



THE POLEMICAL THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

JOHN D. CURRID

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James M. Hamilton, Associate Professor of Biblical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*

Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament

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Prologue

This book is about the relationship between the writings of the Old Testament and other ancient Near Eastern literature. It is a difficult, complicated, and much-debated topic in the field of biblical studies today. To be frank, there is little consensus regarding exactly how the two relate to each other. There are extremes, to be sure: on the one hand, some believe that ancient Near Eastern studies have little to contribute to our understanding of the Old Testament and, in fact, constitute a danger to Scripture. On the other hand, there are some who would say that the Old Testament is not unique but it is merely another expression of ancient Near Eastern literature that is grounded in myth, legend, and folklore. Surely the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. It is certainly undeniable that the historical, geographical, and cultural context of the Bible is the ancient Near East, and study of the era has much to add to our understanding of the Old Testament. But it is also true that the Old Testament worldview is unique in the ancient Near East, and this is immediately confirmed by its all-pervasive monotheism. It simply does not swallow ancient Near Eastern thought hook, line, and sinker. And so, the question for modern minds in this regard is, what precisely is the relationship of the Old Testament to ancient Near Eastern literature?

This book attempts to look at one particular slice of this large and multifaceted issue. My hope is to advance the debate a little, stir up some thoughts, and perhaps make some progress in the discussion. The book, however, is not written for scholars, although I hope some scholars may benefit from it. The work is *introductory* and, therefore, is designed for

those who know little about the topic of polemical theology. My desire is that it might invigorate people to do further study in the Old Testament and its relationship with ancient Near Eastern culture and thought.

The study is also meant to be *exemplary* and not exhaustive. In other words, I do not consider every case of polemical theology in the Old Testament, nor is every example I consider done in exhaustive detail. My objective is to demonstrate that the concept of polemics is not foreign to or uncommon in the Old Testament. And, in fact, polemical writing was commonly practiced throughout the entire ancient Near East.¹

The study is also not meant to be *reductionistic*. The relationship between the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern literature and culture is quite complex. I am focusing on only one aspect of that relationship, and it is obviously only one lens by which to look at the material. There are numerous other lenses that ought to be employed to examine the material in order to arrive at a fully developed perspective on this vast issue. I am aware that I may be accused of being *minimalistic*, but that is certainly not my intention. My desire is to push things forward in order to stimulate conversation.

The main ideas of the monograph were originally presented in a series of lectures I gave at the Fall Conference at Reformed Theological Seminary–Charlotte in 2007. That three-part series was entitled, “Crass Plagiarism: The Problem of the Relationship of the Old Testament to Ancient Near Eastern Literature.” Much has been added to that seminal work, and this new material has been included in this book. In many ways, it remains a work in process, and I hope to write on the topic for years to come.

It is a pleasure to take a moment to thank those who helped in the preparation of this manuscript. First, I would like to thank my teaching assistant, Lacy Larson, for her labors in this project. I am grateful, as well, to Reformed Theological Seminary–Charlotte for granting me a study leave to produce the book. Justin Taylor of Crossway was encouraging to me from beginning to end, and I appreciate his support of this project.

¹ See, for example, John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), page 62 and note 64.

The Birth of the Deliverer

As will become clear in our study, numerous stories from the Old Testament reflect common motifs or plot-motifs¹ of the ancient Near East. One of those motifs that is found in various cultures of the area is a birth story in which a child is under threat and danger in infancy, but he survives and grows up to become an important leader of his people. Most of these stories are mythic narratives or legends that deal with the lives of the gods or of larger-than-life human heroes. The various versions of the motif cover a long span of time: the earliest version perhaps appears as early as the end of the third millennium BC. The motif is found throughout the ancient Near East, including accounts from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Hatti. Important for our investigation is the fact that there are striking parallels between the birth story of Moses recorded in Exodus 2:1–10 and these other stories. The question for us, once again, is how do we evaluate and understand the relationship of these ancient Near Eastern tales and the biblical narrative? Is there dependence between them? Is the biblical author merely borrowing well-known literature from the surrounding cultures and employing it for his own purposes? Is the biblical material legend, myth, or history? These and other questions will be dealt with in the course of this chapter. However, before we attempt to answer these questions, let us first

¹ Term used by Dorothy Irvin, "The Joseph and Moses Story," in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 183; she defines it as "a plot element which moves the story forward a step."

describe and consider the various accounts of the “birth of the deliverer” motif in the ancient Near East.

The Legend of Sargon

Sargon I (c. 2340–2284 BC) was a Semite who was the founder of the Akkadian empire in Mesopotamia. “He had been cupbearer to the king of Kish, but he overthrew his master and then marched his forces to Uruk. Sargon defeated Lugalzaggisi, who at that time was overlord of Sumer, and proceeded to conquer Ur, Lagash, Umma, and finally all Sumer, even to the Persian Gulf. He founded his capital at the city of Agade, the only royal city of ancient Mesopotamia whose location is unknown.”² Sargon expanded his land holdings with military campaigns against Syria in the west and Elam to the east. He ruled more than fifty-five years, and by all accounts his reign was a glorious one.

We do not have much contemporary inscriptional evidence from the reign of Sargon; there are two Sargon texts that describe his military expansion to the east, in particular, against Elam.³ Sargon was certainly a historical figure of great consequence, but in reality we know little of him from documents of the time. Sargon’s reign, however, “made such an impression on the Sumero-Akkadians that his personality was surrounded with a lasting halo of legend.”⁴ Indeed, there are several literary works of a later date that speak of Sargon’s life, kingship, and military exploits. The question for the historian is, how much of the later literature is mere legend and how much of it contains true historical detail?

One of these later texts is the Legend of Sargon, and it tells of Sargon’s birth and his rise to power.⁵ Four copies of the text have been discovered (Texts A, B, C, D) on tablets that come from as early as the seventh century BC. The date of the original composition is uncertain. Brian Lewis

² John D. Currid and David P. Barrett, *Crossway ESV Bible Atlas* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 59.

³ W. Hinz, “Persia, c. 2400–1800 B.C.,” *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 1, chapter 23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 5–7.

⁴ Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 140.

⁵ James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 119. The most up-to-date and detailed study of this text is Brian Lewis, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero Who Was Exposed at Birth* (Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980).

concludes, and Tremper Longman agrees, that it was originally written during the reign of Sargon II (721–705 BC) in the neo-Assyrian period.⁶ The purpose of the tale was to glorify Sargon II by showing that he was a worthy successor of Sargon I of Akkad. In other words, the text was partially composed to legitimize the rule of Sargon II. That chronology certainly is possible, although it is speculative. Some of the elements of the legend are found in other texts that precede the full accounts of the seventh–sixth centuries BC. For example, one Old Babylonian text (early second millennium BC) begins, “I am Sargon, the beloved of Ishtar, who roams the entire world.”⁷ The idea that Sargon is the beloved one of Ishtar does not make its appearance in the Legend of Sargon, but it has been present in Mesopotamian literature for centuries. This is perhaps one indication that the composition derives from an earlier age than Sargon II. Again, to be fair, we are uncertain as to its provenance.

The text is related in the first person singular: “Sargon, the mighty king, king of Agade, am I.” Obviously the story is not from the time of Sargon I, and therefore its genre is what Albert Grayson calls “pseudo-autobiography” or what Longman names as “fictional autobiography.”⁸ Some scholars disagree with this definition, but it is essentially correct.⁹ The bottom line is that the text is fictional and legendary, as it was written long after the death of Sargon I.

The plot narrative of the story may be divided into four parts:

1. *Lines 1–3.* The tale opens with Sargon’s self-identification; again, he is purported to have written this document about himself, but this is highly unlikely. Here he describes his lowly, or at least questionable, origins. He is the son of an *enetu*, that is, a high priestess.¹⁰ Sargon never knew his father: perhaps his father had died young, or more

⁶ *Ibid.*, 97ff.; Tremper Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 57–58.

⁷ Lewis, *Sargon Legend*, 133.

⁸ Albert K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1975), 8 n. 11; and Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 53–60.

⁹ See Hans G. Guterbock, “Die historische Tradition und ihre literarische Gestaltung bei Babylonieren und Hethitern bis 1200,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 42 (1934): 1–91, who classifies this text as *naru*-literature. It is a literary type that is structured like accounts appearing on monumental stelae.

¹⁰ Early translators thought this term meant a “lowly woman,” but modern studies have properly rendered it as a “priestess.”

likely Sargon is the product of an illegitimate relationship. Sargon's family is not well-known or well-heralded; his brothers do not live in the city or the plain but are mere highlanders. One wonders if this text is dealing with the legitimacy of Sargon's kingship, since he was a Semite and not a Sumerian. In fact, Sargon's throne name was *sarru-ken(u)*, which means "the king is legitimate."

2. *Lines 4–9.* The text now relates Sargon's birth story. Apparently at the time of his birth there exists some type of danger or peril so that his mother gives birth to him "in secret." The nature of the threat is not disclosed in the text. Whatever it is, the danger forces the mother to place Sargon in a basket of reeds, cover the basket with bitumen to seal it against destructive elements, and abandon it in "the rivers." The plural perhaps reflects the twin rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates. The tar-covered vessel is for protection from the waters, as is clear from Sargon's statement that the rivers "did not rise over me." At the close of the water ordeal, Sargon is "lifted out" of the water by a gardener named Akki, through the "goodness of his heart."
3. *Lines 10–12.* Akki then raises Sargon as his own son, and the youth becomes a gardener like his adoptive father. The text then relates that the goddess Ishtar loves Sargon in this period of his youth, and this indicates divine election and divine approval of his person.
4. *Lines 13–30.* Because of Ishtar's favor, Sargon becomes ruler and deliverer of the kingdom. Much of this section deals with Sargon's military prowess and how he expanded his kingdom over the land of Sumer and extended it as far as Lebanon to the west.

Sections 2–4 of the text, in particular lines 4–13, are clearly reminiscent of the birth account of Moses in Exodus 2:1–10. The elements of commonality are: (1) the danger and secrecy surrounding the birth; (2) the mother placing the exposed child in a reed basket covered with bitumen; (3) the abandonment of the child in a river; (4) the rescue and adoption of the child; and, finally, (5) the boy growing up to become a great leader of his people. Although some commentators disagree, it seems obvious that there is some type of relationship between the two accounts: in matters of plot, sequence, and details the stories generally match. The question before us again is, what is that relationship? How do we explain parallel stories like these appearing in different cultures and times? Is there dependence or not?

The dominant thinking in the field of biblical studies, of course, is that the story of Moses has been borrowed from the Legend of Sargon. Often the assumption is that the Legend of Sargon was composed earlier than the story of Moses, and therefore the biblical text must be dependent on the earlier ancient Near Eastern documents. That is probably a poor assumption, as James Hoffmeier rightly argues:

A further problem for those wishing to find a correlation between the Sargon legend and the Moses birth story is, as noted above, that the earliest surviving copies of the Sargon text date from the Neo-Assyrian or later times. This factor, along with others, suggests that the legend may have been recorded by (or for) the late 8C Assyrian king, Sargon II, who took the name of his great Akkadian forebear and identified himself with that monarch. This possibility diminishes the case for the Sargon legend influencing Exodus because if we allow that J or E (usually dated to the 10C and 8C respectively) is the source behind Exodus 2:1-10, and follow the traditional dating for these sources, both would predate the reign of Sargon II (721-705)."¹¹

Hoffmeier's tentative conclusion that the biblical account of the birth of Moses was not dependent on the Sargon legend is predicated on the late scheme of the dating of the authorship of Exodus. If one accepts an even earlier dating of the composition of Exodus, perhaps a Mosaic authorship, then the biblical narrative predates the Sargon legend by centuries.

The Myth of Horus

As I have attempted to demonstrate, many scholars believe the birth story of Moses to be clearly related to the Legend of Sargon.¹² However, some do not agree. A few historians, to the contrary, argue that the parallels between the two accounts are weak and mere generalities. Rather, because the setting of the Moses birth narrative is Egypt, one should look for connections with the literature of *that* land. As Gary Rendsburg points out, "the nature of biblical literature suggests that we should look not to Mesopotamia to

¹¹ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 136–137.

¹² See B. S. Childs, "The Birth of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 109–122; and B. R. Foster, "The Birth Legend of Sargon of Akkad," in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., vol. 1 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 1:461.

explain a feature in a story set in Egypt, but rather to Egypt.”¹³ And a story from Egypt that contains what Donald Redford calls the “exposed-infant motif” has been found: it is commonly called the Myth of Horus.¹⁴

The fullest account of this birth story is found in Plutarch’s *Isis and Osiris*, which was written late in his life (46–120 AD).¹⁵ An abridged text called *P. Jumilhac* appears earlier, during the Ptolemaic period in the second century BC. Redford has complained that these texts are so late, and were probably borrowed from the Greco-Roman period, that they have no relationship to the biblical narrative. Rendsburg properly refutes Redford by arguing that “elements of the Horus-Seth conflict and the Isis-Horus relationship appear already in the Pyramid Texts from the Old Kingdom and in the Coffin Texts from the Middle Kingdom. . . . the only element of the Horus birth story that appears for the first time in late texts is the specific mention of the papyrus basket.”¹⁶ Thus, the basic story and the motif of “the exposed child” have been part of Egyptian literary culture for a long time.

The setting of the story is the realm of the gods. Two of the major figures of the account are Osiris, the deity who rules the netherworld, and his wife, Isis. The text narrates the murder of Osiris by the god Seth, the deity of disorder, deserts, storms, and war. Isis responds by resurrecting and resuscitating her husband, and then she conceives a son by him. She gives birth to Horus “in the marshlands of Chemmis.” But there is great danger for Horus: his mother is afraid that if Seth discovers Horus’s existence and whereabouts he will kill the child. Apparently Seth would be afraid that the child will grow up to take revenge on him for killing Horus’s father, Osiris. Seth does find out about Horus’s existence, and he attempts to lure Isis and her child to their death. Thoth, the god of healing and wisdom, comes to their defense, and they are able to escape back to the marshlands of Chemmis (the Delta). There Isis hides Horus in papyrus thickets, and

¹³ Gary A. Rendsburg, “Moses as Equal to Pharaoh,” in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. Gary M. Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), 201–219.

¹⁴ Donald B. Redford, “The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child,” *Numen* 14 (1967): 209–228.

¹⁵ Daniel S. Richter, “Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 131 (2001): 191–216.

¹⁶ Rendsburg, “Moses as Equal to Pharaoh,” 206 n. 19.

in the later accounts she places him in a papyrus basket. Seth continues to try to kill Horus, even transforming himself into a snake to bite the child. Horus survives the peril, and by the end of the myth he is grown up and ready to fight Seth and to avenge the killing of his father Osiris.

The birth story of Horus, of course, is mythic; it deals with the lives of the gods. Its purpose appears to be justification for Horus’s rise in becoming the first state god of Egypt. The Horus-Seth conflict in general has another purpose, and that is to demonstrate Horus’s close relationship with Pharaoh as ruler of all Egypt. In the great battle between Horus and Seth, Seth either wounded or stole Horus’s eye so that Horus was in a weakened condition. Eventually Horus recovered his eye, regained great strength, and conquered Seth. To the ancient Egyptian, the eye of Horus became the symbol of all the power and virtue of that deity. Accordingly, “the symbol and seal of royal power, the uraeus of the crown, is called the Eye of Horus.”¹⁷ In other words, Pharaoh’s crown was imbued with all the power and virility of Horus. Pharaoh ruled the land as an incarnation of Horus (and Re).

The biblical story of the birth of Moses clearly echoes this well-known mythic narrative of the conflict between Seth and Horus and, in particular, the part of it called the Horus birth story. The basic parallels between the two are as follows:

<i>Birth of Horus</i>	<i>Birth of Moses</i>
Child in great danger: Seth attempting to kill him	Child in great danger: Pharaoh attempting to kill him (Ex. 1:15–22)
Role of mother emphasized: Isis tries to protect the child Horus	Role of mother emphasized: Jochebed tries to protect the child Moses (Ex. 2:2)
Isis hides child in papyrus thicket; later versions in a papyrus basket	Jochebed places child in a papyrus basket and hides him in a reed thicket by the banks of the Nile River (Ex. 2:3)
A second familial-related female serves as the child’s guardian: Horus’s aunt Nephthys	A second familial-related female serves as the child’s guardian: Moses’s sister, Miriam (Ex. 2:4)

¹⁷ Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 126.

<i>Birth of Horus</i>	<i>Birth of Moses</i>
Isis nurses the child	Jochebed nurses the child by arrangement with Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:7-9)
The god Thoth comes to the aid of Isis and Horus	Yahweh comes to the aid of all Israel (Ex. 2:23-25)
Horus rises to become first state god of Egypt, incarnated in Pharaoh	Moses rises to become leader to deliver the people of Israel from Pharaoh's hand

The setting of the birth of Moses in Egypt is an important connection with the Myth of Horus that is not present with regard to the Legend of Sargon. The very qualities and temper of the biblical account direct us to Egypt and nowhere else. Furthermore, the biblical narrative does not appear to be anachronistic but properly reflects ancient Egyptian customs and practices. The birth account itself even includes Egyptian vocabulary. For example, after Moses is born, Jochebed could hide him no longer than three months, so she places him in a *gome' tebah* ("a basket made of bulrushes"; Ex. 2:3). The first term, *gome'*, is an Egyptian word that means "papyrus." The second word, *tebah*, is also an Egyptian loan word that literally means "chest, coffin." The ancient Egyptians were known to have used sailing vessels made of long reeds (Isa. 18:1-2), and thus this as a means to deliver the child from danger has Egypt written all over it.

Another example of a solid vocabulary connection is the naming of the child "Moses." This name derives from the Hebrew verb *mashah*, which means "to draw out," and it reflects the action of Pharaoh's daughter, who "drew him out of the water" (Ex. 2:10). However, the name is also a common Egyptian word meaning "son of." Many Egyptian names "employ it in conjunction with other words: Thutmosis (son of Thut) and Ahmosis (son of Ah), for example. In the name 'Moses', however, the genitive has no object. He is simply 'the son of.' This is probably a pun by the biblical writer to emphasize the point that Moses was not a son of Egypt, but rather a son of Israel."¹⁸

¹⁸ John D. Currid, *Exodus*, vol. 1 (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2000), 64.

Rendsburg is correct when he concludes that “the sum of the evidence is clear: not surprisingly, a biblical story set in Egypt echoes a well-known and popular myth from Egypt.”¹⁹ The connection between the two stories is tight and clear, but we are still left with the questions from the beginning of the chapter, such as, what is the exact nature of their relationship? What is their association?

Hittite Tales

The literature of the Hittites contains at least three stories with the primary theme of the birth to the gods of a child who is in immediate and great peril. The child, however, is delivered from danger and grows up to be an important deity and leader of the gods. The first such story is called the Song of Ullikummis.²⁰ This story was originally Hurrian from the middle of the second millennium BC, but it is found in its fullest form on tablets from the Hittite capital of Hattusa from the fourteenth–thirteenth centuries BC. The narration tells of the deity Kumarbi, “the father of the gods,” siring a son who is to grow up and seek revenge on his father’s enemies among the gods. Kumarbi then hides the child with friends in the underworld so that Ishtar will “not crush him like a reed.” The child, named Ullikummis, is delivered, and remains in a safe place where he will grow up in order to avenge his father. The adult Ullikummis then poses a threat to all the other gods.

A second Hittite story, called “The Sun-god and the Cow,” is another birth myth.²¹ It tells the story of how the Sun-god impregnated a cow, and how the cow gave birth to a two-legged calf. The cow is angry because the calf should have four legs, and so she attempts to kill it: “Like a lion, the cow opened her mouth and went toward the child to eat (it?).”²² The Sun-

¹⁹ Rendsburg, “Moses as Equal to Pharaoh,” 207.

²⁰ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 121–125.

²¹ It is sometimes referred to as “The Tale of the Fisherman.” An excellent translation appears in Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “The Sun God and the Cow,” in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., vol. 1 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 155–156. For commentary on the text, see Hans G. Guterbock, *Kumarbi* (Zurich: Europa Verlag, 1946); idem, “The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarbi Myths: Oriental Forerunners of Hesiod,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 52/1 (1948): 123–134; and Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “Hittite Mythological Texts: A Survey,” in *Unity and Diversity*, ed. Hans Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 136–145.

²² Hoffner, “Sun God and the Cow,” 155.

god, however, rescues the child and takes him to the mountains to be under the protection of some animals there. The child is eventually discovered by a childless fisherman, who takes him home. He and his wife decide to take the child and rear him, but first they plot to convince their neighbors that the child has been born to them. The story ends at this point, but it is evident that it continues on another tablet that has not been found.

The third tale is often referred to as “The City of Zalpa,” and like the previous two stories it originated in the mid-second millennium BC. The bulk of the narrative is concerned with a three-generational war between Hattusa, the capital city of the Hittites, and Zalpa, a city located to the north of Hattusa in central Anatolia. At the close of the story Zalpa is destroyed. The preface to the entire account deals with primordial events that occur in the city of Kanesh. One of the events recorded is as follows:

The queen of Kanesh gave birth to thirty sons in a single year. She said, “What is this—I have produced a horde!” She caulked containers with grease, placed her sons therein, and launched them into the river. The river carried them to the sea, at the land of Zalpa. But the gods took the sons from the sea and raised them.²³

Other Hittite myths, such as the tale “Brother Good and Brother Bad,” have a similar plot-motif, but it is unnecessary that we consider each and every one of these. We need simply to recognize the ubiquitous nature of the motif in Hittite literature.

Analysis

The motif of a persecuted child is, as we have seen, a common one in the ancient Near East. In most of these stories, the basic plot of the drama is the rescue of an imperiled child who grows up to become a great leader and deliverer. The biblical narrative of Moses clearly fits into this pattern: it is a descriptive account of the persecution of a Hebrew child by the Egyptian Pharaoh, and how he is delivered and destined to become a leader and savior of the Israelites. In addition, many of the details of the Moses

²³ John M. Foley, ed., *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 262.

story are found in the other accounts. I have attempted to highlight many of these parallels in the study above. In my opinion, the parallels in structure, flow, and details of the accounts are not coincidental. The relationship appears obvious and certain, but what is the exact and precise nature of that association? Is there borrowing of one from another? Is there dependence?

Before considering some suggestions to help us understand that relationship, it is important that we see that there are some critical dissimilarities between the biblical account and the ancient Near Eastern stories.²⁴ The differences are deep and extensive, and they go to the very heart of the disparate views of the Hebrews over against the pagan peoples of the surrounding nations. The unique and exceptional character of the Hebrew world-and-life view is highlighted by such a comparison.

1. *Ancient Near Eastern fiction.* All of the birth accounts discussed above from the pagan peoples surrounding Israel are either myth or legend. In other words, they are focused on the realms of the gods or demigods or folklore heroes. Although in the case of the legends there perhaps is a kernel or two of historical fact, they are mostly devoid of what is commonly understood as history. While the birth of Moses reflects and echoes many of the elements of those stories, it is different because it does not take place in the mythic or legendary sphere. In other words, what was mere myth and legend in the ancient Near Eastern literature was true history in Israel. God truly called a deliverer and saved him from great peril, and he became savior of the people of Israel. What was myth in pagan contexts was fact in Israel. Myth became fact.

2. *Ancient Near Eastern theology.* The story of the birth and life of Moses accentuates the reality of a providential God who is separate from the universe but determines the operation of the universe. Yahweh, therefore, is both transcendent and immanent. To the contrary, the other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies sought to explain the structure and operation of the universe in terms of gods who personified nature. While ancient pagan writers speculatively searched for elements that ordered the universe internally and called them gods, the Hebrew authors presented an

²⁴ In chapter 4, I dealt with this issue in detail in regard to the flood accounts of the ancient Near East. It would serve the reader well to review that chapter. There is some obvious redundancy, but that is to be expected.

external force who created and continually sustained the cosmos. Ancient Israelite cosmology rested upon the Hebrews' unique belief in a single God (monotheism) who began the universe and was completely sovereign over its operation. The entire birth account of the deliverer Moses was played out according to Yahweh's will, purpose, and plan.

3. *Ancient Near Eastern anthropology.* The Israelite writers also understood humans to be important and essential to the workings of the universe. They were creatures of great purpose and dignity. They were made not to be slaves but to be princes, rulers, and the crown of creation. In the Hebrew birth account, humans take center stage, and they are of critical importance for the unfolding of God's redemptive history. In the pagan birth accounts, humans are superfluous (except perhaps for Sargon, who in fact becomes a demigod). In reality, a dominant anthropological theme throughout the ancient Near East is the belief that mankind was created to be slaves to the gods and to serve their every whim. Humans are mere secondary players, simple role actors, in the mythic narratives of the gods.

The Polemical Angle

Although the persecuted-child motif appears throughout the ancient Near East, it is clear that the biblical narrative of Moses's birth most closely resembles and echoes the Myth of Horus from Egypt.²⁵ This makes perfectly good sense, since the setting of Moses's birth is Egypt. In fact, the biblical author may have employed this echo from a well-known Egyptian myth for polemical reasons. In other words, the writer takes the famous pagan myth and turns it on its head in order to ridicule Egypt and to highlight the truth of the Hebrew world-and-life view. At the heart of the polemic is a taunt of the Egyptian Pharaoh:

Furthermore, the biblical writer utilized the venerable Horus myth in order to present Moses as equal to Pharaoh. The young Moses is akin to the young Horus, the latter a mythic equal of the living Pharaoh. At the same time, the Pharaoh of the biblical story has been transformed from

²⁵ Hoffmeier, in *Israel in Egypt*, 139, demonstrates that the parallels are not merely thematic; there are several Egyptian loan words employed in Exodus 2:1–10. This helps to confirm the connection between the two accounts.

his Egyptian mythological position of the persecuted, that is, Horus, to that of the persecutor, that is, Seth.²⁶

In other words, whereas Egyptian thought teaches that Pharaoh is the incarnation of the persecuted Horus, the biblical writer is saying that, in reality, he is not the persecuted Horus but the persecutor Seth! Moses, on the other hand, is the Horus figure who survives infant persecution to grow up and deliver his people from the evil figure of Pharaoh as the Seth figure. This ironic twist is a polemic that serves as an overwhelming assault on Pharaoh and his status as the living embodiment of the god Horus.

²⁶ Rendsburg, "Moses as Equal to Pharaoh," 207–208.

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