BIBLICAL STUDIES

THE AMBIGUITY OF BIBLICAL "BACKGROUND"

NOEL K. WEEKS

In theory any information that one can obtain about the background of a biblical passage is to be welcomed as an aid to interpretation. Yet, just comparing the number of interpretations proposed in the scholarly literature with the number that command widespread acceptance makes clear that there is a considerable gap between the postulation of a significant background and the acceptance of that postulation as an interpretative key. This article will suggest that uncertainty applies to much that is proclaimed as background to particular biblical teaching. Why is there such a disjuncture between the ideal and the actual?

My focus in this article will be primarily the problem as it impacts OT studies, but I suspect that some of the issues may be present in NT studies and I will include NT examples in the discussion. Since my essential thesis is that wrong models for individual human and societal dynamics are often involved, there is some relevance for thinking about later periods of history also.

I. *Background as Corroborating the Text: The Fall of the "Albright Synthesis"*

The significant shift that has taken place in OT studies in the last years of the twentieth century will be well known. In effect the field has gone from a situation in which "background" was used as proof that the author had used reliable sources and hence the text was generally reliable, to a predominate use of "background" to show the entrapment of the author in his historical context and thus to make any trans-historical authority of the text problematic. It is my contention that the earlier stage, though generally welcomed by conservatives, had serious flaws in reasoning and some of those flaws continue to trouble us to this day.

Let us then examine the older position, or as it is commonly called, the "Albright synthesis."[1] The strong point of the synthesis and its eventual Achilles' heel was the contention that the patriarchal narratives contained a reflection of the genuine social and legal customs of the second millennium B.C. and therefore

Noel K. Weeks is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Sydney in Australia.

[1] The name is somewhat misleading because it reached beyond Albright. Even academic foes of Albright, such as Cyrus Gordon, were contributors.

those stories must have been based upon genuine traditions.[2] When one examines the evidence to support the thesis one sees that it depends upon evidence gathered widely from the Ancient Near East. In Albright's version of the thesis, evidence from Mari, a town on the middle Euphrates in the early second millennium, plays a major role. With Gordon, the evidence stressed comes from the town of Nuzi in the Diyala valley in the middle or latter part of the millennium.

Here there is an unstated assumption. If customs attested at Mari and Nuzi are background for what the patriarchs experienced in Palestine, then the same customs and culture must prevail all across that region. That this assumption was accepted is not surprising. The field was still heavily influenced by the Pan-Babylonian assumption that civilization originated with the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia and spread uniformly from there.[3]

The defense of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives was generally welcomed and employed by those of conservative theological convictions,[4] even though some of the "proofs" of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives depended on the postulate that the biblical author was writing in a later period and misunderstood the "real" background now uncovered from other texts.[5]

It is well known that the Albright synthesis has been generally rejected. That rejection is generally attributed to sweeping attacks by John Van Seters and Thomas L. Thompson.[6] However, those attacks had the benefit of a number of more specific studies that had probed the validity of the alleged connections and parallels. For example, attempts to connect Nuzi adoption practices with the relationship of Laban, Jacob, and Rachel do not fit the specifics of each part of the parallel.[7] The attempt to interpret Abraham's marriage to his sister Sarah on the basis of the practice of adopting women as sisters at Nuzi[8] does

---

[2] A good example of this argument is John Bright's popular and influential *A History of Israel* (2d ed.; London: SCM, 1972), 76-102.

[3] For the original Anti-Semitic use of Pan-Babylonianism to prove that the Jews were copiers and corruptors of the great Sumerian civilization see Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible* (edited and with an introduction by Claude H. W. Johns; London: Williams & Norgate; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903). For a history of the controversy see Klaus Johanning, *Der Bibel-Babel-Streit* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988). For a non-racist version of the basic thesis see Samuel N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1959). Albright was a student of, and succeeded, Paul Haupt at Johns Hopkins University. While Albright rejected the Anti-Semitism of Haupt, he retained the underlying assumption of uniformity of culture.

[4] E.g., Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1974), 165-70; Donald J. Wiseman, "Archaeological Confirmation of the Old Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (ed. Carl F. H. Henry; London: Tyndale, 1958), 304-5.

[5] See my "Mari, Nuzi and the Patriarchs," *Abr-Nahrain* 16 (1975–1976): 73-82.

[6] Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975); Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974).

[7] John Van Seters, "Jacob's Marriages and Ancient Near Eastern Customs: A Re-examination," *HTR* 62 (1969): 377-95; Moshe Greenberg, "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," *JBL* 81 (1962): 239-48.

[8] Ephraim A. Speiser, "The Wife-sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives," in *Biblical and Other Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 15-28.

not take into account the specifics of that peculiar practice,[9] and is contrary to the explanation given in the biblical text itself. Reading the Sumerogram DUMU ("son") in the Mari texts in terms of the West Semitic root for son and so finding Benjamites at Mari[10]—besides being a case of circular interpretation, because first our knowledge of the biblical tribe is read into the Mari texts and then a parallel to the Bible is found in the Mari texts—goes against the writing conventions in those texts.[11]

The thing to note in these and many other cases, where a suggested confirming parallel of the biblical text has been criticized, is the fact that when the supposed parallel is read more carefully within its own context, the supposed parallel becomes less convincing. Put another way, the differences between the environment of the biblical text and the cultural context of the supposed parallel are so great as to make it clear that an apparent parallel is not a real one. Thus, one calls into question the cultural uniformity which was a hidden premise of the whole argument. Of course, this is not to say that there are no cases of widespread practices. Marriage to a maid, when the wife cannot bear children, is one such widespread practice.[12] However, geographically widespread practices are often chronologically widespread and thus such surer cases of parallel are not useful in attempting to prove the antiquity and hence reliability of the biblical text.

II. The Special Case of Covenant / Treaty

Coming out of the same period and with similar presuppositions was George Mendenhall's argument that similarities between Ancient Near Eastern treaty texts and certain biblical covenants placed those covenants in the second millennium B.C. and thus lent weight to the historical accuracy of the biblical text.[13] Mendenhall's argument was based upon the contrast between the then known second millennium treaties, with their appeals to history as a motivation for the vassal's obedience, and first millennium texts, which did not appeal to history and in which the curse element was much more developed.

For a general distinction between first and second millennium treaty forms to be valid, one has to assume that, in at least this respect, practice was uniform throughout the Ancient Near East in each millennium. Since treaties of some sort are attested well before any possible dating of Moses, it is natural to assume that the direction of movement was from the background to the biblical text. Whomever one sees as the primary author of the texts containing early covenants—whether God or Moses or a post-exilic writer—that author has made

---

[9] J Mervin Breneman, "Nuzi Marriage Tablets" (Ph D diss , Brandeis University, 1971)

[10] Bright, *A History of Israel*, 70

[11] Hayim Tadmor, "Historical Implications of the Correct Rendering of Akkadian *dâku*," *JNES* 17 (1958) 130 n For a review of the evidence and a cautious rejection of the West Semitic reading see John T Luke, "Pastoralism and Politics in the Mari Period" (Ph D diss , University of Michigan, 1965), 52-59

[12] Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 68-71

[13] "Covenant," *IDB* 1 714-23, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh Presbyterian Board of Colportage of Western Pennsylvania, 1955)

use of an existing practice to convey a truth about the relationship between God and Israel. Those who took up Mendenhall's thesis may have had varying conceptions of the way in which treaty/covenant moved from being a literary form in surrounding cultures to incorporation into the biblical text. Thus Meredith Kline and Ken Kitchen took over Mendenhall's thesis with apologetic purposes but they may not have had the same understanding of the relationship of background and biblical text.[14] It is hard to be definite because in this period, in which there was confidence that the background was authenticating the text, the emphasis was on the authentication and not upon the interrelationship of background and biblical text.[15] Clearly one can convey this reconstruction of events in a form that would give more initiative to the author: the author has made use of existing and known practice to convey his point. Or one can make the author more passive: the background has shaped the thought and expression forms of the author. Whichever way it is expressed, the background is first and the text is in some sense derivative of and reflective of that background. Just as with the adoption of the defense of the patriarchal narratives by conservatives, the employment of the logic of Mendenhall's position by Kline and Kitchen involved similar assumptions about uniform culture and the way in which background and biblical text interrelate.

While the fall of the theses of Albright and Gordon is well known, not so much attention has been paid to the parallel collapse of Mendenhall's thesis, and with it the apologetic for the authenticity of Deuteronomy developed by Kline and Kitchen.[16] Since Mendenhall's thesis depended on appeal to history in second millennium treaties but not in first millennium ones, it was vulnerable to discoveries that would upset that pattern. Such texts have appeared: a first millennium treaty between the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and the Arabian tribe of Qedar which appeals to history[17] and second millennium treaties which do not use history.[18] When one looks at the pattern of treaties, augmented by discoveries since the publications of Mendenhall and Kline, it becomes clear that the pattern

[14] Kline, *The Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1963), revised as *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1975), Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London Tyndale, 1966)

[15] However Kitchen (*Ancient Orient*, 102) is specific "There can be little doubt that the early Hebrews thus used a set form that was common all over the Ancient Near East and used it in a unique way"

[16] That a particular argument for the historicity of Deuteronomy has been undermined does not mean that the historicity of Deuteronomy has been undermined As with the question of the patriarchal narratives, the assumption that overthrow of a previous apologetic proves that the reverse of that apologetic is true, is just bad and tendentious logic

[17] Karlheinz Deller and Simo Parpola, "Ein Vertrag Assurbanipals mit dem arabischen Stamm Qedar," *Or* 37 (1968) 464-66, A F Campbell, "An Historical Prologue in a Seventh-Century Treaty," *Bib* 50 (1969) 534-35

[18] J Eidem, "An Old Assyrian Treaty from Tell Leilan," in *Marchands, diplomates et empereurs Études sur la civilisation mesopotamienne offertes a Paul Garelli* (ed Dominique Charpin and Francis Joannes, Paris Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1991), 185-207, Dominique Charpin, "Un traité entre Zimri-Lim de Mari et Ibâl-pî-El II d'Eshnunna," in ibid , 139-66

those authors discerned was skewed by the fact that the then known second millennium treaties were predominately Hittite and the then known first millennium treaties were predominately Assyrian. What was seen as a difference between millennia looks much more like a difference between cultures.

I have attempted to bring the evidence on treaties and covenants into a new synthesis.[19] The central problem I set out to solve was why this one particular form seemed to appear in so many different cultures, now that the simple assumption of uniform culture of treaties across the Ancient Near East had been shown to be unsustainable. The problem is heightened by the fact that, once uniform culture becomes doubtful as a premise, individual parts of the older theory fall away. Crucial for Mendenhall's understanding of the role of treaty/covenant in Israel was the premise that the form under which Egypt ruled its vassals in south Syria/Palestine would be the same that the Hittites used in Syria and Anatolia and thus the similarity of biblical covenants and Hittite treaties is easily explained.[20] Israel adopted the covenant form from its previous use by Egyptians in Canaan. However, I can find no evidence that Egypt entered into treaties with its vassals of a form similar to Hittite treaties or any other form.[21] Take away that part of the explanation of the similarity between history-using Hittite treaties and history-using biblical covenants, and the parallels between Hittite and biblical forms becomes even harder to explain.[22] One cannot argue that it was a case of acceptance and employment of the commonly "known" and accepted form, whether one means by that known throughout the Ancient Near East or known in south Syria/Palestine. Postulates of some sort of contact between the Hittites and Israel of the Pentateuchal period are postulates with no supporting evidence.[23] Even if there was some

[19] Noel K Weeks, *Admonition and Curse The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter Cultural Relationships* (JSOTSup 407, London T&T Clark International, 2004)

[20] George E Mendenhall develops the consequence of this premise much more clearly in his *The Tenth Generation The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) This premise is in turn the basis of his revolt model of the conquest

[21] Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, 103-12 On the relationships within the Egyptian Empire see Mario Liverani, *Three Amarna Essays (MANE* 1/5, Malibu, Calif Undena, 1979), especially p 5 Treaties between Egypt and the other great powers, the so-called parity treaties, are a different question They are well documented and the contrast of the clear evidence for parity treaties, as compared with the lack of evidence for suzerain–vassal treaties, strengthens doubts about Egyptian use of treaties within its empire

[22] One of the consequences of the heightened difficulty of explaining the historical basis of the connection of covenant and treaty has been the attempt to deny any connection of covenant and treaty Lothar Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn Neukirchener Verlag, 1969) This denial is tied to an attempt to loosen the connection between the biblical text and the Near Eastern historical background attested by the text itself That is then a crucial step in the attempt to move the writing of the biblical text into the Hellenistic period and to make it dependent on Greek historiography

[23] The Hittites involved in the discussion about treaty forms were a people of central Anatolia (in today's terms Turkey) who periodically expanded their control into Syria We do not know if there was a connection between the Hittites as a pre-conquest people of Palestine and the Hittites of central Anatolia It might be an accidental similarity of name or it might be a real historical connection

historical connection unknown to us, we cannot establish that a treaty form, in which history played a prominent part, would have been generally known in Palestine.[24]

These difficulties are part of the wider problem of the treaty form, which seems sufficiently specific to have a common origin and yet manifests itself in sufficiently different forms as to make very implausible a simple history of origin and development. Part of the difficulty may be related to treating the treaty form as a thing in itself that was simply "borrowed" from culture to culture. Both Hittite culture and the Bible do more than appeal to history as part of treaty/covenant: appeal to history is pervasive in the texts and concomitant with that is a willingness to report negative aspects of the national experience. Internal as well as external relationships are structured in terms of relationships protected by oaths to God/gods. In Mesopotamian texts, very broadly speaking, there is less appeal to history as providing lessons for conduct. While we know that there were Sumerian and Babylonian treaties, our best evidence is Assyrian. Assyrian imperialism commonly resorted to force and the threat of force. Hence, Assyrian treaties stress the curse and their historical inscriptions emphasize the terrifying military and vindictive power of the kingdom. Only with the empire tottering do we find a treaty which appeals to history and historical accounts which tell of the "good" that Assyria does for its conquered territories. Unlike Hittite and biblical texts, Assyria had a reluctance to report the errors of the past—except, of course, when one has just overthrown another Assyrian ruler in an internal coup. In Egypt, where evidence of the use of vassal treaties is very weak, and probably non-existent, the might of pharaoh is the thrust of historical texts, and the errors, even of overthrown rulers, are very rarely mentioned.

Taking the broad picture, I suspect that there is a correlation between politico-social form and treaty form. The Hittite kingdom, even in its imperial phase, did not completely centralize power. The kingdom relied upon the cooperation of internal elements that had some capacity to act independently. Hence the lessons of history were repeatedly invoked to persuade people of the importance of united and cooperative action. That flowed over into the use of history in treaties to incline vassals to loyalty. Both internally and externally the Assyrian kingdom relied on force, and the power of the divine guarantors of a treaty is emphasized in the curses. Egypt with its divine king is a further step along the path of the centralization of power and has even less of a place for persuasion in its political order. One can place on the same sliding scale the responsibilities taken by treaty suzerains: obviously compared to the promises of God, the Hittite king guarantees little to his vassals, and yet it is more than an

---

[24] The vassal states of Egypt, attested in the Amarna Letters, do seem to have known some form of treaties with each other (see Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, 103-9), but not with Egypt There is no evidence as to whether these treaties made use of arguments from history Further complicating the discussion is the fact that there is no clarity on the relationship of these states to the Canaanites of the Conquest period Whether we see them as the states that preceded the Israelite Conquest or the remnants of post-Conquest Canaanites depends on where one dates the Conquest, which is then bound up with difficult questions of the relationship of biblical and Egyptian chronology

Assyrian does. Perhaps even to enter into the degree of reciprocity implied in a vassal treaty was below the dignity of a divine pharaoh.[25]

If this reconstruction is correct then I suggest that the whole area had inherited the notion of relationships bound by oaths before God/gods.[26] Each developed that in accord with the socio-political structure of the country. Thus, the similarity of the use of history in biblical and Hittite covenants/treaties is a case of parallel developments upon a common base. When the Assyrian empire could no longer threaten, it also turned to appealing to history.

III. *What Do Similarities Prove?*

I pointed out earlier that the weakness of the defense of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives lay in the fact that what looked like similarities were not real similarities when the relevant practices were viewed in the context of their own culture. Thus, the similarities were in appearance only and in that sense accidental. The situation with covenants/treaties is not exactly the same because there was a real, but distant, common base. However, there is a similarity in the course of the scholarly debate in that conclusions that could not be sustained were drawn about the history and the historicity of the biblical text.

One would expect that the realization of the misuse of arguments from the perceived similarities between the Bible and its background would lead to a reaction. Scholars would be very wary about arguing from similarity and be concerned to prove that the similarity was significant. I do not observe that to be happening. What I observe are equally spurious arguments, with the premise of uniform culture retained but other presuppositions brought into play.

IV. *Background as Undermining the Text: The Cultural Captivity of the Author*

We have seen that in the original "Albright synthesis" similarities were used to authenticate the text. Along with this went an attempt to emphasize the distinctiveness of biblical culture over against the surrounding cultures. Though, to my knowledge, not explicitly formulated because the logic seemed so obvious, the logic might run something like the following. External evidence has validated the accuracy of the text. That same text says that Israel was religiously and culturally distinct. We accept that because the text is reliable.

---

[25] This is the summary of the thrust of my argument in *Admonition and Curse*. There are other treaties from other states that seem to have different traditions again, but for them the evidence is insufficient to grasp the broad outlines of their approach and its correlation with wider aspects of the national culture.

[26] The biblical account of early human history and the role of covenants in that early history gives a plausible reason why that idea should be common to the area. There remain significant questions to be answered. To my knowledge, the concept of relationships guaranteed by an oath before God/gods, and documented in a treaty is not found outside the Near Eastern and Classical worlds. Why the lack? Outside the Bible no clear examples exist of relationships between man and divinity/ies, expressed in covenant terms, in spite of desperate scholarly attempts to find them. I suspect the lack is connected to the nature of polytheism: politically a pagan society can conceptualize absolute and exclusive loyalty; religiously it cannot.

Yet one may argue a very different case. Thus James Barr argues that an essential feature of the biblical text, the covenant structure, is shown by the similarities to be derived from the Hittites.[27] Hence, the distinctiveness of Israel is undermined by the sort of evidence that others once used to validate the text.

There is a definite shift from the original form of the Albright synthesis in this reasoning. In the defense of the patriarchal narratives the parallels from external evidence to the customs were attested by the narrative. The argument from covenant/treaties was finding a parallel, not just to what the text talked about, but to the text itself. Hence, arguments that external parallels prove that the text is historical and/or the Bible correctly places the text in the right time period can be turned into arguments that the biblical text is not distinctive but is derived by borrowing and imitation from another culture. Curiously we are back to the logical structure of Pan-Babylonian arguments: the Bible is derivative and imitative. Certainly the explicit Anti-Semitism is not there, but the result is as destructive of the value of the biblical text. I suggest that the reason we can go back to the logical structure of Pan-Babylonianism is because the fundamental premise of cultural uniformity across the Ancient Near East is being retained.

V. *Add Historical Determinism*

It is one thing to argue on empirical grounds that a portion of the biblical text is derived from another culture. As happened in the case of the defense of the patriarchal narratives and the connection of biblical covenants and Hittite treaties, the connections, on closer inspection, may not be so clear or may be subject to alternate explanation. An apparently stronger argument is based on historical determinism: the biblical authors must conform to the approaches found in other texts of the time because they are all trapped in the same historical and cultural period. Notice that connected again with this argument is the premise of cultural uniformity in a particular time period. Given that premise, then one does not have to try so hard to prove empirically that a biblical text and another text are significantly similar. The premise says that they must be significantly similar because they both belong to the ancient world. Thus one finds that many of the arguments about the conformity of the Bible to the surrounding cultures have this as an often not-so-hidden premise.

> For if there is to be divine communication to men who dwell in history, it will inevitably be historically conditioned. As we have seen, if it is to be intelligible to those to whom it is made, it will have to be in terms of their institutions, assumptions and myths, which means that it will be in culturally conditioned terms. There can be no possibility of a revelation which transcends culturally conditioned terms altogether and is given in terms which are not peculiar to any one culture but apply equally to all cultures.[28]

---

[27] James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), 83.

[28] Dennis Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Study of the Bible in an Age of Rapid Cultural Change* (London. Macmillan, 1976), 133. For his application of the same principle to Jesus see p. 190.

James Barr recognizes a consequence of this cultural determinism, and consequent relativism. If the conceptual world of a given society is so parochial, how can it be possible for one culture to understand another? Specifically it must imply that the Bible is incomprehensible in the modern world.[29] Barr's response is equivocal. At some points he seems to accept the premises of relativism.[30] Though his commitment to a plurality of acceptable viewpoints makes him indifferent to whether the relativists are right or not, he raises some objections.[31] Cultures are not as homogeneous as relativism implies. Among the diverse elements within a culture there may be some that can resonate with the concerns of another period. In so far as memory of the past is a cultural artefact, it creates a possibility of commonness and hence communication between a past and a later culture.[32] Thus Barr takes issue with the communication blockage that relativism implies. Indeed, if he did not, he could not claim to be a scholar interpreting the Bible. What he does not take issue with is the fundamental premise of human captivity to a particular culture.

A logical consequence of determinism is the impossibility of newness and hence, change. If everything I conceptualize, think, say, and do is determined by what impinges upon me, then all I can produce is a form of what has already impinged upon me. However, being a general truth, that applies to our age as much as any former age. Therein lies a problem for determinists. Being very much a modernist, Nineham illustrates this dilemma very clearly. He wants to set the modern era with its freedom, enlightenment, and progress over against the ancient. He has his saints, such as Galileo, who broke the shackles.[33]

How is this possible if all are determined by their environment? It is true that some will portray the modern world as different to the ancient in its ability to achieve newness, but that merely pushes the problem back to one of origins: how did this modern world with the ability to produce the new arise out of a world which could produce nothing new?

I think there is a better way to address the question. People do speak in terms of the questions and issues that their culture and times raise, but what they say is not necessarily determined by those cultures and times. Can I prove this point of view? If one will accept empirical evidence, then historical change is the evidence: newness is incompatible with determinism. Paradoxically, the contrast of ancient and modern that is so much part of the relativist's argument tells against him. The modern is inexplicable on his own premises. Of course I do not say that everybody who responds to the issues raised by his period says something new. Repetition of the cliches dominates all forms of discourse. All I am arguing for is the possibility of newness.

[29] Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, 39 Nineham comes close to wrestling with this consequence when he argues that the attraction of the Bible to various cultures derives from its reliance upon primordial myths and images common to many cultures (*The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 194)

[30] Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, 85, 136

[31] Ibid , 46

[32] I will return to this point below because it explains a crucial implication for the doctrine of the church that flows from these trends in Biblical Studies

[33] Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 30, 43, 96, 218

Evangelical and Reformed ethics have historically rejected determinisms because one consequence of any determinism is lack of culpability. I cannot be held responsible for external factors over which I had no control. The biblical text places the onus upon man (Jas 1:13-15).

Deism is implicit in the conception of determinism held by Nineham, and many others. God cannot intervene in any way that would lead to a message that escapes the confines of that particular time. Passages that state otherwise, such as 1 Pet 1:10-20, must be ignored. It is not surprising if a view incorporating determinism and deism finds much of the Scriptures to be problematic.

VI. *The Resulting Situation*

I have stated the generally accepted point that the parallels seen to authenticate the patriarchal narratives were accidental and the acceptance of them did not take into account the specific situation of the texts involved. I have argued the case that what looked like very specific parallels in the case of covenants/ treaties can be best explained as a convergence created by separate development of a common background. I cannot claim this has been generally accepted, but I do claim that it makes better sense of the complex evidence than other models. In each case the claimed parallels, and hence the elucidating background, were not what they seemed. I doubt that anybody will, in the abstract, question that accidental parallels can occur and seeming parallels and thus background could arise from many different circumstances and mechanisms. That should imply that one needs to be very careful to understand the whole situation of the specific data from one culture that is being compared to specific data from another culture. My observation is that this kind of careful consideration is generally lacking in the biblical field. I will give specific examples below, but if the unstated assumptions that I have claimed are at work, then I think this surprising lack is to be anticipated.

If one implicitly retains the premise of a common culture in the Ancient Near East, then it is to be expected that the same features will appear in biblical texts as in outside texts. It would falsify the basic premise of determinism if the authors of biblical texts were able to produce something radically different to their surroundings. Anything new in the biblical text, if coupled with an idea of divine inspiration, in any form that implied the activity of God in this world, would threaten deism. The simple chronological fact that the biblical texts are later than the origins of the great pagan civilizations implies that the biblical authors received stimulus from those societies. The problem of where those other societies obtained their strikingly original and distinctive ideas can be passed over as lost in the mists of time. On any theory of the dating of the particular writings of the OT, they fall within the era for which historical documentation exists.

VII. *Creation Ideas and Texts as Examples*

It is not my intention to solve the problem of the parallels between biblical texts with some connection to creation and outside texts.[34] I would merely point out that, despite the huge unsolved problems of the relationship of biblical creation motifs to other texts, the idea that the similarity is not accidental is taken for granted and the dependence of the biblical writers on outside texts is commonly asserted. It is interesting that this stretches across the theological spectrum and includes conservative scholars, though conservative scholars will sometimes opine that the biblical writers were taking the outside material and changing it in various ways with polemic intent.

As I said, it is not my intention to solve the problems but I will at least raise some alternate possibilities to show that I am not making wild assertions. That the Bible and other texts speak of sea creatures or water phenomenon, for example Leviathan, using related words, might prove no more than the fact that Hebrew and Ugaritic are both Semitic languages. That the same words—allowing for linguistic differences—are used for these creatures, might prove nothing more than that both partook of a common literary culture. If (perish the thought) in some future distant millennium, all that remained of writing on the OT was this article and a earlier work from a different point of view, commonness of technical vocabulary could easily prove the derivation of this article from the other. I have chosen these cases because they are the most specific connections between the Bible and outside mythical literature. If alternate explanations for these very specific cases need to be evaluated, how much more when the connections are much more elusive? Please note that I am not positively asserting these possibilities. I am merely saying that they have to be investigated.

Similarly allow me to mention briefly the prior issues that need to be addressed to make sure presuppositions are not determining results. A corollary of the common culture notion would seem to be that if any one culture has creation accounts, the others could be expected to have them. Is the corollary true? I know of nothing that looks like a creation account in Hittite.[35] Closer to the issue, did Ugarit have creation accounts? The attempts to prove that, simply by changing what we understand by creation, we can classify the Ugaritic Baal stories as creation myths, illustrates the problem but not a convincing solution.[36]

The background to the biblical creation stories has been "found"; the problem is whether it has been found in Mesopotamia,[37] Ugarit,[38] Egypt,[39] or a

---

[34] There may be an extra presupposition with respect to creation that I have not mentioned, namely that paganism precedes monotheism and hence any monotheist creation account must derive from a polytheist forebear

[35] Of course in this case and that of Ugarit, it can be asserted that they are as yet undiscovered Strictly, all we can say is that the assertion of a common culture of interest in creation is as yet unproven

[36] Richard J Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," *Or* 53 (1984) 183-201, Loren R Fisher, "Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament," *VT* 15 (1965) 313-24, J H Grønæk, "Baal's Battle with Yam—A Canaanite Creation Fight," *JSOT* 33 (1985) 27-44

[37] Hermann Gunkel, *Schopfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung uber Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Gottingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895), R Luyster, "Wind and Water

complex mixture.[40] Each has it supporters and one wonders if the evidence for the one is more convincing than for the other. Yet there are clearly recognizable differences between the origins accounts of the different cultures. Even more disconcerting are the differences between different accounts within the one culture. For example, advocates of Egyptian origin sometimes create the parallels by taking elements out of different Egyptian accounts. Are we to imagine the biblical author having access to this whole range of materials and picking a bit out of this and a bit out of that myth? That of course assumes that the biblical author read Egyptian.[41] To obviate that difficulty we might imagine a synthesis of all of these versions in some oral tradition that might have come into the possession of a bilingual Egyptian, but do we know if ancient pagan societies practiced such ecumenism of myths? Mesopotamia as a postulated source presents similar difficulties.

In other words I am suggesting that there are large problems in postulating a way in which the ideas passed from their pagan form to their biblical form. Surely the fact that those postulating the transmission do not deal with the problem of manner of transmission shows that presuppositions show them that it must have happened, so why worry about the problem of how it happened? Yet if derivation from an outside source is so certain, why is not the source clearer?[42]

Cosmogonic Symbolism in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 93 (1981) 1-10, Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids Baker, 2005), 25-27, Kenton L Sparks, *God's Words in Human Words An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids Baker, 2008), 97-99

[38] John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1985), Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," 183-201, Flemming Hvidberg, "The Canaanite Background of Gen I-III," *VT* 10 (1960) 285-94

[39] John D Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1997), 53-73 (N B Currid is primarily concerned to show that the real relation of the biblical material is to Egypt, not Mesopotamia, the reasons for the relationship of the biblical material to Egypt is not his main interest), J A Atwell, "An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1," *JTS* 51 (2000) 441-77, James K Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 & 2 and Egyptian Cosmology," *JANES* 15 (1983) 39-49

[40] Otto Kaiser, *Die mythische Bedeutung des Meeres in Ägypten, Ugarit und Israel* (2d ed, Berlin Alfred Topelmann, 1962), Wilfred G Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *JTS* 16 (1965) 285-300

[41] Note the argument that only a few percent of Egyptians themselves could read (John Baines and C J Eyre, "Four Notes on Literacy," *Göttinger Miszellen* 61 [1983] 65-96)

[42] It is interesting to compare the creation case with the Flood one The relationship between biblical and Mesopotamian accounts of the Flood is unmistakable (Of course what that proves is another question It is presupposition, not evidence, that tells us that all real parallels mean that the Bible borrows) Why is the case with creation accounts not similar? And why does only Mesopotamia, in the Ancient Near East, have clearly comparable flood stories? It has been argued that literary texts within the Akkadian literary tradition were heavily amended, so the fact that biblical texts differ from their purported sources is not significant (Jeffrey H Tigay, "On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing," in *The Tablet and the Scroll Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W Hallo* [ed Mark E Cohen, Daniel C Snell, and David B Weisberg, Bethesda, Md CDL Press, 1993], 250-55) Yet, in the examples Tigay cites, there is no question which text is being emended That is not the same as the debate over whether the preponderance of claimed allusions proves Gen 1 came from the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* or the Ugaritic Baal myths or the Egyptian *Memphite Theology*

VIII. *Examples from Wider Afield*

My concern has been primarily with the field of OT studies but I suspect that what I am discussing has wider implications. It remains for specialists in other areas to assess whether that is so. Here I want to raise the possibility by giving some specific examples.

A number of writers have been concerned about the way in which the NT writers interpreted the OT. It is not infrequent to see that exegesis criticized as ignoring the context of the OT passage and as an employment of the standard Jewish hermeneutic of the time. In my *Sufficiency of Scripture*[43] I criticized a version of this position, specifically as presented in Richard Longenecker's *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*.[44] I objected to the treatment of Judaism over an extensive period and involving various schools as being unitary with respect to its use of Scripture. I pointed out that Jacob Neusner has argued that first century A.D. rabbis of the Pharisaic School used Scripture in a very different way to their descendents, Rabbinic Judaism.[45] As compared with the later detailed appeal to the text of the OT introduced by Akiba to establish opinions, the Pharisees appealed to tradition, as the NT tells us.

If we have to go outside the period of the NT to find rabbinic exegesis comparable to the NT use of Scripture, then clearly the argument for NT adoption of prevailing exegetical methods collapses. Further, it raises a crucial question about the postulate of a uniform Jewish approach to the Bible in the apostolic age.

If the rabbinic material is removed from consideration, then the argument has to depend on other forms of Jewish literature, especially the writings of the Qumran community. In that case, the particular approach to biblical interpretation that has attracted scholarly attention is the so-called *pesher* method, where the words of the text are treated as a code to be interpreted so that a particular word in the text will have an explicit correspondence with a contemporary figure.[46] It has been pointed out that this involves treating the OT text as Daniel treated the symbols or words in his visions.[47] Certainly there are examples in the NT of seeing OT figures or situations as models or types of the equivalent NT figures or situations. However, this is not the cracking of a secret code like Qumran *pesher* interpretation.

---

[43] Noel K Weeks, *Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh Banner of Truth, 1988), 183-93

[44] Richard N Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1975) There is no change to the basic thesis in the second edition (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1999) In what follows I will give references to the second edition, as representing, presumably, the most considered form of the thesis

[45] Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (3 vols , Leiden E J Brill, 1971) The bibliography to Longenecker's second addition lists a number of works by Neusner, but not this one

[46] Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 24-30

[47] Frederick F Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (The Hague Van Keulen, 1959), 7-17

The dilemma of trying to relate NT interpretive methods to Qumran *pesher* interpretation is illustrated by Longenecker's position that, when a NT text sees fulfillment of a prophecy or a precedent in the new age, this is *pesher* interpretation in spite of the fact that there is no evidence of seeing the former text as a code to be cracked.[48] There are clear cases in the OT of events being seen as fulfillment of earlier prophecy (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:38). Why cannot we see the NT belief in fulfillment as something learned from the OT? I think the postulated relationship to Qumran *pesher* interpretation is far fetched because the reading of the text as a code is absent in the NT, but let us suppose that it was a real relationship. If, as suggested, Qumran derived it from reading Daniel, did nobody but the Qumran community read Daniel?

Note again the exclusion of alternate explanations and the possibility that some of the postulated similarities could have been the result of independent communities[49] working with the same OT text. Once again I suggest that a presupposition about the entrapment of people within their immediate culture is determining what options may or may not be considered.

Previously I criticized the creation of a model of Jewish interpretation that is constructed by taking texts from centuries apart and constructing out of them a supposed uniform Jewish approach. In some works this reconstructed Jewish way of interpreting the Bible, or perhaps we should say contextualizing the OT revelation to new historical situations, reaches into the Intertestamental Period and even back to OT books such as Chronicles.[50] Thus the "historical background" to understanding the exegetical methods of the NT becomes centuries long. The wider one casts the net the greater the plausibility that features will be discovered that have resemblances to the NT. Thus, there is something analogous to proving the derived nature of biblical creation accounts by taking items here and there out of the myths of the many surrounding cultures.

Yet, paradoxically, such a wide net may not be allowed to the NT authors themselves. Enns sees a difficulty in Matt 2:15's quotation of "Out of Egypt I

[48] E g, Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis,* 54-58, 113-16

[49] One consequence of the hypothesis that the biblical text is wholly, and only, explicable in terms of its background, is to increase the pressure to find that background Just as with the previous attempt to validate the accuracy of the text through background texts, so here there is the danger that the closeness of the relationship of the external text to the biblical text may be exaggerated Has that happened with the Qumran texts? Why is it that the gospels, descriptive of events in Palestine, show no evidence that Jesus was encountering people with the distinct sectarian beliefs of the Qumran community? Certainly there is evidence in other books such as Jude that there was contact, but the gospels and Paul's letters lack clear evidence of contact Hence, Longenecker's confidence that so crucial a NT theme as fulfillment comes from using the approach to Bible reading of the Qumran community, sits poorly with the very peripheral role of that community in the NT (I thank Dr David Jackson for sharpening my thinking about Qumran and the NT)

[50] Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation,* 116-32 Note that by taking the "Second Temple Period" as the period under consideration, there is a subtle shift in the periodization of history Rather than an OT age and a NT age separated by a period distinguished by lack of revelation, we now have an age that spans and includes the gap While history may be bundled in different ways, there are consequences in adopting a new bundling In this case note the way that the old rule of interpreting Scripture by Scripture is superseded by an approach in which literature from the period of non-revelation may become crucial for the interpretation of Scripture

called my son" (Hos 11:1).[51] Hosea in context was not thinking of the coming of the Messiah. Yet surely it is possible that Matthew had in mind, not the narrow context of that reference in Hosea, but the centuries-long exploring of the theme of the Exodus, of which this text was a convenient example. I think there are many cases where the NT is citing a particular case of a persistent and pervasive theme. If it is claimed this is quoting out of context, then the crucial issue is which is the context: the particular situation of the author who made this particular reference to the theme or the larger context of the many authors who worked with that theme? On the one hand the necessity of finding a determining Jewish background for the NT text means that the net will be cast over a chronologically large area. On the other hand the conviction that authors are determined by their immediate circumstances does not promote understanding of those intellectual concepts and ideas that are created by minds working and re-working data over centuries.

Bruce Winter has written a work relating NT instructions concerning the dress and deportment of women to similar concerns in the surrounding world, attested with imperial authorities and Stoic or Neo-Pythagorian philosophical sources.[52] In his view it is these outside influences that explain the NT position, even to the point of suggesting that the problematic "angels" of 1 Cor 11:10 are imperial inspectors checking on the dress of women in the church.[53] He sees the concerns of the extra-biblical parties as being a reaction to the advent of the "New Woman," that is, women acting in ways considered as outside reasonable standards of propriety. The biblical writers are then influenced or swayed by those concerns, perhaps enforced by action of imperial authorities.

I am not concerned to address the question of whether his analysis of the extra-biblical material is accurate.[54] My concern is to point out the logic that concludes from similarity to dependence by the biblical writers. Winter is quite clear in seeing the Pauline instructions as reflections of aspects of Roman law that sought to regulate behavior patterns.[55] Quite logically he sees that if the

---

[51] *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 132-33 See also Dan G McCartney and Peter Enns, "Matthew and Hosea A Response to John Sailhamer," *WTJ* 63 (2001) 97-105

[52] Bruce W Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows The Appearance of the New Woman and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 2003)

[53] Ibid, 88-91

[54] However, I must comment on what seems an obvious flaw in the argument Winter sees the material in 1 Cor 11 on head covering for women as directly dependent upon imperial pressure for modest female attire (ibid, 73-91) Yet the existence of statues and images of bare-headed women, even imperial women, is a fact of the period He postpones that information until he deals with hair styles for women, where once more the concerns of 1 Tim 2 8 are seen as responding to external influence In that context he rather lamely suggests that the images of bare-headed imperial women are an attempt by the imperial household to display the hair treatment that was appropriate for women (104) Surely a requirement for covered female heads makes hair styles irrelevant

[55] "However, it will be argued that in the Pauline communities there are reflections of aspects of Roman law which sought to regulate behaviour patterns It was for this reason that some of the instructions to the Pauline communities appear to have been framed, taking cognisance of those laws" (ibid, 3)

NT rules were shaped by and determined by their context, they are not authoritative for our different context.[56] Yet assuming the accuracy of his picture of the "New Woman," this situation could alternatively be analyzed as two independent reactions to the phenomenon of the "New Woman": from the side of Roman civil society and from the side of the biblical writers. It is not my contention that the latter is the case; merely that it is a logical possibility that should be explored. It has obvious implications for the authority of the biblical text in this and analogous cases.

My next example is from church history. David Bebbington's history of British Evangelicalism[57] gives a wealth of information. My concern is with the approach to historical causation. The timing and distribution of the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century is attributed to the fact that it was a form of Protestantism adapted to the Enlightenment.[58] Key doctrines of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, such as the personal return of Christ,[59] verbal inspiration of Scripture,[60] and the holiness movement[61] were a result of Romanticism. Evangelicalism thus emerges as very much a product of the influences of the times.

Yet surely it would be possible to find different causes of the same events. In an earlier work Bebbington defended the possibility of divine intervention in history, though acknowledging that it was very difficult to prove.[62] Even without resort to that elusive possibility for the modern historian, alternate explanations are clearly possible. Both Romanticism and Evangelicalism had issues with the Enlightenment on a number of points that could produce parallel reactions. The possibility of a direct influence from Scripture, with the form of error dictating the issue to be addressed, is not considered. On a more complex level we might postulate that the emphasis of the Enlightenment on simplicity and clarity of statement rather than philosophical obfuscation, reminded Evangelicals that there were parallel concerns in Scripture and so they sought by clear statement of the truth to fight fire with fire. I am not a church historian so I do not assert any of these possibilities as fact. All I contend is that they need to be considered as alternate possibilities. What is significant in this example is the jump from similarity to determining influence, just as in the biblical field.

IX. Reflections

James Barr perceptively commented that one of the consequences of cultural determinism was that it implied that the church in our day would be passive

[56] Ibid., xiii-xv.

[57] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

[58] Ibid., 53

[59] Ibid., 84-85.

[60] Ibid., 87-91.

[61] Ibid., 152.

[62] David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 171-74.

before cultural forces.[63] That follows from the general truth that men cannot escape from the determining influences of their environment. That position is often espoused by consistent relativists, who want to hold to relativism no matter what the corollaries. I doubt very much that many of the proponents of the views we have been considering, whatever their form of theology or philosophy, would happily embrace that consequence. The only way of escape that I can see is the form of Modernism that says that though the ancient world was trapped in conformity, we in the modern age are free-spirited individualists. A number of the more general works that I have mentioned do have an obvious tendency to contrast the modern world and the ancient.[64] I therefore suspect that the use of biblical background that I have been considering is often accompanied by an implicit but illogical Modernism. It is illogical because the relativist argument that is applied to the past should be applied to the present day also.

Alternatively there may be a different tendency operating. Does a lack of uniqueness of the biblical text in the ancient context correlate with a lack of distance of present Christian culture from the surrounding culture? In so far as it is a tendency that includes evangelicals, might it be another manifestation of reaction to separationist Fundamentalism? It seems logical that the isolation of the biblical text, and the isolation of the modern community which derives from it, would be correlated. This correlation might well be unconscious.

Another frequent accompaniment is the appeal to the contemporary church as the place where the problem caused by Scripture being culture bound has to be resolved.[65] Once more this appeal to the church stretches across the theological spectrum. I suspect that it is, in part, a logical consequence. If the Bible speaks in the time-bound concepts and ideas of its time, which are not applicable to our time, and if the Bible is to play any role on the contemporary scene, then there must be a complex process of translation and the church is the place where that will happen. Nobody is sure how to do it, but it is what must happen. This is a confirmation of the logic of the Reformation: undermine the effective authority of Scripture and the center of authority and certainty must shift to the church.

However, that may not be clear to the advocates of this point of view because there has been an effective change in the periodization of history. A traditional treatment of post-biblical history within the Protestant church tends to see the Reformation as a crucial event. It divides history into before and after. What we see, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, is a shift to making the Enlightenment and the rise of criticism the crucial event of post-biblical history. Once the Reformation loses its significant position, its theology and its

---

[63] Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, 46-47.

[64] And notice also that the works which do so range across the theological spectrum. E.g., Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible;* Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation;* Sparks, *God's Words in Human Words.*

[65] Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible,* 269-71; Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World,* 38; Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation,* 170-71; Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words,* 358-72.

approach to the Bible logically follow. The Reformation then lies in the pre-Modern age from which we are distanced by being children of the Modern age. What comes from before the Enlightenment, including both Scriptures and the Reformed confessions, are products of their age and cannot speak to ours.

ATLA_{erials}