognitive environment was not borrowed from one culture to another. A cognitive environment is a cultural heritage shaped by infinite forces and influences generation by generation, through complexities that cannot be traced or identified. Even today when one culture decides to imbibe deeply of the cognitive environment of another (e.g., the Japanese adoption of Western culture), the result is a complex mix of that which is adopted wholesale, that which is adapted, that which is taken at one level without really being understood, that which is utterly rejected, and on and on in innumerable variations.

In Genesis 16:1-4, for example, we learn that Sarah’s barrenness prompted her to give the slave Hagar to her husband in hopes of offspring. The family line’s continuation was imperative, which is why barrenness was considered a curse in Israel, and the surrounding nations (King and Stager 2001, 48). Therefore, the practice of using a “surrogate mother” or another wife was acceptable and considered normal,²¹ as the ancient legal document, attests: “Marriage variables were regulated by contract, including the use of a concubine for bearing children when the wife was barren” (Walton 2006, 71). Another example is Tamar and Judah’s story in Genesis 38:6-26 (also Boaz and Ruth), where we find the concept of the “levirate” marriage as an underlying tradition.²² King and Stager (2006, 56) explain that “if a married man died without children his brother was to cohabit with his widow for several reasons: to prevent the widow from marrying to an outsider, to perpetuate the name of the deceased, and to preserve within the family the inherited land of the deceased.” In this light Tamar’s, not Judah’s, deeds were per God’s commandments to “be fruitful and multiply” and her request was her given right (see Gen 1:28; 38:25-26).

Commonalities can also be observed in the matter of slavery since the Israelites owned slaves like other nations.²³ However, certain discrepancies are noteworthy: slaves were not only property, but they also had some allowances

21 Look for detailed explanation in Matthews 2015, chap. 1 – “Importance of an Heir.”

22 More additional information, Ibid.

23 It is known from the biblical text that slavery was part of the earliest beginnings of Israelites history (e.g., Abraham had at least two know slave: Eliezer of Damascus and Hagar; Gen 15:2; 16:1). Even more slaves are reported in the Bible during the monarchy period, especially early on, and war times because prisoners were captured and enslaved in various ways (servants, wives or concubines, construction workers; see Deut 21:10-14; 2 Sam 12:31) (Matthews 2015, chap. 3).

that indicated they were considered people (e.g., Exod 21:1-11; Deut 15:12-18); slaves could celebrate religious festivals with their masters if certain conditions were met; they were not to be mistreated, and their service was limited to several years (see Lev 25).²⁴ Furthermore, Israelites could not enslave their people. Another discrepancy with ANE peoples is that women in Israel were generally better treated (esp. widows). “The later Deuteronomic Code (dating to after 620 BCE) also required that slaves be freed after six years of service ... and that they should not be sent away empty-handed (Deut 15:12-15). In other words, former debt slaves are given some form of economic support so they do not immediately fall back into debt service. This Deuteronomic Code further simplified the law by including both men and women in this six-year, limited period of servitude (Deut 15:12)” (Matthews 2015, chap. 3). Moreover, provisions were made for the poor, weak, and marginalized in the Torah (e.g., orphans, widows, slaves, strangers; see Deut 10:17-19; 24:17-22; 27:19) (King and Stager 2001 49, 53).²⁵

Lastly, certain weird or even immoral conducts in some of the ancestral narratives can be illuminated when considering the broader perspective of surrounding lands and their cultural-legal norms. The story of Abram—Sarai and the wife-sister scheme is such a case (see Gen 12:10-20):

This aspect of the story fits well with the ecologically fragile nature of ancient Canaan, which often was plagued with drought and then with famine. Since Abraham’s household had only recently arrived in Canaan, it would be difficult to obtain food from the economically stressed local inhabitants. This meant a further trek to Egypt, where traditional wisdom indicated that food could be purchased and that transients were tolerated and occasionally used as temporary sources of cheap labor. Egyptian texts do mention “Asiatics” (‘amu), who arrive either as prisoners of war who are sold into Egyptian slavery, or as refugees who may eventually assimilate into Egyptian society or return to their own lands (Matthews 2015, chap. 1).

Matthews (2015, chap. 1) explains why Abram probably used duplicity with the pharaoh.

Another difficulty faced by every immigrant group is fitting into the legal patterns of the host group. Immigrants are seldom familiar with the laws of the land, and they are often denied the legal protection guaranteed to citizens (Gen. 19:9). **This can lead to the use of deception as a defense mechanism. Assuming that survival of the group took priority over providing a poten-**

24 This applies to Israelite servants and slaves. Compare Lev 25:39-43 with 25:44-46. The same is true with the 7th-year release in Deut 15 and Exod 21. The point still stands that even non-Hebrew slaves were considered human with some rights. So, for example, the release of a slave who is permanently injured by his/her master is not limited to Hebrews (Exod 21:26-27).

25 Although ANE codes also make provisions for some of these groups. However, in those codes, they are not said to be under the special protection of the deity as in the Torah.

tial enemy with all the facts, the morality of such a deception must not have presented much of a problem for the ancestors. As a result, there are several trickster stories contained in the ancestral narratives (emphasis added).

There would be much more to write, of course, about various ANE writings, archeological finds, and inscriptions that attest to the historicity of Scriptures or shed more light on the biblical message but for this article, we have chosen only a few to stress the argument.

Conclusion

It is a general perception in linguistics that a sentence is ambiguous on its own, sometimes even incomprehensible. If a sentence is equivocal or uncertain then it is necessary to understand how it is integrated into a more extensive network of meaning (i.e., context) to understand and clarify a text's intent. When deciphering ancient documents, capturing the contexts is often tricky, especially true for the Bible. Our interpretation is therefore also subject to the risk of misunderstanding. For methodically guided scientific research of the original text's intentions, the interpretation is dependent on the reconstruction of "worlds" of nearby cultures. Biblical texts make more sense when they are integrated into the ANE network. Understanding deepens when we not only discover connections and recognize similarities but likewise perceive the differences. Since context changes everything, serious Old Testament study is not possible without the inclusion of ancient Near Eastern documents and contemporary archeological finds. All these extra data provide more insight and assist in the reconstruction of the ancient "cognitive environment," which we have demonstrated in many instances throughout this paper. The fact stands that informed interpreting begets sound understanding of Scriptures which in return enables the Christian believer to translate their improved theology more efficiently into everyday life.

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