

My Journey Through ANE Studies

Leong Tien Fock

I was asked to share why the more I was exposed to the literature of the “ancient Near East” (ANE), the more I became convinced of the verbal plenary inspiration of the Old Testament (OT). This is a concise presentation of the highlights in my journey through ANE studies.

I did an MA in OT studies at Wheaton College before moving on to UCLA to do an MA and then PhD in ANE studies. One of my professors at Wheaton College, who did his PhD in ANE studies at a secular university, once said: “Those of us evangelicals [who did ANE studies in a non-evangelical institution] often moved away from our evangelical position when we were there. But when we returned to teach in an evangelical institution, we gradually returned to our evangelical position.” So I was forewarned. This must have affected how I approached ANE studies in a secular university.

In UCLA, I was able to look at ANE literature and compare it with the OT without feeling any academic pressure to conform to the mainstream scholarship of either field. And given my belief in, and thus bias toward, the OT as inspired Scripture, it was natural for me to view the striking similarities between the ANE materials and the OT as superficial and incidental. It was also natural for me to suppose that the similarities mean that the ANE bears witness to a common memory of “pre-historic” events, and thus corroborates what we read in Genesis 1–11. Also, in view of the equally striking differences, it seemed obvious to me that the OT preserves the correct version of the memory. For instance, in ANE literature the reason given for the Flood that destroyed almost all of humanity is that humanity had become too noisy and disturbed the sleep of the gods. So it made so much sense to me that if there was indeed such a Flood—and if not, why is there such a memory also in ANE literature?—the OT preserves the actual reason for the Flood.

We are all biased; the question is whether we are biased toward the truth. My (“biased”) view that the similarities between the ANE materials and the OT are superficial and incidental was confirmed when I took a course in Mesopotamian religion. The professor, who was not evangelical, showed that the differences between Mesopotamian religion and OT religion are structural—the differences are integral to their respective belief systems, belonging to entirely different structures. This means, the difference between the two religions is not in degree but in kind and hence, the similarities are indeed merely superficial and incidental. So the OT could not be simply a “demythologized” version of the ANE materials as claimed by non-evangelical scholars.

The course in fact opened my eyes to see that the difference between OT monotheism and ANE polytheism is not in numbers as generally assumed (one God versus many gods), but in kind altogether. In fact, one can be “polytheistic” without believing in the multiplicity of gods. It is then inconceivable how OT monotheism could have “evolved” from ANE polytheism as generally assumed. (I later discovered that all this was already demonstrated by Yehezkel Kaufmann in his book *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*.) Thus it became clear to me that the OT is absolutely unique in the ANE world and is of a kind that could not be purely the work of the human mind. It was through this comparing and contrasting the OT with the ANE materials that the absolute uniqueness of the OT as inspired Scripture became concrete to me.

In that Mesopotamian religion course, I wrote a most unusual term paper. I practiced what I preach—to really understand a book (or any literature) we must accept, at least temporarily, the dogmatic assumptions of the book/literature, that is, read it on its own terms and not let our own assumptions interfere with our reading (this assumes we are aware that we do have assumptions that constrain how we read a book/literature, and what these assumptions are). How many scholars would do it, and do it consistently, for Mesopotamian literature? And liberal/pseudo-evangelical biblical scholars do not do it for the OT. I did it in studying Mesopotamian literature, just as I do in studying the OT, and it culminated in the term paper. It was using this approach—without imposing my own assumptions on the materials—that I showed that Mesopotamian theology is purely man-made. I submit that if one would intentionally use this approach in studying the OT, and be “willing to do God’s will” (John 7:17), one could see that OT theology has to be revealed by God and thus recognize the verbal plenary inspiration of the OT. Otherwise, we can actually make the Bible say what we want it to say, such as the outright nonsense that we find in the Internet.

I knew my professor well enough to take a risk in writing such an unusual term paper. In his comments, he asked: “Is there any theology which is not purely human?” Then he summed up the paper: “An excellent paper, in which you show a remarkable ability to define and pursue a topic. Also, some excellent ideas which seem quite original.” He seems to be saying that the paper serves no real purpose—it is just “to define and pursue a topic”; there is no need to show that Mesopotamian theology is purely man-made. However, the “excellent . . . quite original” ideas were the outcome of precisely this sort of study! He gave me an A+ for my effort in defining and pursuing a topic.

It did serve a real purpose, at least for me. The exercise enabled me to understand Mesopotamian literature on its own terms and thus confirm that we can better understand any book/literature (can even have “excellent . . . quite original” ideas) if we do not impose our own assumptions on it, whether consciously or unconsciously. The better we understand the OT and the ANE materials, the more we see the absolute uniqueness of the OT in the ANE world. So the reason why the more I was exposed to the ANE materials the more I became convinced of the verbal plenary inspiration of the OT is that I read both the OT and the ANE materials respectively on their own terms.