

"And the Lord Appeared": Missiology Meets Ancient Near Eastern Religions

by Kevin Higgins and Joel Hamme

Kevin Higgins has served in two Muslim regions of South Asia, where he helped to develop work in emerging movements to Jesus that now extend to a dozen language groups. He served as International Director for Global Teams from 2000 to 2017, and is still involved in Bible translation, the subject of his doctoral study (PhD, Fuller Seminary). In 2017 he became President of William Carey Int'l University, and since January 2019 also serves as the General Director of Frontier Ventures. He and his wife, Susan, have three daughters, Rachel, Sarah, and Emma.

Joel Hamme has served churches in rural Kansas, and worked with Filipino immigrants in the Los Angeles area. He is the associate professor of biblical and ancient Near Eastern Studies, and chair of the MA program committee for William Carey International University, where he has served since 2006. He also chairs the biblical studies department at SUM Bible College and Theological Seminary. His research includes Israelite religion and the Old Testament in the context of ancient Near Eastern, particularly Mesopotamian religion (PhD, Fuller Seminary).

In one sense, this article grew out of a conversation between Joel Hamme and me in September 2017. However, in another sense, that conversation was itself possible because we had each been independently thinking about our topic for a long time—and in our own particular fields.

As a missiologist I have frequently reflected on the incarnational realities of God's revelation, salvation, and his engagement with his own creation, especially humanity in all its varied cultural and religious expressions. That has shaped my reading of the Scriptures and I have searched for passages and texts from which to gain insight.

I met Joel Hamme soon after I became president of William Carey International University. In an early conversation he mentioned his studies of the Old Testament. As he described his convictions, arrived at by applying (among other methods) a religious studies approach to the Old Testament, I found that we were both postulating a similar theory: namely that the religion of Israel as a totality—not only in isolated texts or in the borrowing and reusing of it—is an expression of God's ways of meeting human beings within their cultural contexts.

We agreed to co-author something that would approach this thesis from within our two respective disciplines: Old Testament studies (or, to be more accurate, Ancient Near Eastern Religious Studies), and missiology. The result is this article.

Our approach will be dialogical. We decided for the Old Testament to lead the way, and so in each stage of the discussion, apart from this introduction, Joel will offer his perspectives first. I will then respond, typically asking a missiological question for the next section. We will hereafter identify our respective contributions by *KH* for myself, and *JH* for Joel.

As such, beyond just writing an article we trust will stimulate the thinking of others, we also hope to model a methodology for missiological reflection on the

Scriptures, and a biblically informed missiology. As a starting point, Joel will describe his approach to the text.

JH: The basic starting point of my methodology in comparing the ancient Near East with the Old Testament is a cultural-anthropological one, especially building on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his idea of the *bricoleur*. Simply put, the bricoleur is someone who takes what is available in his or her environment to create myth systems. I would expand this, as well, to rituals and other thought constellations, such as royal ideology, which is embedded into myth in the ancient Near East. This does not mean that nothing new emerges in the religious life of Israel, but that the building blocks for what is new are what is at hand in Israel's cultural sphere, the broader cultural and religious context of the ancient Near East.

The evidence at hand in the Old Testament Scriptures indeed bears this out. It is commonly argued that Deuteronomy is similar in structure and content to the common literary form of the Suzerain-vassal treaty that remained basically the same from the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age II (roughly 1400 BC–600 BC), the time period for which we have evidence of it. A number of the laws in Exodus 20–23 have close parallels in other ancient Near Eastern law codes, both in content and structure; the most famous is the Code of Hammurabi from the eighteenth century BC. This similarity extends to the rituals in Leviticus, for example, the leper cleansing ritual in Leviticus 14 compared to purification and exorcism rituals from the Mesopotamian sphere. Close affinity with other Near Eastern contemporary religious material can also be found in a number of the Psalms concerning confession of sin (Ps. 51), and those concerning slander (Pss. 11–14; Pss. 52–55).

Thus, there is much that the Old Testament has in common with the larger ancient Near Eastern cultural sphere. In the past, some Old Testament scholars

argued for the distinctiveness of Israel's religion (for example, G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against its Environment*). However, this approach represents an overstatement of the distinctiveness, based on the convictions of such scholars rooted within their own historical context. For example, Wright and others wrote to counterbalance the valid concerns about the use of natural theology to defend political developments in the official German church of Nazi Germany.¹ This is what the Confessing Church had to combat when the (official) German Christian church began to consider Adolf Hitler "A New Word from God."²

Maintaining distinctiveness in that historical context was crucial. The danger



in contemporary missions movement is different. Some people think that believers need to be cordoned off from their cultural environments. This belief is boosted by a misunderstanding concerning the Old Testament's relationship with its larger ancient Near Eastern environment. It can sometimes lead to the planting of churches that seem alien to their larger environments, and thus have little, if any, transformative impact on their communities. Although there are differences between the Old Testament and the larger ancient Near Eastern culture (explored later), there is much that is the same, down to the level of concepts and worldview. Even what is different is delivered through shared rituals, concepts, and materials.

KH: Thank you, Joel for your opening remarks about method in approaching the Old Testament. Reading through the comments with my missiology lenses, I was struck by the phrase, "the building blocks for what is new are what is at hand in Israel's cultural sphere." This is very much akin to what relevance theory would call the *cognitive environment*: the whole constellation of ideas, experiences, memories, values, and assumptions through which we all understand and interpret the world and the various types of communication we use.

I think I am understanding you to say that Israel's corporate and communal cognitive environment was largely shaped by Ancient Near Eastern Religion (ANE). God's communication to Israel would have taken place within that cognitive environment, not by dropping new religious forms and expressions in from some pristine outside world, but by actually meeting Israel where they already lived, within a world they already understood, and through which they already made sense of life.

If that represents your perspective correctly, I would like to explore some specific examples. But before that, I can imagine that some readers will want to ask,

If this is true, then what is unique about God's communication and revelation to Israel? Within that ANE world, what is distinct and new?

JH: There are numerous small variations on common themes, but when it comes to large distinctions, I would like to start with the Old Testament view of humanity because it leads to a chain of other distinctions. However, even in these subsequent distinctions the Old Testament uses basic ideas from the larger ANE cultural sphere.

My basic method inclines me to start from what is well-known and documented and proceed to the less well-known and documented. Thus, I will first start with ideas from Mesopotamia

that have been evident for virtually all of its documented history. In the Mesopotamian world view, there were basically two creations of humanity, both in mythic times. The first creation involved the creation of a wild, uncivilized humanity, *lullu-amēlu*. That humanity was not ruled over nor controlled by a civilizing force, nor did it rely on that civilizing force for survival. The second was the creation of *malik-amēlu*, the human or the wise person who was to be in control.

See the Mesopotamian mythic text from the Neo-Babylonian period (first millennium BC) below, in figure 1.

In Mesopotamia, the human, free of an overarching power (the king), defied the created order, and could not survive. This idea is timeless in that it is derived from the myths that formed the Mesopotamian worldview.

That a similar idea was current in areas close to Israel is evident from the Me-sha Stele, from the ninth century BC. In this text, the Moabites are depicted as helpless until King Mesha ruled over them and gave them the wherewithal to survive. The depiction of the creation of humanity is similar to that

Rather than God's will being carried out by the exercise of some kingly power, God's will is carried out through the extended family.

found in the Mesopotamian creation epic, *Atrahasis*, in which *lullu-amēlu* is created to serve the gods by doing their manual labor.

In the Old Testament, the creation of humanity *as a whole* as a partner of God is the mythic vision.⁴ This is clear in both Genesis 1 and 2. When Kingship is mentioned it is not given a mythic origin in the Old Testament; instead it is stressed that the king was to be one from among his brothers (Deut. 17:15). Based on biblical history, its institution can be dated to the early Iron Age (eleventh century BC). Kingship is not central to the Old Testament's depiction of two orders of humanity, but the depiction of the human in general is in language drawn from ancient Near Eastern royal ideology—common language and thought constellations are transformed to say something powerful and new about the person's relationship to God: there are not two levels of humanity; all of humanity is created as God's "partner."

KH: Thank you, Joel. So, in the wider ANE context, this view of humanity was in a sense two tiered. There was a higher level, divinely created, and a lower level (the masses) also divinely created but clearly not held in the same level of "esteem" by the deity. You also make it clear that there is a very different view of humanity in the Old Testament texts.

This is important for our discussion. From a missiological standpoint, I am interested to understand culture and the gospel and their interplay. What in the culture is distinct? What needs to change in the light of the gospel and what is often called a biblical world view? This also begs the question of what does *not* need to change. And, of course, how do we know and decide (and who decides). But those are for another discussion!

You have argued that the particularly unique insight in scripture, when compared to the wider ANE context, is scripture's view of humanity. We might say that one dimension of what is unique in the biblical worldview is its anthropology. Can you elaborate on that further? What is Genesis (for example) saying about humanity, that is distinct from the wider ANE worldview?

JH: Kevin, in reply, I will explain how Genesis 1–2 rearticulates some aspects of ANE royal ideology in its depiction of humanity as a whole, but I will also comment on how it makes three significant distinctions. 1) In a large part of the OT, rather than God's will being carried out by the exercise of some kingly power, God's will is carried out through the extended family. 2) God's covenant is made with all of God's people, and all the people are addressed rather than just the king, as is the case with the Code of Hammurabi. 3) As God's covenant partners, all of Israel is

Figure 1. Creation of the King³

(30) Ea began to speak, addressing Bēlet-ilī
 "You are Bēlet-ilī, lady of the great gods!
 It is you who have created *lullū-man* (*lullu-amēlu*)
 now create a king, a man to be in control (*malik-amēlu*)!
 Encircle the whole of his body with something fine.
 (35) Finish perfectly his appearance, make his body beautiful!"
 So Bēlet-ilī created the king, the man to be in control (*malik-amēlu*)
 The great gods gave to the king the power of battle.
 Anu gave his crown, Enlil his [throne].
 Nergal gave his weapons, Ninurta his [terrifying splendor].
 (40) Bēlet-ilī gave [his] beautiful countenance.
 Nusku gave directions, gave counsel and stood in service [before him].
 Anyone who speaks with the king [deceitfully or falsely],
 if a notable [...]

addressed by the prophet, rather than just "special people" such as the king, and occasionally the Queen Mother, the Crown Prince, etc. This is very different than prophetic literature among other peoples in the larger ANE context.

Unlike the surrounding cultures, the Hebrew Scriptures speaks of humanity, both men and women, as made in the image and likeness of God. In other ANE materials, similar language is used of the king, and rarely of someone like a high priest, but never of humanity in general. In fact, Genesis 1–2 uses a lot of standard ANE royal imagery in describing *humanity* and the remarkable stature they have in the created order. Humans are made in the image of God. Humans are guardians of the tree of life. Alternatively, in Mesopotamian kingship, it is the king who, at times, is depicted as caretaker of the tree of life, or even as the tree of life itself. As a whole, Genesis 1–2 depicts humans as priest-kings in a temple. They can hear God's will and carry it out. In the OT the sociological mechanism for carrying out the divine purposes is not the kingship but rather the extended family.

This idea that God has a relationship with people, rather than merely a special person, (someone who is separated from the masses by his very nature), explains why God addresses a whole people in giving the covenant in Exodus 20–24, rather than addressing the king alone. This contrasts sharply with documents like the Code of Hammurabi, where the Sun-god *Šamaš* gives the law-code to the king, and the people as a whole are not involved.⁵ It is the *people* of Israel who are responsible for hearing and obeying the revealed will of God.

Finally, in the examples of prophecy from cultures around Israel, prophecy too was for the very elite, especially the king and the other members of the royal family.⁶ For example, there are no surviving prophecies to the Assyrian people as a whole. As is evident from the Hebrew Bible, classical prophecy is addressed largely to the people as

a whole, although in earlier periods prophecy was generally given to kings (Nathan to David, Elijah to Ahab, etc.). The prophet Isaiah is generally viewed as a transitional figure between these two types of prophecy.

To sum up, the view of humans in the Hebrew Bible is unique, for it gives everyone a special dignity that is generally lacking in the rest of the ancient Near East. This special dignity means that anyone and everyone can hear God's will and carry it out.

KH: Joel, to me, these seem to be profound issues. I find myself leaping to a number of connections as I read your contribution, but I want to somewhat randomly select two of them.



First, your comment that God's will is in large part carried out through "extended family." Recently, I participated in a conference of some very perceptive Asian mission practitioners who were reflecting with a number of us who work in Asian contexts. The entire gathering really focused on *oikos* ("household" and "house" in Greek), and family as a primary theme in mission and at the core of our understanding of *ekklesia* or church.

I see in your work that this theme is not something that suddenly appears in the Genesis 12 account of the Abrahamic blessing for "all families of the earth" but is in fact woven into God's purposes for humans in the

very beginning. This calls to mind Paul's reference to the church as "the household or *oikos* of God." When I thread all these themes together, I cannot help but conclude that the original "Eden Family" could be said to form the roots for all we think *ekklesia* should be. It is certainly full of application for mission contexts relative to "church planting," that is, God's re-forming of his Eden Family, the original household or *oikos* of God.

Second, your mention of the first humans in Genesis 1 and 2 as "priest-kings" in a temple also presses my imagination forward to Peter's reference to the saints in Christ being "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) and all of the other images in the New Testament of the new temple, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, which is, of course, a temple made of people.

Let me make a comment on that image of the temple. An oft cited verse from Paul refers to our bodies as a temple of the Holy Spirit. I estimate that 99% of all references to that verse made by Christians today apply it *individually* and tie it to specific practices an individual believer should either undertake or avoid in order to keep his or her body (singular, private) pure, as a temple. But Paul is referring to our bodies (plural) as the temple (singular). We are the temple. The newly remade Eden Family, God's household family, is the place of God's dwelling.

Again, all of this ANE insight into anthropology seems ripe with rich fruit for missional application, Joel.

In one final section I want to pick up from a comment in your endnote (3) about the fact that "people were considered the children of these lesser deities." In the Bible, Israel is seen as *God's* son—and evidently divine beings are called sons of God (though Jesus applies it to his critics as well in John's gospel); the King is God's son, especially in the Psalms; believers are God's children (by adoption in Paul's writing; by begetting

in John 1); and, of course, ultimately Jesus is called God's son. How much of that theme is drawn from, then modified, and transformed by the Bible from this original ANE context?

JH: The context in which "the son of his god" occurs in Mesopotamian texts is in prayers that accompany various rituals dealing with the reconciliation of a person to his or her personal god. The basic rhetoric involves the re-establishment of a strained or broken family relationship that the supplicant has had with the deity. The personal god and goddess give the power of generation to a family and were believed to inhabit both the father and mother.

The prayers were generally for one of the greater deities to intervene on behalf of the supplicant who has a broken relationship with his personal deity, who, in a real, tangible sense, is responsible for the supplicant's life. The god is generator, provider, protector, and guide—so in a very real sense, he is a part of the family. The deity that inhabited the parent is viewed to then inhabit the child. It is easy to see how the family unit influenced Mesopotamian domestic religion. Whereas royal ideology has left its stamp on quite a bit of the Old Testament and Israelite religion, this other sociological arrangement has as well. Domestic religion is a fruitful vantage point from which to view quite a number of the Psalms, and the book of Genesis. It also gives a clue on how interpreters should view the idea of "God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," and the switch of understanding in Exodus 6:3, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *El Shaddai*, but by my name, *Yahweh*, I was not known to them." Rather than "God Almighty," perhaps a better translation of *El Shaddai* would be "El, my family God."⁷

KH: Joel, there is not space here to pursue every line of thinking that your last section suggests to me, including one more pass at the "children of the gods" discussion related to ANE as the context in which much of the

Several Muslim believers and I were reflecting on the profound mystery of the intertwining of Jesus' sonship with ours.

Old Testament is imbedded. But now I want to jump to some of the New Testament uses of that.

The idea of being God's children is very important in the New Testament. John's Gospel speaks of this in the first chapter and he returns to that in his epistles.

Just today, I was discussing Galatians 4:6 with several Muslim believers in Jesus who lead movements. We were reflecting on the profound mystery of the intertwining of Jesus' sonship with ours. The spirit of Jesus is in us crying out "Abba."

Tracing this back to the Old Testament context and Israel as God's child ("Out of Egypt I have called my son . . ." Matt. 2:15) is important. Seeing how that also was communicated within the ANE context is what you are opening up for us. Looking at this as indicative of how God uses human context as a means of communicating deep spiritual realities is the missiological theme I am trying to pry loose as we interact.

Conclusion

KH: Joel, thank you for interacting. Perhaps this can spark a series of deeper dives into some of the themes we have barely touched upon here.

JH: Thank you, Kevin, for the invitation to interact. What we see here—that even the Hebrew Bible's witness itself is contextualized—can serve as a model for helping believers contextualize the gospel for their own contexts. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ G. Ernest Wright was an American counterpart to German scholars, such as Gerhard von Rad, who was concerned about the anti-Semitic tone in German theology in the early to mid-twentieth century. Wright was a leading figure in the American Biblical Theology movement in the 1940s–60s, which had a distinctive Hebrew worldview

focus. Though not an Old Testament scholar as such, Karl Barth was a lead figure in a repudiation of natural theology, largely in response to troubling developments in German theology in the first half of the twentieth century. His main work that does this is *Nein*, which is a full onslaught against natural theology and his colleague, Emil Brunner. Barth's later work, especially as seen in *The Humanity of God*, pulls back to an extent of such an attack on natural theology.

² Paul Althaus was one of the more prominent German Church theologians. For a good survey of his thought in the context of mid-twentieth century Christian thought, and Lutheran thought in general, see Robert P. Ericksen, "The Political Theology of Paul Althaus: Nazi Supporter," *German Studies Review* 9, no. 3 (October 1986): 547–567.

³ The coronation hymn of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal has a very close parallel. Alasdair Livingstone, "A late piece of constructed mythology relevant to the Neo-Assyrian and Middle Assyrian coronation hymn and prayer (1.146)," in *Context of Scripture*, eds. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden/New York: Brill, 2003), 477.

⁴ I am not using this word *mythic* in a sense that means untrue, but in the sense that it presents a timeless truth that informs worldview.

⁵ One note here, however, is at the level of domestic religion, and the worship of family and personal deities, people were considered the children of these lower level divinities, and there were various taboos and so forth that the average person was to follow, and these divinities could be sinned against, and exercise wrath of various sorts against transgressors.

⁶ There are two rather large collections of ancient Near Eastern prophecy outside of Israel. From the early second millennium BC there is a large collection from the Northern Mesopotamian city of Mari, and from the seventh century BC, there is a large collection that generally revolve around the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.

⁷ This formulation of the etymology of *El Shaddai*, is not without controversy, as the Akkadian term, *Shedu*, crosses over into the later strata of biblical Hebrew, and even later, Rabbinic Hebrew, as a term meaning "demon."