

University of Notre Dame
Department of Theology

**THEO 60178:
Theology of the Old Testament in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context
Summer, 2017**

Time and Place: 8:30-11 am, 7:30-8:45 pm

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I. Course Description:

This course will explore the topic of Old Testament (OT) theology but do so historically. These two approaches, the theological and historical, are frequently pinned against one another, taken implicitly and sometimes explicitly as diametrically opposed. But we shall reconsider this, and ask whether the in fact opposite is truer: An appreciation of OT theology is best, and perhaps only, appreciated in the light of the world from which this text comes. To accomplish this we will look at writings from the ancient Near East that bear on some of the main themes of OT theology, including ideas of origins, monotheism, and the nature of the divine-human relationship, especially with respect to one specific group.

II. Challenges:

A. The General

The idea behind this course is not new. To the contrary, seemingly already with the earliest modern discoveries of the world of the ancient Near East over the past two centuries, the relationship between this world and the OT has figured to be a central question in ancient Near Eastern studies. And quite rightly: why would the great literary product from this world, which just happens to serve as the cornerstone to our own, *not* be studied against its counterparts? Even if one were to claim that s/he has no dog in that fight, the avoidance of this question would be folly at best. After all, all decent history is done in the manner of any real attempt at knowledge, makes judgments by way of continuous comparison and differentiation, and the analysis of the new and unknown from the established and known.

This motivation precisely explains the innumerable attempts to understand the nature of the relationship between the Bible and the ancient Near East, spanning the history of modern Biblical studies. Some instances in this journey have become famous, or infamous, especially the Babel/Bibel spectacle from the earliest days of the 20th century (see below). Other, less dramatic, examples – for instance, G. E. Wright's *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (1962) – have in their own way provided additional landmarks in this ongoing debate, something better appreciable with the benefit of history.

And even a lacuna in such interest, as witnessed, for instance, in the turn in Biblical studies internally, away from the comparative angle, cannot truly escape this question, since that Near Eastern genie, once out of its unearthed bottle, cannot simply be ignored in any serious manner. To try and do so takes the position – implicitly perhaps but inevitably nonetheless – that the OT is ultimately sufficiently autonomous from, independent of, and more sophisticated than its “roots” so as to warrant their ignoring. Naturally this last point finds support by those who champion it by the manner in which the issue is framed. For if the OT’s world is understood in the manner suggested, then the study of the text to the essential exclusion of its context becomes more justifiable. What poet, after all, surveys a tree’s roots when singing of its crown’s splendor?

The risk of reentry into these charted and troubled waters (to mix metaphors), therefore, should be duly noted. But their avoidance is no option if a credible picture of the OT on its own terms is sought for. And here the point raised above bears repeating: our taking on this challenge is not tantamount to the excavation of the Biblical text for the reconstruction of the historical Israel. It is intended to shed light on the *theological* idea of Israel, when compared to the world in and from which this idea comes. Naturally, in order for this experiment to work, what this means is that the ancient Near East, too, must be considered in theological terms – regardless of the impetuous kicking and screaming this may elicit in this world's best students.

B. More Specific

A *theology* of the ancient Near East? Many experts nowadays recoil from the study of this world's *religion* – let alone *theology* – on the grounds that the latter cannot be approached historically. And this point, while to an extent absurd, is not entirely without merit, even where the will is good. For how, exactly, should the thinking about the supernatural realm by different peoples (Sumerians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Hittites, Egyptians) over a wide span of time (4000-500 BC) be arranged? And what of the fact that this thinking is reflected in literatures of almost utterly different sorts, from the mythic-epic, to the hymnic, the scientific (yes, that too) – not to forget the daily “ephemeral,” the latter constituting the vast majority of what was recorded? Nor should one forget that the written record represents one of several main areas from which data bearing on this issue could be gathered. Would a responsible consideration of theology not turn to the visual record as well, or the architectural?

The problem we face, in short, is not limited to matters of understanding OT thought or even of proper method in comparative work. We find serious challenges facing us even on the side of the ancient Near East, the world is typically plucked from ad hoc for the sake of a passing comparison. To offer but one example of this point: while a glance at *Enūma eliš* undoubtedly augments the reading of Genesis 1, an in-depth consideration of that text in its own world reveals perspectives on the “*ex nihilo* question” that would otherwise almost certainly be missed. But can this text even be trusted as the proper representative of the theology of the ancient Near East?

C. Practical

Challenges present themselves at the “lower-level” of course organization, but inevitably more so in a forum as the present one, in the summer, without the span of time for new ideas to simmer in the mind and at more (or less?) congenial temperatures, with fewer (or more?) temptations for distraction from the beauties of nature. How are we to encompass a basis of the ancient Near East, its intellectual-theological reflections, and then turn and compare these with the OT counterparts? And all this in two weeks – to follow one of the texts to be surveyed, no more than twice the time in which creation was achieved by the divine realm?

III. Toward Solutions:

Of necessity, then, our journey can represent only initial foray into these complex matters. But that does not necessarily mean it is doomed for failure. If its inherent limitations are recognized (what is always and rightly the case), a better intellectual itinerary can be planned, one that will allow for just the right glimpse for an improved understanding of the issues, some sense of their answer, and, ideally, the intent and desire, with Gilgamesh below, to plum to greater depths at a future date.

In more practical terms this means that we will limit ourselves to two representative cultures from the ancient Near East: the Mesopotamian (itself an amalgam of two basic components) and the Canaanite. The reasons for this are threefold. In the first place, there is the simple reality of time constraints (which, incidentally, would not be altogether different were this a full-semester course during the academic year.) The second is guided by a rabbinic adage: תפסת מרובה לא תפסת, “(when) you (seek to) grasp (too) much, you grasp nothing.” In the present case this would apply for the attempts to cover a more diverse palate, including the writings from other cultures – for instance the Hittites, Egyptians – that would rightly deserve a seat in any table where ancient Near Eastern theology was being discussed. But this would surely yield more superficial results and perhaps even take us backwards, to understandings of past generations. Third, and most importantly, the comparative side of this exercise is

not intended to pin two unrelated systems of thought against one another. Rather, it is undertaken in keeping with what is known of Israel's history in terms of origins and cultural contacts. On these counts it is with Mesopotamia and Canaan that Israel is most entwined and derivative of (albeit in reverse contact).

IV. Class Schedule:

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| 1. Monday, 7/10: | Introductory Matters; Comparative Theology; Ancient Near East |
| 2. Tuesday, 7/11: | Mesopotamia: Myth |
| 3. Wednesday, 7/12 | Mesopotamia: Myth to Epic |
| 4. Thursday, 7/13 | Mesopotamia: Theology, Philosophy, Science, Law |
| 5. Friday, 7/14 | Canaan: Myth and Epic (?) |
| 6. Monday, 7/17 | OT: Creation and Ancient History |
| 7. Tuesday, 7/18 | OT: Sinai and Zion |
| 8. Wednesday, 7/19 | OT: Law |
| 9. Thursday, 7/20 | OT: History and Prophecy |
| 10. Friday, 7/21 | Summary |

V. Requirements:

The format of the course will consist of informal lectures, with student participation, based on the readings of primary and secondary texts, expected. The texts will be read in translation. Daily reviews of the literature (1 page each) and a final examination project will constitute the requirements for the course.

VI. Readings:

To follow soon ...