

Old Testament Backgrounds: Lecture 10 — Literature of the Babylonian Period

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Abstract

This lecture examines the rich literary backdrop of the Old Babylonian period (c. 1800–1600 BC) and its foundational intersections with the Old Testament. Dr. Donald Fowler analyzes the Mari royal archives to challenge claims that Israelite prophecy was rooted in ecstaticism, arguing instead that biblical prophecy is fundamentally ethical and legal. Furthermore, Fowler explores ancient Near Eastern covenant terminology, demonstrating how legal terms like 'father,' 'son,' 'love,' and 'hate' reflect covenantal loyalty and election rather than modern emotional states. Finally, the lecture compares Mesopotamian flood narratives—specifically Tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh Epic—with the biblical Genesis account, weighing significant thematic parallels against profound theological and historical differences.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Old Babylonian Period (c. 1800–1600 BC)

- A. Shift from political/regal history to literature of the Old Babylonian era
- B. Golden age for comparative connections with the Hebrew Bible and patriarchal narratives (Isaac, Jacob, Joseph)
- C. Major tablet discoveries and key archaeological sites (Mari, Nineveh, Ugarit)

II. The Mari Archives and Biblical Prophecy

- A. Discovery and Scale of the Mari Royal Palace
 - 1. Discovery of over 20,000 cuneiform tablets on the Euphrates River
 - 2. Largest palace of the Old Babylonian period (2.5 acres, 300+ rooms and courts)
 - 3. Preservation of 3,600-year-old Amorite royal wall paintings and art
- B. Evaluation of Prophetic 'Ecstaticism' at Mari vs. Israel
 - 1. Critical academic claims regarding Mari functionaries as 'ecstatics' (out-of-body experiences)
 - 2. Rejection of 'Parallelomania' (Samuel Sandmel): warning against forcing external parallels onto scripture
 - 3. Theological framework: God graciously reveals truth within the historical-cultural language of the recipient
 - 4. Purpose of Mari functionaries: providing Oracles Before Battle (OBB) to validate royal military ambitions

5. Distinguishing characteristics of Old Testament prophets:
 - a. Grounded in ethical demands and enforcement of the Mosaic Law rather than ecstatic states
 - b. Functioned as royal counselors and advisors to kings (e.g., Isaiah, Micah)
 - c. Alleged ecstatic passages (Numbers, 1 Samuel 10, 2 Kings 3, Ezekiel) represent context-specific exceptions rather than the normative rule

III. Ancient Near Eastern Covenant Language in Mari and the Old Testament

- A. Technical Legal Function of Covenant Vocabulary
 1. Covenant terms establish legal status rather than biological relationship
 2. Parity Covenants (equal partners): designated by the term 'brother' (e.g., David and Jonathan)
 3. Suzerainty Treaties (sovereign and vassal): designated by 'father' (suzerain) and 'son' (subordinate)
 4. Potential background for functional relational terms within the Trinity
- B. Reinterpreting 'Love' and 'Hate' in Biblical Covenant Contexts
 1. Meaning of 'Love' (Deuteronomy 6:5)
 - a. Modern emotive interpretation vs. ancient Near Eastern covenantal fidelity and allegiance
 - b. Mari precedent: Queen Shibtu's letter to her general ('if you love me' = act with complete legal loyalty)
 - c. Neo-Assyrian parallel: Treaty of Ashurbanipal/Esarhaddon commanding covenant loyalty and transmission to descendants
 - d. New Testament connection: Jesus citing Deuteronomy 6:5 as wholehearted covenant faithfulness
 2. Meaning of 'Hate' (Malachi 1:2–3 & Luke 14:26)
 - a. Malachi 1: 'Jacob I loved, Esau I hated' signifies covenantal election ('chosen' vs. 'not chosen')
 - b. Luke 14: 'Hate mother and father' reflects rejecting patriarchal legal authority in favor of allegiance to the Messiah

IV. Mesopotamian Flood Narratives and the Gilgamesh Epic

- A. Four Major Mesopotamian Flood Accounts
 1. Sumerian Version (early 2nd millennium BC, fragmentary tablet)
 2. Old Babylonian Version (Atra-Hasis, comprehensive creation-to-flood epic)
 3. Neo-Assyrian Version (Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet 11)
 4. Late Babylonian Account (Berossus, 3rd century BC priest)
- B. Narrative Structure of the Gilgamesh Epic
 1. Exploits of Gilgamesh (hero: half-god, half-man)
 2. Creation of Enkidu (half-man, half-bull) as rival, turning into friendship
 3. Death of Enkidu driving Gilgamesh's tragic quest for immortality
 4. Search for Utnapishtim ('day of life' / flood survivor) and the Tree of Life in the Persian Gulf
 5. Loss of the plant of eternal life to the sea monster Tanim

C. Comparative Analysis: Biblical (Genesis) vs. Mesopotamian Accounts

1. Undeniable Parallels: Divine decree to destroy humanity, single hero saved on a vessel, vessel landing on a mountain, sending of birds, post-flood repopulation

2. Substantive Differences:

a. Cause of flood: Human moral wickedness (Genesis) vs. human noise/overpopulation disturbing divine sleep (Gilgamesh)

b. Divine character: Singular, righteous God warning Noah vs. deceptive, arguing pagan deities

c. Vessel design: Seaworthy rectangular vessel (Genesis) vs. unfloatable cubic structure (Gilgamesh)

d. Post-flood covenant: Unconditional rainbow covenant never to destroy the earth again vs. absence of divine promise in Gilgamesh

V. Conclusion and Methodological Principles

A. Priority of cultural-historical context over strict etymology in word studies

B. Requirement to explain both similarities and differences in comparative biblical studies

C. Preview of three interpretative models for addressing Near Eastern parallels