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RECONSIDERING THE METHODS OF COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT CRITICISM IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

Abstract: *This paper considers the methods of Cognitive Environment Criticism as a tool for executing the comparative studies between the texts of the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East. This balanced approach between “parallelomania” and “paralelophobia” is deepened by the employment of the metaphor of the baptism in the river of the Ancient Near East. This metaphor serves to point to the change that occurs in the Old Testament texts as the product of communication or awareness of the Ancient Near Eastern texts. Change that unfolds after the immersion in the culture and textual tradition of the neighboring countries results in Israel’s polemical theology of immense value.*

Key Words: *Cognitive Environment Criticism, Old Testament, Ancient Near East, Comparative Studies, Enuma Elish, Babylonian Theodicy, Mari Prophecies.*

Introduction

The best way of utilizing background studies in the Old Testament expositional context, as well as in the context of exegesis, is so-called Cognitive Environment Criticism. Cognitive Environment Criticism is a via media between “parallelomania” and “paralelophobia,” and it was initiated by scholars who contrasted the “Pan-Babylonian” controversy that all the Scriptures are only the versions of Babylonian mythology prompted by Fridrich Delitzsch. W. W. Hallo was one of the first to start the endeavor of the “contextual approach,” which was backed and encouraged with the editing of the volumes of Context of Scriptures along with K. L. Younger. This paper will continue in Hallo and Younger’s steps and argue that the principal way of comparative studies between the ANE and the Old Testament is Cognitive Environment Criticism but, to an extent, deepened and more elaborate.

Ancient Near East and Old Testament Exposition

Many scholars defined the methodology of Cognitive Environment Criticism. Still, it is quite a vast problem, as John Walton suggests: “When comparative studies are done at the cognitive environment level, trying to understand how people thought about themselves and their world, a broader methodology can be used.”¹ The bottom line of this method is a better cognition, as Younger writes in his *Ancient Conquest Accounts* when comparing the biblical conquest account with Ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts to “gain a better understanding of the

¹ John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006, 24.

biblical narrative.”² Also, as John Monson writes, one is to advance in “a deeper appreciation for unique theological positions”³ recognized in comparison.

One of the integral problems of the method is a rapid settlement of parallels, as H. Ringgren advises: “Comparative research in the Biblical field has often become a kind of ‘parallel hunting.’ Once it has been established that a certain Biblical expression or custom has a parallel outside the Bible, the problem is considered solved. It is not asked wheatear or not the extra-Biblical element has the same place in life, the same function in the context of its own culture.”⁴ He proposes that the first step is the recognition of the “Sitz im Leben.” Also, he sees the problem of the method as “the main difficulty” for the embedded dilemmas of evaluation that it professes.

Shemaryahu Talmon provided essential contours for this method in his famous essay: “The ‘Comparative Method’ in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems.”⁵ R. Averbeck recognizes the method of Shemaryahu Talmon as the best framework for doing comparative studies and highlights “the proximity in time and place, the priority of inner-biblical parallels, correspondence of social function, and the holistic approach to texts and comparison.”⁶ In Averbeck’s case, this method helped detect “the formative way of influence.”⁷

John Walton proposes ten principles for comparative studies. Namely, similarities and differences are both to be considered. Correlations between the texts “may suggest a common cultural heritage or cognitive environment rather than borrowing.”⁸ These must be considered closely because they might only appear connected externally, not internally or conceptually. The context of both texts is to be respected and informed by prior background study. The proximity of time and geography and other aspects may increase the prospect of synergy and influence. Different genres, if compared, yield minimal results.⁹

As for the goal of Cognitive Environment Criticism, Walton notes, “The goal of this discipline is to recover the cultural layers from the world behind the text that were inherently understood by the ancient audience but have been long lost to our modern world. Texts and iconography serve as windows to the cognitive environment of the ancient world.”¹⁰ He explains several models of the relationship between the texts: borrowing, polemics, counter-text, echoes, and diffusion. Hence, by using the metaphor of the flow of the cultural river, Walton explains

² Lawson Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1990, 52.

³ John Monson, “Original Context and Canon” in: Andrew T. Abernethy, (ed.), *Interpreting the Old Testament Theologically* (Essays in Honor of Willem A. VanGemeren), Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018, 29.

⁴ H. Ringgren, “Israel’s Place Among the Religions of Ancient Near East” in: G.W. ANDERSON, P.A.H. de BOER, G.R. Castellino, Henry Cazelles, John Emerton, E. Nielsen, H.G. May, and W. Zimmerli, (ed.), *Studies in The Religion of Ancient Israel*, (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, Vol 23), Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1972, 1.

⁵ See Shemaryahu Talmon, “The ‘Comparative Method’ in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems,” in: John EMERTON, (ed.), *Congress Volume Göttingen 1977*, (Vetus Testamentum, Supplements, Volume: 29), Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1978, 320-356.

⁶ Richard Averbeck, “Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method: Historiography and Temple Building” in: M. Chavalas, and K. L. Younger, (ed.), *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002, 89.

⁷ R. Averbeck, “Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method”, 121.

⁸ J. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 36-37.

⁹ J. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 36-37.

¹⁰ John H. Walton, “Interactions in the Ancient Cognitive Environment,” in: Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton, (ed.), *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018, 333.

that ancient Israel was immersed in it, and they became embedded in this context. I would propose the continuation of the metaphor in the form of the baptism of Israel into this river and emphasize polemical theology as the change that happened after this baptism. In the words of John Currid, the aspect of polemical theology is underrated in entire Cognitive Environment Criticism and represents a vital form of relationship between the biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts: “Polemical theology is the use by biblical writers of the thought-forms and stories that were common in ancient Near Eastern culture while filling them with radically new meaning.”¹¹ Back to the metaphor of baptism in the ANE river, this is the change that happens during the period of being immersed in the waters: polemical theology. Common ANE motifs and expressions are given new essence, the essence of monotheism. This is the successful integration of ANE in the biblical narratives and deserves methodological attention under the Cognitive Environment Criticism. Methodologically, this may be expressed by the words of Ellen van Wolde: “The examination begins with cultural categorization and ends with a view on the specific reality of meaning that emerges from a single literary text. This meaning configuration is not the property of a single entity or reducible to it but is dependent on the collective behavior of the conceptual elements.”¹² Therefore, a new view emerges as the consequence of the *ANE baptism* of Israel. Certainly, this is a dialogical relationship with the surrounding world which at the same time seals and redefines the relationship with God. Ironically, this method uses the metaphor of baptism in the ANE river, but essentially, this *baptism* is cultural and not religious in nature. The differentiation and religious separation are fundamental to this immersion, for ANE religious view is evaluated and reframed. ANE religious judgment through this interaction produces polemical theology of immense value. Polemical twists bring the differentiation and uniqueness of Israel among the ANE religions. Interestingly, through the interaction of *ANE baptism*, biblical authors conceive new cognitive domains and religious purity.

In his essay on prophecies, Hans Barstad makes a helpful comment for the refinement of the method of Cognitive Environment Criticism, stating: “there is far more material that is relevant to the study of prophecy than the 50-odd texts that are usually referred to by scholars”¹³. These words are a kind of an echo of Talmon’s article “It demands an interdisciplinary and synoptic grasp, thus requiring the cooperation of experts in diverse areas: philology, literature, folklore, theology, sociology, history, and the history of ideas.”¹⁴ Accordingly, this method requires a great competence of the scholar or, ideally, a group of scholars from different branches. Barstad continues to say: “It is also important to reflect somewhat on what it is that we are comparing,”¹⁵ alluding to the rules that one must follow while comparing the texts.

Moshe Abnar proposes analogical understanding as a result of a comparison between Mari documents and biblical prophecies for their historical distance.¹⁶ He compares the symbol of Yoke in the writings of Mari, Amarna Letters, and biblical texts, namely Jeremiah. Abnar

¹¹ John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013, 25.

¹² Ellen Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies, When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition and Context*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009.

¹³ Hans Barstad, “Sic dicit Dominus: Mari Prophetic Texts and the Hebrew Bible” in: Yairah Amit, E.B Zvi, I. Finkelstein and O. Lipschits, (ed.), *Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na’aman*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006, 23.

¹⁴ S. Talmon, “The Comparative Method”, 356.

¹⁵ H. Barstad, “Sic dicit Dominus”, 26.

¹⁶ See Moshe Abnar, “To Put One’s Neck under the Yoke” in: Yairah Amit, E.B Zvi, I. Finkelstein and O. Lipschits, (ed.), *Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na’aman*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006, 17-18.

explains that because of the lack of evidence from the land of Israel, he had to turn to the sources from the other parts of the Fertile Crescent. Methodologically, it would be perfect if one would use spatially bound materials as well. Partial similarities and correspondence between these as information or conclusions of the comparison are indispensable for a better grasp of the Bible.

Finally, essential for Cognitive Environmental Studies is the knowledge of ancient languages. Leo Oppenheim writes: “Translated texts tend to speak more of the translator than of their original message. It is not too difficult to render texts written in a dead language as literally as possible and to suggest to the outsider, through the use of quaint and stilted locutions, the alleged awkwardness and archaism of a remote period.”¹⁷ He argues that the text has to speak for itself, which is yet another difficulty posed by this method. Not to mention the wide range of ancient languages one should be competent in, like Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian (Hieroglyphs, Demotic, Hieratic), Ugaritic, etc.

This paper will follow the hybrid methodological framework of several scholars mentioned above in order to conduct Cognitive Environmental Criticism. It will be pre-supposed that the texts match in the genre. The proposed methodological framework involves: 1) Proximity in time and space (Shemaryahu/Averbeck); 2) Similarities between the texts (Walton); 3) Differences between the texts (Walton/Casutto); Polemical Theology (Currid). The paper will also be interested in amplifying the scholarly metaphor of the immersion of Israel into the river of the ancient Near East, named *baptism*, for the transformation and change of environmental trends into narratives with new meanings.

Ancient Near East and Old Testament Narrative

The tablets of Enuma Elish were recovered in 1849 by Austin H. Layard, a collector of the British Museum, H. Rassam, and G. Smith, at Ashurbanipal’s library in Nineveh. A half-century later, German excavators found an Assyrian version of the same story at Ashur, with the main differences in the names of deities. Later discoveries followed in 1925 with two tablets at Kish and a fragment in 1929 in Uruk.¹⁸ It is known as the Babylonian Epic of Creation or Enuma Elish, according to its opening words meaning “When above,” and it reflects Sumerian and Amorite traditions. W. G. Lambert argues that “it is not younger than 1100 BC.”¹⁹ Lambert, in his comprehensive work *Babylonian Creation Myths*²⁰, provides a literary analysis of the epic, translation, and commentary.

Considering the proximity of time and space between the texts, as the first methodological step in the Cognitive Environment Criticism, it is essential to note that the proximity in the area may be an easier task than judging the time of inception of Genesis. Indeed, because of its scope, this essay will not discuss this step in detail. Thus, the common ground for embarking on the comparative journey is the Fertile Crescent, with a conservative time frame of 1500-1100.

The next step is to consider both similarities and differences between the two texts. At the outset of creation, the world was mainly comprised of water. The name of these waters shares

¹⁷ Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, 3.

¹⁸ See Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1-3.

¹⁹ W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis” in: Richard HESS, and David Toshio Tsumura, (ed.), *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994, 101.

²⁰ W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns: 2013, 3-144.

sound consonance. In Hebrew, these waters are called *tehom*, while in Akkadian, they are called Tiamat. The division of this body of water was one of the first creational acts in both accounts. And this division was made possible by a sheet or separator. The luminaries were created, and their role in the world was prescribed. The human was the last to be numbered in the act of creation.

These similarities prompted some scholars to see the biblical author using Enuma Elish extensively. However, the stories need to be more similar to infer this direct dependence. Even the familiar resonance of the words for the body of water between the languages does not provide a strong case for dependence. Possibly, the common root is to be found in a third language. Parallels and allusions are remarkable and impressive, but this is not the case of one story just being plagiarized. Most likely, Genesis does not borrow from this story directly but instead shares premises of common tradition.

The most notable differences between Genesis and Enuma Elish are theological, bringing us to the Baptism in the ANE river again. Confronted here is the theogony of the ANE cultures with the monotheism of ancient Israel.²¹ The theogony represented here may be summarized in the natural view of gods. It is the mating of Apsu and Tiamat that opens Enuma Elish. This godly procreation continues, and gods are described in human terms: “Profoundly discerning and wise, of robust strength” (line 18).²² They are loud (line 22) and may be destroyed (lines 32-70). Gods are begotten and nursed, like Marduk in lines 80-86.

In his famous commentary on Genesis, Umberto Cassuto reflects on the differences between the biblical account and the concepts of the ancient Near East and their cultures. His method is based on underlying the differences and not only the similarities. Also, he captures the beauty of the polemic which the biblical text portrays:

The purpose of the Torah in this section is to teach us that the whole world and all that it contains were created by the word of the One God, according to His will, which operates without restraint. It is thus opposed to the concepts current among the peoples of the ancient East who were Israel’s neighbors, and in some respects, it is also in conflict with certain ideas that had already found their way into the ranks of our people. The language, however, is tranquil, undisturbed by polemic of dispute; the controversial note is heard indirectly, as it were, through the deliberate, quiet utterances of Scripture, which sets the opposing views at naught by silence or by subtle hint.²³

Apart from the difference in theogony and cosmology, as well as the difference between ANE theomachy – creation after the conflict between gods²⁴ and biblical submission of nature to the will of God in the word-act relation, as for example seen in: “And God said, Let there be light.... And God said, let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters... And it was so.” (Gen. 1:3–7), the biblical text offers demythologization. In Enuma Elish, the world is created from the dead body of a mythological

²¹ John Walton’s starting point for comparing ANE and Israeli cognitive environments is to find the common themes regarding cosmology, as its genre. He defines sub-topics like Ontology, Centrality of order and disorder, metadivine functions, the position of deities in Cosmos, theogony and cosmogony, theomachy, etc. See John WALTON, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011, 8-12.

²² W. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 51.

²³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah*, translated by I. Abrahams, Skokie, IL: Varda Books, 2005, 7.

²⁴ There are some echoes of the ANE legend of the Sea Monster present in the Bible, like in the Psalms, but the scope of this paper does not permit further discourse.

creature, while in the Bible creation occurs from a neutral element – water. The process of demythologization is yet another change unfolding after Israel’s baptism in the ANE river. Accordingly, the Sovereignty of God is obvious in Genesis 1-2, while Enuma Elish portrays confronting divine entities, even though they are a family. J. Walton explains the differences found in texts: “Accounting for the ANE context means that we have to understand that God has accommodated his communication to that audience / that is, to their cog native environment. This is not controversial because any effective communication requires accommodation to the intended audience.”²⁵

Ancient Near East and Old Testament Wisdom Literature

Babylonian Theodicy is possibly the best text to be compared with the book of Job. It was probably developed around 1000 BC in Babylon. It is a dialogue between the sufferer and his friend. “Scholars have reconstructed 27 stanzas with 11 lines each from tablets that Austen Henry Layard (1817–94) recovered from Tel Nimrud in 1845.”²⁶ Interestingly, W. Lambert captures the tone of this work: “The sufferer begins the debate by addressing his friend with the greatest respect, a politeness which the two speakers maintain to the end.”²⁷ One of the examples of the parallel thoughts from these two texts is found between lines 235-242 of Theodicy: “Seek constantly after the rites of justice”,²⁸ and Job 8:5 “If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy.”

“I am finished. The anguish came upon me” (line 8)²⁹ from Babylonian Theodicy is similar to many of Job’s exclamations of complaining: “Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?” (Job 3:11), or when Job asks God: “Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked?” (Job 10:3).

Both Job and the Babylonian sufferer are concerned with the reception of their words. In the third stanza, the sufferer asks his friend: “Listen to what I say, pay attention for a moment, hear my words.”³⁰ Job cries out: “Oh, that my words were written! Oh, that they were inscribed in a book! Oh, that with an iron pen and lead, they were engraved in the rock forever! (Job 19:23–24).” Here the perception of time is confronted even though they share the ordinary state of suffering. The former is concerned with having attention for “a moment,” while the latter wants his words inscribed forever, eternally.

Another comparison is seen in the reference of the sufferers to their bodies. The Babylonian sufferer says: “My body is shrouded, craving wears me do[wn]” (line 27). Similarly, Job reflects on his body eaten by worms (Job 7:5) and his skin being destroyed (Job 19:26), uttering: “my heart faints within me” (Job 19:27). Common are the references to the natural world in both accounts. For example, Job 12:7 mentions “beasts of the field” and “birds of the heaven”, while the Babylonian account speaks about “palm a precious tree” (line 75) “wild ass” (line 59) lion (line 247). The tone of the dialogue in the Babylonian Theodicy is generally very polite and pleasant, calling the friend’s advice “fine” like a “pleasant breeze” (line 67).³¹

²⁵ John Walton, “Reading Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology” in J. D. Charles, (ed.), *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013, 143.

²⁶ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 4th ed., New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016, 254.

²⁷ W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996, 64.

²⁸ W. Hallo, and L. Younger, eds., *The Context of Scriptures*, 493.

²⁹ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 71.

³⁰ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 73.

³¹ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 73.

Contrary to this, in the book of Job, the dialogue is often a heated argument. For example, Bildad: “Why are we stupid in your sight?” (Job 18:3).

The trust in God differs between the sources. The Babylonian sufferer is certain that the key to prosperity lies in doing things opposite to God’s commandments. He argues: “Those who neglect the god go the way of prosperity, while those who pray to the goddess, are impoverished and disposed of” (line 70-71)³². He concludes, “A cripple is my superior. The rogue has been promoted, but I have been brought low” (lines 76-77).³³ He is disadvantaged and depressed because of the people who respect god as he suffers: “I will ignore my god’s regulations and trample on his rites” (line 79). The sufferer has all the steps planned for how to avoid being in communion with god. Also, it is essential to mention that the Babylonian sufferer still depends on the same god and his help: “May the god who has thrown me off give help; May the goddess who has abandoned me show mercy” (lines 296-297).³⁴

On the other hand, when afflicted, Job shows a different attitude. He never speaks against God and his Creator with opposition and contradiction as the Babylonian sufferer does. Job’s first reaction to suffering is, in fact, turning toward God in the way of formal mourning: “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped” (Job 1:20). This act is followed by Job’s confession which is essentially praise to God: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). This attitude is quite unique, and it cannot be compared with the Babylonian counterpart. Not to mention that Job in chapter 21 goes on to acknowledge the topic of the prosperity of the wicked, in a like manner as the Babylonian sufferer. Job asks: “How often is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out? That their calamity comes upon them? That God distributes pains in his anger? (Job 21:17).” He continues to number all the blessings of the wicked and their households, and even to note “their children dance” (Job 21:11) and that “their bull breeds without fail” (Job 21:10). These words bring the two accounts even closer, where Job notes that “no rod of God is upon them” (Job 21:9). Even though Job is aware that the wicked prosper and that God is doing nothing to stop them, Job does not label God as one who promotes the wicked, and that he (Job) will go on and because of that ignore God’s laws as the Babylonian sufferer says above (line 79).

The friend of the Babylonian Sufferer is like Job’s friends interested in creational topics. In one of his speeches, he elaborates on the creation of people, showing that they are created with evil qualities:

Nuru king of gods who created mankind,
And majestic Zulummar, who dug out their clay,
And mistress Mami, the queen that fashioned them,
Gave perverse speech to the human race,
With lies and not the truth, they endowed them forever (lines 276-280).³⁵

Job has a different approach. Even though he notes that: “He has made me a byword of the peoples, and I am one before whom men spit” (Job 17:6), he is not labeling God as evil or the source of evil. God is the sole creator in the book of Job, and no other gods participated in this act, like in the Babylonian Sufferer poem. However, the contextual environment of the book is aware of other creational accounts, so Job comments that God is above all of them. For example, he says: “By his wind, the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent”

³² W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 75.

³³ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 77.

³⁴ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 87.

³⁵ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 89.

(Job 26:13). In His final words, God asks Job: “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook (Job 41:1).” Accordingly, this theological polemic places God above all and in charge, the sole good creator of mankind, as confessed in Job’s words: “Your hands fashioned and made me” (Job 10:8).

Theodicy is an excellent challenge in the comparison between the accounts of the sufferers. The Babylonian sufferer is specific: “The god does not impede the way of a devil”³⁶ (line 244). The greatest question that emerges from reading the book of Job is why he is suffering and why God allows this to unfold. Incredibly daunting is the interpretation of the Hebrew word *למה*, usually translated as “without reason” or “without cause.” God permitted evil and hardships on Job without reason (Job 2:3) or was it so?³⁷

In the end, Job repents, and God gives two-fold to him. The daunting “why” question still lingers in the air of the scholarship and church, respectively. Here, the *baptism* of Israel in the river of Ancient Near Eastern thought challenges the readers to re-think all their presuppositions as well as faith and give their statement, or more deeply - be the answer.

Ancient Near East and Old Testament Prophetic Literature

Prophecy is a central institution in ancient Israeli history, religion, and culture, and the prophets were regarded as compelling figures. Above all, the prophets are unique and intriguing personalities who “speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God.”³⁸

This institution was also known in the ancient Near Eastern world, the neighbors of ancient Israel. The two most prominent Mesopotamian sites that provide this backdrop to ancient prophecy are the cities of Mari and Nineveh. The former is much older and dates around the 18th century BC, while the prophetic texts from the latter date from the 8th century BC.

Importantly, one must distinguish between the divinatory texts and the prophecy. Diviners were usually very intimate with rulers and lived in the royal courts. They used the manuals for divination, like ones that guide liver readers, and so were perceived by ancients as scientists.³⁹ Lev 19:26 advises against this profession, and Ezekiel 21:21 witnesses that this was a normal practice of Babylonian emperors: “For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim; he looks at the liver.” On the contrary, prophets lived in remote places and did not consult the guidebooks but uttered spontaneous and ecstatic revelations. The prophecy was “an alleged divine-human communication, in which a human person the so-called prophet, acts as the mouthpiece of God”.⁴⁰ The prophet of Israel “was a messenger sent to Israel by God in contrast to the pagan prophet who acted by a divine power which had become embodied in him.”⁴¹

³⁶ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 75.

³⁷ See new and thought-provoking translation of Edward Greenstein, who proposes a new way at looking at Job and his sufferings, and argues that Job is in fact, defiant. See Edward Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 10.

³⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001, 5.

³⁹ See Frederick Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and its Near Eastern Environment: A Socio-Historical Investigation*, Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1994; and Ulla Koch-Westernholz, *Babylonian Liver Omens*, Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000.

⁴⁰ Martti Nissinen, “What is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective” in: John Kaltner and Louis Stulman, (ed.), *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, Essays in Honor of Herbert Huffmon*, London, UK: T&T Clark, 2004, 19.

⁴¹ Moshe Weinfeld, “Ancient Near Eastern Patterns in Prophetic Literature” in: Robert GORDON, (ed.),

Mari prophecies, like biblical prophecies, are concerned with the well-being of the king and the matters related to this issue, which may be characterized as political. One of the Mari kings, Zimri-Lim, had a great interest in the prophecies, which were well-attested in the Mari archives. They keep the correspondence between the prophets and prophetesses like Šibtu, Mukannišum, Lanasum, Addudu-duri, Šamaš-Nasir, Inib-šina, etc., to the king, on different matters. The officials later compiled these prophecies in the form of a summary.

In one of the letters, the prophetess Inib-šina is concerned with the possible treaty between the king Zimri-Lim and the kingdom of Ešnunna. She urges the king to protect himself and warns of a danger: “The peacemaking of the man of Ešnunna is false: beneath straw water runs! I will gather him into the net that I knot. I will destroy his city and I will ruin his wealth, which comes from time immemorial.”⁴² The metaphor of the straw that floats on the surface of the water means that “things are not what they seem,”⁴³ so the warrant is issued because of this deceptive appearance of the kingdom of Ešnunna.

Similar to this prophecy is the way prophet Isaiah warns about the alliance of Israel with Egypt: “Ah, stubborn children, declares the LORD, who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin, who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore, shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation” (Isaiah 30:1-3). Through his prophet, God is upset because Israel does not ask for guidance. In the example of the prophecies and divination and their comparison between the ANE world and Israel, it is clear that the ANE world provides categories that Israel is well aware of. The interaction, or as argued in this paper, *the ANE baptism*, leads to the embracement of the concepts. Still, their essence is religiously changed to speak of Israel’s God and benefit Israel’s theology.

Conclusion

This paper aims to emphasize the value of ANE background studies to the exposition and exegesis of the Old Testament. The examples taken from the biblical narratives, biblical wisdom, and biblical prophetic literature helped in understanding that Cognitive Environment Criticism deepened through the metaphor of *the baptism* in the ANE river and transformation in polemics is the way one should carry out comparative studies. Authors of biblical texts transformed and used neighboring cultures and their texts to make theological statements and crown their stories with the complex truth of their God and the dignity of His people. As presented above, the interaction with the ANE world is essentially dialogical. This dialogue embraces the world, makes Israel part of it, filters it, and yields religious purity and uniqueness.

Place is too Small for Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995, 33.

⁴² Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2003, 28.

⁴³ James Ross, “Prophecy in Hamath, Israel and Mari”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 63 (1970), 17.

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Димитрије Станојевић

**ПРЕИСПИТИВАЊЕ МЕТОДА КРИТИКЕ РАЗУМЕВАЊА ОКРУЖЕЊА
У БИБЛИЈСКИМ СТУДИЈАМА**

Овај рад се бави методама Критике Разумевања Окружења (Cognitive Environment Criticism) као једним од начина за вршење компаративних студија између текстова Старог Завета и текстова који потичу са Древног Блиског Истока. Овај уравнотежен приступ између „паралеломаније“ и „паралелофобије“ у раду продубљен је употребом метафоре „крштења у реци Древног Блиског истока“. Ова метафора служи да укаже на промену која се дешава у старозаветним текстовима као производ комуникације или свести о древним блискоисточним текстовима, упоређеним са мотивом погружавања приликом крштења. Промена која се дешава након урањања у културу и текстуалну традицију суседних земаља врхуни се у полемичком богословљу. Тако, Израел у својим списима не само да потврђује текстуалну размену, него уједно води теолошку расправу, те тврдње блискоисточних текстова оповргава на својствен библијски начин. У раду се посебно обраћа пажња на следеће древне блискоисточне текстове: Енума Елиш, Вавилонска Теодицеја (Богооправдање) и пророчанства из Мари архива.