

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-CULTURALISM: PARADIGMATIC OR ENIGMATIC?

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“Paradigmatic or enigmatic” is simply scholarly jargon for whether or not there is a theological message in cross-culturalism as evidenced in the OT. The Archbishop of Canterbury is reported to have said recently that the only reason for the Church to send missionaries is to dialogue with world religions. From that standpoint the OT would be the last place to go to learn something theologically about cross-culturalism since Israel started with a command to exterminate her neighbors and eventually was almost exterminated by them. Yet, as a believing community, Israel in its various stages had to interact and communicate with diverse peoples and cultures. Scripture posits a supernatural origin to account for the uniqueness of Israel’s religion, but it also informs us that the nation was pressured and sometimes shaped by peoples who had mores—especially religious mores—that were contrary to Israel’s divinely-revealed oracles. Through the prophetic office the nation was continually warned about syncretism, which eventually brought about its demise.

But the OT also tells about a positive aspect of Israel’s relationship to surrounding cultures. A simple but often neglected truth about OT Israel is that it was a community with a worldwide vision. Mosaic legislation provided for the care and proselytizing of the resident alien within the gates. M. Dahood thinks certain of the Psalms reflect the words of converts from polytheism. Israel was constantly reminded that their calling as God’s chosen people was not an end in itself but a means of bringing all nations to praise the name of the Lord. Although this was most often put into an eschatological setting, proselytism was expected and regulated. Provision was made for the resident alien to celebrate the Lord’s Passover by converting, after which no distinction was to be made between the native-born and the alien living among them (Exod 12:48-49).

The Hebrews as Semites had their closest cultural connections with the Asian Near East, but they lived at a cultural crossroad often ruled and constantly influenced by non-Semitic peoples such as Egyptians, Hittites, Hurrians, Sea Peoples and eventually Persians. The Egyptian *Journey of Wenamun* to Phoenicia presents a view of cross-culturalism at the time of the disintegration of the New Kingdom (c. 1100 B.C.). The

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Asiatics were beginning to reject the authority of Egypt. The prince of Byblos asserts his freedom from Egypt's political control but is still heavily influenced by Egyptian culture. The prince states that craftsmanship and learning came from Egypt. In the coastal town of Dor, which belonged to the relatives of the Philistines called the Tjeker, Wenamun, an Egyptian official sent to buy lumber, is robbed. He weeps like a Hebrew psalmist and has to have a singer come and soothe him. The hieratic text contains both Semitic and non-Semitic names and words.¹ All of these people brought cultural diversity to Canaan, but they all adopted the Canaanite language as Abraham did when he journeyed from Ur of the Chaldeans.² Each culture left its own imprint, but Israel was to leave the greatest and most lasting legacy. This was not due to material greatness, for the Hebrews began as "hillbillies" unable to take the rich valley plains (Judg 1:18). In contrast to the already rich and ancient cultures of Egypt, Babylonia and Anatolia, Israel's material wealth was short-lived. What was to become its greatest and most lasting legacy was scoffed at—namely, a God people could not see. The taunt against the psalmist—"Where is your God?"—is to be taken quite literally (Psalms 9; 42). It was nothing less than radical among the cultures that surrounded Israel to have an invisible God.³

At the time of Israel's birth as a nation, Egypt was the dominant power politically and economically, especially on the southern half of the Canaanite littoral. But despite Egypt's hegemony in the mid-second millennium, Babylonian—not Egyptian or Canaanite—was the *lingua franca*, as the Tell el-Amarna tablets show. By the eighth century, Aramaic was already on its way to becoming the trade language as may be seen in the request of Hezekiah's emissaries to Sennacherib's field commander that he cease speaking in Hebrew because they understood Aramaic (2 Kgs 18:26; Isa 36:11)—an early example of psychological warfare. This is an indication of what a cultural mixing pot, even melting pot, the land was and would continue to be. Cross-culturalism, then, was a daily reality for the OT community of faith beginning in patriarchal times and continuing throughout their history.

The period prior to the patriarchs is cross-culturally illuminating. For example, Genesis 10 is not a genealogy but a table of nations. This is proven by its use of the *qal* stem instead of the *hiphil* of the verb *yld*.⁴ It gives a picture of the proximity of nations that is cross-culturally instructive. The tie between Egypt and Canaan as the sons of Ham is an example (v 6). The relationship was so long and sustained that ancient

¹ See ANET 25-29; for a statement about craftsmanship see 27b ii 20.

² Gen 31:47 witnesses to the language Abraham's family adopted. It was probably a dialect of Canaanite from which Hebrew developed as Israel became a nation in its own right.

³ See reference below to the Egyptian god who had hidden himself but who sees what cannot be seen.

⁴ Normally in Hebrew the *qal* stem of *yālad* is used for the mother's part in bearing a child while the causative (*hiphil*) is reserved for the father's role. In Genesis 10 the *qal* is used to indicate a metaphorical begetting while the *hiphil* in 11:10 ff. indicates a literal genealogy.

Egyptian is labeled a Hamito-Semitic language. Those who have studied in both areas will readily agree. On the other hand Gen 10:15 says that Canaan had this *yālad* relationship with the Semitic Sidonians and Amorites along with non-Semitic Hittites and Jebusites (Hurrians). The answer to this conundrum is that these non-Semites lived so long in Canaan that they were absorbed into the culture but not without helping to shape it.⁵

The table of nations also connects the Arameans and the Israelites through parallel lines of the sons of Shem. This brings up the intriguing question of what language Abraham spoke before he entered Canaan. Biblical hints point to Aramaic. In the litany of Deut 26:5 the people are to say, "My father was a wandering Aramean." Isaac married Rebekah, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor (Gen 23:20-24). One of the sons of Nahor is called Kesed, West Semitic for the word Chaldean. The Chaldeans were a roving Aramean tribe until they settled down around 1000 B.C. in the area south of Babylon, which they later conquered and ruled as neo-Babylonians.⁶ The reference to Ur of the Chaldeans is anachronistic unless the LXX is correct in translating it "the land of the Chaldeans" based on a rare root attested in the OT but used more frequently in Phoenician.⁷ All of this makes the Aramaic that Laban spoke with Jacob in Gen 31:45-47 fit into a scenario in which Abraham's father moved from one Aramaic-speaking territory (the land of the Chaldeans) to another (Haran). Abraham, however, finally adopted the Canaanite language of his new home near Hebron but rejected its religion—a paradigm for the future. This new home was under strong Egyptian hegemony, as the patriarchal account attests. This paper will lay stress on the Egyptian connection.

From the wealth of documentary material we can give only a few samples in three areas that reveal the extent and mode of cross-culturalism in the OT. We will seek to show how Israel reacted and what lessons there might be for the Church.

I. LITERATURE

It has long been recognized that the OT shares the literary forms and genres of the world of which it was a part. One may choose not to label

⁵ Critical scholars in the nineteenth century had problems with the array of diverse peoples the Bible says inhabited the land. Many of them were considered fanciful, including the Hittites—who have proved to have had one of the dominant cultures of the ancient Near East. They controlled the northern Aramean territories so long that centuries after the Hittite empire fell the Assyrians continued to call these Aramaic-speaking peoples Hittites, a fact that also explains the presence of the Hittites in Israel in the time of David and later.

⁶ See *CAH*, 3. 4.

⁷ One need not accept M. Dahood's "Elysian field" interpretation in certain psalms (cf. Ps 36:10; etc.) in order to appreciate the strength of his evidence that *ʿwr* sometimes means "land, field" in the OT as it does in Phoenician. Isa 24:15 is one of the most compelling passages with this meaning, although it is one Dahood does not even mention. He correctly sees the word in Isa 26:19; Ps 56:14; Job 33:30 (cf. AB 16, pp. 222-223). In Isa 24:15 *bē-ʿurim*, "in the lands," is

the Semitic antecedents as representing another culture. This is debatable since various Semitic peoples who shared roots had their own cultures and languages that were as different from each other as are the Romance languages and cultures. But it is still true that the most interesting examples of cross-culturalism in the OT may be found in the non-Semitic sources.

Wisdom literature provided the most abundant communion of ideas between the cultures of the ancient Near East. This genre was the Near East version of philosophy. It appears in two forms, traditional and anti-traditional, and it appears precisely in these two forms in the OT. Texts like *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* (ANET 412–414), *The Instruction of Amenemope* (421–424), and the various Akkadian and Sumerian proverbs and counsels of wisdom (425–427, 593–596), along with *The Words of Ahiqar* (427–428)—all compare favorably with the Biblical book of Proverbs and some wisdom Psalms. Anti-traditional wisdom of Egypt like *A Dispute over Suicide* (405–407), the Sumerian *Lamentation to a Man's God* (589–591), and the Babylonian documents *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom* (434–437), *A Dialogue about Human Misery* (438–440) and *A Pessimistic Dialogue between Master and Servant* (437–438) present the anti-traditional or anti-wisdom wisdom.

Ptahhotep, which purports to come from the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2450 B.C.), is instructing his son about actions and attitudes that make a good official. He strikes an important note in Egyptian culture that may explain why Moses was reluctant to speak before the pharaoh: “Good speech is more hidden than an emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones.” This is demonstrated in the lengthy *Protests of the Eloquent Peasant* (ANET 407–410). Elihu's pride in his “superior knowledge” may not be a claim to superior knowledge but to eloquence (Job 36:4). It is unlikely that Elihu would claim for himself the same perfection he attributed to God (37:16). H. L. Ginsberg suggested that the root usually translated “knowledge” (*dē'î*) in Job 32:6, 10 comes from a cognate root that means “speech.”⁸ This fits the cultural mores much better, and it also makes Elihu's prolixity more understandable since that was one measure of eloquence.

Another wisdom document, dating from the First Intermediate Period (twenty-second century B.C.), also lauds speech. Merikare says, “Be a craftsman in speech (so that) you may be strong, for the tongue is a sword and speech is more valorous than any fighting” (ANET 415a). This same document makes reference to “an invisible god,” the “Lord of the (creative) Hand.” It says that “the god, who knows (men's) characters, has hidden himself. There is none that can withstand the Lord of the Hand. He is the

parallel with *bē'iyê*, “in the coastlands of,” and should not be translated “in the east” as has been customary.

⁸ In line with Ginsberg's interpretation of Job 32:6, 10, *dē'ôt* in 36:4 is feminine plural (cf. masculine plural *dē'im* in 37:16) and parallels *millāy* “my words, speech.” The verse would read: “For truly my speech is not false, one pure of utterance is with you.”

one who attacks what eyes can see" (*ANET* 417b). Though one among the gods, this deity is different from all others in that he remains unseen but must be respected because though invisible he controls the visible. Only here, during a period of great cultural upheaval, does a view of such a deity fleetingly appear in Egyptian literature.

The words of the wise man Amenemope compare favorably with portions of certain wisdom Psalms:

The passionate man in the temple—
 He is like a tree that grows in the forest;
 In one moment it loses its branches,
 And it finds its end in . . . ;
 It is swept away from its place,
 And the flame is its burial.
 But the truly silent one, when he stands aside,
 He is like a tree that grows in a plot;
 It grows green, and the fruit thereof increases,
 It stands in the presence of its Lord;
 Its fruits are sweet, its shade is pleasant,
 And it finds its end in the garden (*Amenemope* IV vi 1–12).

Psalm 1 is built around this same tree motif (cf. Jer 17:5–8). The Egyptian equivalent of "the righteous man" is "the silent one," and that of "the evil man" is "the passionate man" or "hothead." In Egypt good and evil were defined in terms of a peculiarly Egyptian sense of cosmic order called *ma'at*.⁹

Among the many genres, narrative is another that provides a fruitful area for comparison. The Sinuhe story uses the same literary motif as the Joseph story, being especially instructive because it so clearly outlines cultural differences. As a second-millennium Egyptian document with a Middle Kingdom setting, it tends to corroborate the cultural relations between Egypt and its Asiatic neighbors presented in Genesis 37–50. It is the reverse of the Joseph account since Sinuhe leaves Egypt under suspicious circumstances and ends up a great man among the Asiatic bedu. After many years he yearns to return home. When a new ruler arises in Egypt he is received home, clad in fine linen and anointed with myrrh and prime oil. He is raised to the ranks of the courtiers and the royal children, who give a cry of adulation. Sinuhe is grateful he can give back the dirt to the desert, be shaved, have his hair combed and sleep in a bed.¹⁰ The cultural relationship between the two peoples (only Egyptians

⁹ See the comment below on the meaning of the Egyptian word *ma'at* (n. 11).

¹⁰ As with Sinuhe, in Gen 41:43 the king of Egypt saw to it that Joseph was dressed in fine linen, a gold chain was put around his neck and the people cried out to him a word of acclaim. The word *ʾabrek* is of uncertain origin. It will not yield to attempts to translate it "bow the knee" since it is the wrong stem and the wrong personal affix for that meaning. Many think it is an Egyptian word, and there is one used in the Sinuhe story that fits quite well. *ʾbrk* means literally in Egyptian "heart to you," which may mean "be heedful"—although J. Wilson translates it "no heart against thee" in *ANET* 20b 185. The context says that Sinuhe's heart was carried off, so the next line would read: "You indeed were not heedful." In Gen 41:43 *ʾabrek*

shaved; cf. Gen 41:14) is accurately summarized in Joseph's words to his brothers: "Then you will be allowed to settle in the land of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians" (Gen 46:34).

Arbitrarily we choose another motif from the book of Job. The fact that Job was not a member of the Israelite covenant community is a most amazing but often overlooked evidence of cross-culturalism in the OT. Job was not only outside the sphere of Israel's covenant bond; his views represent both the lowest and highest levels of faith in God. Yet the book became part of the Hebrew canon, and though it caused consternation it was never seriously challenged. The antecedents to the Job genre in both Akkadian and Egyptian literature state the theodicy issue but fail to deal with it creatively. They are shallow accounts compared with the theological profundity found in the book of Job.

A fine example of cross-culturalism emerges when we compare Job 31 and the "protestation of guiltlessness" found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead (*ANET* 34). In this series of mortuary texts the deceased seeks to secure eternal happiness through "negative confession," which was part of Egyptian social law. It was unique to Egyptian culture and an unlikely source for Biblical affinity. Yet a key genre finds its way into the book of Job where Job devotes forty verses in chap. 31 to his "negative confession" (i.e. protestation of innocence), which outlines numerous virtues that characterize the upright man. In the Egyptian documents the deceased's heart is weighed against *ma'at* ("truth").¹¹ He speaks before the Broad Hall of the Two Justices and sees the faces of the gods. He closes his protestation with the words "I shall not fall for dread of you."

Similarly, Job gives his protestation only after he feels assured that he will have an audience with God. He closes the document with his signature and a statement of bravado similar to that in the Book of the Dead. Job's speech is a veritable storehouse of cultural and religious concepts from that world. Some social notions are shared, but Job's relationship with God is emphatically monotheistic. He rejects the ubiquitous fertility cult (v 1)¹² and worship of the astral deities (v 26). Even in social matters Job goes beyond the usual statements of his times regarding his social responsibility and concern for the human rights of his servants (vv 16-23).

is without the negative and so would mean "take heed," a cry of adulation by the people of Egypt.

¹¹ Egypt had no single god on whose character was founded a standard or law that defined good or evil. The religion was extremely syncretistic. Though there were certain "virtues" against which the heart of the deceased was weighed, these were based on what the Egyptians called *ma'at*, symbolized by a feather. But this was also the name of the goddess who was both daughter and mother of the sun-god Re. *Ma'at* was a cosmic force tied to the religious, social and political order. It was very pragmatic and strongly protective of priestly rights. See J. Wilson, *The Culture of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965) 48, and index under *ma'at*.

¹² For an argument that favors taking *bētûlâ*, "maiden," in 31:1 as a reference to the fertility goddess who receives that epithet in the Ugaritic texts see my commentary on Job in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 4. 992-993.

II. MUSIC

The Hebrews were not unique in respect to their music. Nothing in the ancient Near East was secular in our sense of the term, but there were noncultic types of music and poetry that Israel shared with its neighbors: love songs (Song of Songs), victory songs (Exodus 15; Judges 5), various types of military songs (cf. the taunt song in Num 21:27-30).

Evidence of early Near East use of music in liturgy is both archeological and philological. Instrumental music and communal singing existed long before the Hebrews became a nation. Reliefs, figurines and murals depict the use of the flute and stringed instruments in the third millennium and even much earlier.¹³ The name of the female choir director at the Mesopotamian town of Mari was Urnanshe. Her gypsum statue dates to c. 2500 B.C. in the opinion of Leonard Woolley.¹⁴ Scholars have even attempted to reproduce second-millennium-B.C. written music notations from a Hurrian cult song on cuneiform tablets.¹⁵

The musical sophistication of David's day presented by the Chronicler (1 Chronicles 25) is well in line with what we know existed in Egypt and Mesopotamia at the beginning of the first millennium. The lament genre goes back to the Sumerians, and even the hymnody attributed to David and his temple musicians was paralleled by similar datable hymnody in Egypt long before the Hebrew monarchy.¹⁶ C. H. Gadd has published royal hymns in which Shulgi, the most conspicuous ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2000 B.C.), is saluted by his court poets. Gadd believes the king's literary talent was such that he must have produced some of these compositions: "As if literary pre-eminence were not enough, a recently published text ascribes also to Shulgi the title of first royal musician, traditionally claimed by David." Shulgi was a master performer on eight instruments including the lyre of thirty strings, an instrument strangely named after the earlier Sargonic king of Kish, Ur-Zababa, who is called in one text "the shepherd who rose like the sun in the temple of Kish."¹⁷

To this we may add Israel's primeval history in Genesis, which informs us that music was an integral part of human artistic expression from

¹³ See *ANEP*, figs. 191-198, and a picture of a bird-bone flute said to be the earliest evidence of music (25,000 years old) in *National Geographic* 174/4 (October 1988) 449.

¹⁴ See L. Woolley, *Art of the Middle East* (New York: Crown, 1961) 71.

¹⁵ An attempt has been made at deciphering and even recording in stereo the musical notations of this Hurrian cult song on clay tablets from Ugarit. But as P. C. Craigie has noted, the process of interpreting such musical notations is fraught with difficulties (*Psalms 1-50* [Waco: Word] 38-39). Cf. also A. D. Kilmer, R. L. Crocker and R. R. Brown, *Sounds from Silence: Recent Discoveries in Ancient Near Eastern Music* (Berkeley: Bit Enki, 1976), which includes a booklet and stereo record.

¹⁶ See J. A. Wilson's translation of Egyptian hymns and prayers in *ANET* 365-381 and S. N. Kramer's translation of *A Sumerian Petition* (382) and *A Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (455-463); also see F. J. Stephens' Sumerian-Akkadian hymns and prayers (383-392). Early rituals are elaborately depicted on the walls of Egyptian temples, and Hittite ritual texts of the second millennium make explicit many cultic details (346-361).

¹⁷ *CAH*, 1. part 2, 418, 605-606.

man's earliest days. Gen 4:21 says that the brother of Jabal the herdsman was Jubal the musician, the father of all who play the harp and flute. Their father was Lamech, who sang a song (vv. 23-24) that shows how early on man prostituted this art, this godlike creativeness, to his own sinful and vengeful spirit. Instead of boasting in God like the psalmists (cf. *hālal*, "to boast"), he boasts in his own prowess and claims special privilege.¹⁸

There is no extant Canaanite hymnic material from the OT period except for hymnic fragments in the Tell el-Amarna letters.¹⁹ Although the Ugaritic literature provides a great deal of poetry it unfortunately provides no Semitic psalms or hymns, though these no doubt existed. We must look, then, to Egypt and Mesopotamia where hymnic sources are plentiful. Egypt as a self-contained national entity had reached its zenith and declined before the time of David. Yet it continued in varying degrees to affect the Semites of western Asia through trade that plied the sands and seas. We should not be surprised to find affinity between the poetry and music of the two nations.

The most obvious point of all should not be overlooked—namely, that Egypt produced true psalmody used in worship. And it is equally obvious that it employed similar poetic techniques such as parallelism. But it also must not be overlooked that Hebrew psalms express distinctively Hebrew religion while Egyptian psalms express uniquely Egyptian religion. Despite syncretistic pressures the Hebrew psalms never assign deity to the sun, stars, animals or other parts of the physical world—a basic theme of the Egyptian psalms. The Biblical psalms are emphatically monotheistic, and some are polemics against polytheism. By contrast every Egyptian psalm is founded on a highly developed and sophisticated pantheon, and that includes the reputedly monotheistic *Hymn to Aten*.

III. RELIGION

James Henry Breasted popularized the notion that Israel's monotheism derived from the cultural revolution of Akhenaten (Amunhotep IV) as seen in the famous *Hymn to Aten*, which has been linked to Psalm 104. It is now evident that this was not genuine monotheism but a refined polytheism in which old traditions were cast aside and Aten was identified

¹⁸ A proper frame of reference is needed to understand the song of Lamech in Gen 4:23. The words may leave the reader of the English Bible rather bewildered unless he understands its genre as a song of praise (self-praise): "O Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; / O wives of Lamech, give ear to my word. / For a man I killed for striking me, / Even a lad for injuring me. / If Cain is avenged seven times, / then Lamech seventy and seven." This bold lion of a man boasts of (praises) his ability by brute force to demonstrate his prowess. He dares to make a plea to God for the same sevenfold protection afforded the descendants of Cain. 'Abdu-Ḥepa, the Hurrian king of Jerusalem, wrote to Amunhotep III calling for the same sevenfold vengeance against the Nubians who had almost killed him: "Seven times and seven times let the king my lord avenge me" (*ANET* 488b).

¹⁹ Cf. A. Jirku, *JBL* 52 (1933) 108 ff.; S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967) 266 n. xxxix.

with the sun-god Re while Amun, the patron god of the Theban priesthood, was cast aside. Here are some excerpts from the *Hymn to Aten* (ANET 369-371):

Your shining is beautiful in the horizon of heaven,
the living Aton who ordains life.
You rise in the eastern horizon.
You fill every land with your beauty.
You are beautiful, you are great, you dazzle.

The reputed parallel is Ps 104:1-2:

O Lord my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with honor and majesty,
wearing light as a garment,
stretching out the heavens like a curtain.

The *Hymn to Aten* continues:

You are Re. . . .
You are far away, but your rays are upon earth. . . .
When you go to rest in the western horizon
the land is in darkness and in the way of death;
(people) spend the night in a chamber;
heads are covered and an eye does not see its neighbor. . . .
Every lion goes forth from its den,
every worm that bites. . . .
When you arise in your horizon the land becomes bright.
You shine as Aton in the day. . . .
The two lands are in festival.
Their hands praise your appearance in glory;
the entire land does their work.

Ps 104:20, 23 says of the Lord:

You make darkness and it is night,
wherein all beasts of the forest creep forth. . . .
The sun rises, they gather together
and lie down in their dens.
Then man goes out to his work,
to his labor till evening.

These two hymns say very much the same thing about the effect of the rising and setting sun on nature and human beings—a universal observation. But in the psalm the rising of the sun is one of the many works of Yahweh (v. 24). Comparing these lines shows no real theological relationship. The only serious possibility lies in the apparent monotheistic wording of one line in the *Hymn to Aten*. It describes Aten as “the sole god, like whom there is no other.” But the same statement was made of Amun in an earlier hymn, as noted by Egyptologist John Wilson.²⁰ So one is

²⁰ J. Wilson, *Culture of Egypt* 211. This hymn to Amun as the sole god comes before the Amarna (Akhenaten’s) revolution, during the time of Amunhotep III. For post-Amarna references of this type see ANET 368. Here the priests of Amun seem to be making a case that

forced to the conclusion that Aten is unique in some other sense than Yahweh, before whom all other gods were false gods. As the sun-disk, Aten was of course unique in the sky. Before being chosen by Akhenaten, Aten had long been a rather obscure deity connected with sun worship. So given the syncretistic tendency he was easily substituted for the ancient prime deity, the sun-god Re. For a time, then, during Akhenaten's reign he was considered the chief deity and the fashioner of the earth. But there was more than mere syncretism here. Akhenaten rebelled against all of Egypt's cultural past, though it lasted only during his short life. In his totally new temple at Amarna he too was considered a deity. Aten held its exalted position until Amun was reinstated at the death of Akhenaten, when Egypt reverted to its old ways.

Although we see little theological commonality, there was considerable literary interdependency. Other poetic techniques besides parallelism were common to the two literatures. Examples are the repetition of opening lines and the use of refrains. Though the ancient Egyptians excelled in other types of literature their hymns did not attain the literary excellence of the Hebrew psalms. One finds it difficult not to associate this with the nature of their religious ideology.

In our interpretation of the OT a distinction must be made between what was considered normative (official) on the one hand and actual practices on the other. Religious syncretism was a continuing process that the Biblical account attests to. Figurines of the fertility goddess were often in the hands of Israelites. A recently discovered seventh-century inscription reads: "Yahweh and his Asherah." But this only shows the struggle with syncretism. Officially, according to the OT, God is sexless. There was no mythology and no word for "goddess." The writers of Scripture consistently call female deities by their proper names. Even the above-mentioned seventh-century inscription does the same. Israelite religion at its worst had no indigenous nature myths, but at its best it did not hesitate to use the language of the Canaanite myths. For example, in Ps 74:12-14 the mythopoeic language about the many-headed Leviathan is historicized and used metaphorically to describe Yahweh's great victory in history at the Red Sea. The monster here is Egypt:

But you, O God, are my king from of old;
 you bring salvation upon the earth.
 It was you who split open the sea by your power;
 you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
 It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
 and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert.

This mythopoeic language actually enhances one's understanding of the true nature of God in the OT. Sheol, for example, where Mot (Death) is

Amun is the first principle, the god who brought himself into being: "All (other) gods came into being after he began himself" (368b). But further on in the text the three important gods Amun, Re and Ptah are all considered one (369a). There are similar hieratic texts from about 1300 B.C. in which hymns are addressed to various universal or cosmic gods who are treated as a conflated personality and addressed in the singular (371-372).

supreme and Baal is powerless, is open before God so that its denizens tremble (Job 26:6). In Ugaritic, Mot has a never-satisfied appetite. Mot says to Baal:

I shall pound you, consume and eat you. . . .
 Lo, you are to go down
 into the throat of the god Mot,
 into the gullet of the Hero, beloved of El.

How appropriate it is then for Isaiah to say of Yahweh that “he will swallow up death in victory” (Isa 25:8; cf. 1 Cor 15:24)!

Mot is also a hunter who uses snares, nooses and nets. We are not surprised to find Ps 18:4–5 (cf. Job 18:9) employing the same hunter figure for death. But we may be surprised to find Job using the figure for God in Job 19:6. This is only because Job’s God holds the power of death in his own hands and is not helpless—like Baal—in the clutches of Death. If Job had believed the myths his God would have been limited, and he would have had no basis for his accusation in 9:24: “If it is not he, then who is it?”—that is, who is responsible for the apparent injustice in the world? This is a problem to Job only because his God is sovereign. The mythology allots to the gods their separate domains. With Baal dead, Ashtar, the little rebel god, is permitted by El to attempt to sit on Baal’s throne, but not having the stature he does not succeed and must be content to be less than a cosmic deity. But even El, the head of the pantheon, is sometimes portrayed as a weak and frightened character who cannot control the deities he sired.

Similar to this conscious demythologizing is anti-myth, which appears to be present in Psalm 121 (cf. Jer 3:23), a polemic against both the cosmic mountain motif as expressed in hill-shrines and the deities themselves as patrons:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
 where does my help come from?
 My help comes from the Lord,
 the maker of heaven and earth.

The stress on Yahweh as Creator is necessary, for the deities were identified with the natural forces of heaven and earth. In a world full of patron deities the psalmist shows that Yahweh is the only and true patron deity:

He will not let your foot slip—
 he who watches over you will not slumber;
 Indeed, he who watches over Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep. . . .
 The Lord will keep you from all harm.

There were three ways in which the Hebrews were affected by the Canaanite religion. The first has to do with theology, the second with cultic practice and the third with language. In theology and cultic practice the Hebrews came into head-on collision with their neighbors. Israel’s God presents himself as the only Creator, the unique and exclusive Deity, the sovereign Ruler of the universe: “I am Yahweh your God; you shall

have no other gods before me. . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God" (Exod 20:3-5; Deut 5:6-9). The apodictic law that follows is the very expression of Yahweh's character and the crowning glory of Israelite religion. In contrast to Canaanite deities, Yahweh sets the example for all time. He cannot be bribed so that he behaves contrary to his moral nature (Deut 10:17).

In cultic practice Israel also came into head-on collision with Canaanite religion. The Israelites and the Canaanites shared certain features of religious worship, such as some of the terms used for sacrifices and the shape and nature of their temples. But they collided where Canaanite practice violated the spiritual and moral character of Israel's faith. In certain cases it is not possible to understand ritual prohibitions in ancient Israel without realizing that these rules were a reaction to cultic Canaanite practices. On the surface some of the worship was similar, but basic theological tenets were essentially different. All the nations sacrificed animals and made votive food and drink offerings, but Israel had unique theological reasons. The sacrifices of the Canaanites were mainly an attempt to bribe or to appease the gods. The Israelite sacrificial system was based on substitutionary blood atonement tied to a concept of sin defined in terms of the holy nature of Yahweh. Lev 18:3 says, "You must not do as they do in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices" (*NIV*).

But what of Yahweh's command to destroy the Canaanites (Num 21:3; Deut 7:1-6; etc.)? Since sacred war was widespread, does this not tarnish Israel's theological uniqueness? No one can deny that the OT says God used this widespread cultural convention to uphold the uniqueness of Israel's faith. The real question hangs on whether the OT theological claims are true or false. The verb *ḥāram*, "completely destroy as a sacred act," meant that Israel was to be God's surrogate to carry out punishment for sin. It is an historical type of ultimate retribution for sin and is theologically justifiable only if Yahweh as the only true God is both sovereign and infinitely holy. Deut 20:18 gives the immediate purpose for this admittedly horrid action. Here Yahweh says, "Otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God" (*NIV*). What were some of these detestable things? The most obvious was idolatry, which constituted a rejection of Yahweh's exclusive claim as the only true God. Moreover the religion practiced by these people was vile for it included human sacrifice, temple prostitution, mutilation of the human body, sorcery and divination. Among some of the groups there was even official religious sanction for bestiality, which was punishable by death among the Hebrews (Exod 22:19-20).²¹ The *NIV* translation of Deut 23:17-18 makes the Hebrew reaction to temple prostitution very clear: "No Israelite man or woman is to become a temple prostitute. You must not bring the

²¹ See G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), footnotes on p. 252, for articles dealing with these practices in Egyptian, Canaanite and Hittite sources.

earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the temple of the Lord your God to pay a vow, because the Lord your God detests them both" (*NIV*). In Deut 18:10-12 human sacrifice, divination and sorcery are prohibited among the Hebrews. Verse 10 says, "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, casts spells or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord. Because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God" (*NIV*). God through Moses warns the Israelites against mutilation of their bodies, which was practiced by the Canaanites in certain rituals for the dead. *UT* 67 gives a typical Canaanite grief ritual:

He pours the ashes of grief on his head,
 The dust of wallowing on his pate,
 For clothing he is clothed with sackcloth.
 He roams the mountain in mourning,
 Yea through the forest in grief,
 He cuts cheeks and chin,
 He lacerates his forearms.
 He plows the chest like a garden;
 Like a vane he lacerates the back.
 He lifts his voice and shouts:
 Baal is dead (VI, 19-22).

It is such a practice that forms the background of Deut 14:1-2: "You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God" (*NIV*). Cultic practice was a testimony, a mark of identification. In Exod 34:13 the Israelites are admonished: "You shall destroy their altars and their cult pillars and cut down their poles that are dedicated to Asherah." In contrast, in Ps 106:34-40 we have a sad commentary on what happened eventually in ancient Israel: "They did not destroy the peoples as the Lord had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons, they shed innocent blood, and the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan. . . . Therefore the Lord was angry with his people and abhorred his inheritance" (*NIV*).

Despite this sad commentary of theological and cultic syncretism among the people, in the area of language the Hebrews were both creative and successful in dealing with Canaanite religion. The inspired writers simply took the old linguistic survivals that came down in their language and either demythologized the terminology or created their own anti-mythology. Every culture must find its expression of theological verity in terms of the language that is available and is used. Though the Hebrew prophets and psalmists were emphatically opposed to Canaanite polytheism, it must be borne in mind that they were not literary iconoclasts, as were the Jews of a later date. Many highly graphic phrases, especially

those that express the personal nature of God, were used to enhance Hebrew monotheism.

The Lord is called "the rider of the clouds" (Ps 68:5), a frequently-used epithet for Baal. It may be part of a polemic against Baal worship. It does not mark a primitive stage of Hebrew religion but a time of religious vitality and verbal fluency. It would have been impossible in the Maccabean period, when Hebrew was wooden and Hebrew scholars were given to the use of anti-anthropomorphisms. The poet of Psalm 68 expressed God's control over nature, which the Canaanites thought was Baal's domain. Canaanite expressions were part of the language and a readily available vehicle through which the prophets and poets could communicate their own theological verities. Though the idiom was freely used it was not carelessly used, so that only theologically acceptable concepts were communicated. The common Semitic *'ilat*, meaning "goddess," was rejected by all OT writers of all periods. Female deities like Asherah were referred to by the proper names given to their images but were never called goddesses, simply because the Hebrews had no mythology in which such a concept would have meaning.

That certain valid theological concepts are not late in human history still does not answer the question of when and where they originated. According to the Bible, man originally had a true concept of Deity, which he proceeded to distort. The Hebrew prophets rejected these distorted notions and progressively revealed the truth that was and is always mingled in all religions. Although the OT was in one sense a product of its time, its own claim to be the product of the Holy Spirit of God is enhanced by its just reaction to the practices and beliefs of surrounding religions, at the same time not rejecting those elements that were part of the vestige of truth still remaining in a corrupt world.

We have seen that the mythopoeic language of the OT conforms remarkably well with the god-language from pagan sources, but we have also seen that this does not mean the OT writers were committed to a low view of Yahweh—whether as storm-god, war-god, or whatever. In his nature the God of Israel is not a figure of mythology in the sense that one could speak of his private life. Yahweh is the one besides whom no other is God and before whom all others are shown to be no-gods.

IV. CONCLUSION

Does this story of cross-culturalism trace for the Church a theological paradigm? The lesson is both negative and positive. God ordered Israel to be a holy kingdom but not a cultural ghetto. Rabbinic Judaism's rejection of certain art forms on the basis of an extreme application of the second commandment (borrowed by Islam) is not supported by God's specifications for the tabernacle and temple. Borrowing was not forbidden except where it contradicted previously revealed truth concerning God's person and work (Deuteronomy 13; 18). It was here that Israel's ultimate failure became the negative example of cross-culturalism, and it is here that the Church must also set her bounds.