

Editorial

Editorial for the Special Issue “The Bible and Ancient Mesopotamia”

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In the mid-1980s, Moshe Yitzhaki ([Yitzhaki 1987](#)) carried out a citation analysis of scholarly publications from 1920 to 1980 to gauge the degree of cross-fertilization between biblical and Assyriological scholarship. His data reveal that it was meagre. At first blush, this is puzzling. After all, prior to the archaeological discoveries in Mesopotamia in the nineteenth century and the decipherment of cuneiform that quickly followed, the oldest texts to shed substantial light on ancient Mesopotamia came from biblical authors who had lived there or experienced the impact of Assyria and Babylon in the southern Levant. However one looks at it, the Bible and ancient Mesopotamia are profoundly linked and likely to be mutually illuminating. Nevertheless, on closer examination, the hesitancy to seek elucidation of biblical texts from Mesopotamian sources is explicable. The trauma inflicted on the cross-disciplinary biblical–Assyriological space by the bitter *Babel und Bibel* controversy at the turn of the twentieth century provides the explanation ([Foster 2011](#)). The widespread scholarly rejection of its central conceit that all that was valuable in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament derived from Mesopotamia led to wariness of this field of study.

In the past forty or so years, however, the picture has changed ([Carr 2011](#), p. 304). Kenton Sparks describes the development:

In the last few decades, . . . the pendulum respecting Mesopotamian influence has been modestly swinging the other way. Biblical texts once believed to come from early in Israel’s history are now being dated to the exilic and post-exilic periods, at a point when the biblical writers actually lived in Mesopotamia or under its cultural influence. One result has been renewed interest in the Near East and its literature among scholars and students of the Hebrew Bible. ([Sparks 2016](#), p. 58)

While the reaction to Pan-Babylonism explains why the field was largely ignored during the six decades following World War I, why has this trend been increasingly reversed since the 1980s? Sparks offers one reason, but perhaps more significant is the substantial change that has occurred in biblical exegesis in that period. Growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of historical criticism—the quest to identify the original text and context of biblical passages—has led many biblical scholars to look afresh at other research trajectories ([Floyd 2000](#), p. xvi). One of them, the investigation of the relationship between the Bible and ancient Mesopotamia, is the subject of this book.

I quibble with Sparks’s assessment of the change as “modest.” The essays by distinguished scholars published here attest to the vigour, rigour and remarkable range of current work in this field. The ten essays cover a temporal spectrum of two millennia, from the Old Assyrian epistolary literature excavated in Kanesh/Kültepe, which dates from 1950 to



Received: 29 September 2025

Revised: 3 February 2026

Accepted: 3 February 2026

Published: 10 February 2026

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1850 BC (Damsma), to *The Gospel of Thomas*, composed in western Mesopotamia in the late first–second century AD (Baker).

A number of themes connect different contributions. The most pervasive is the interaction between different cultural frameworks in the ancient Near East. In his study of Assyria’s material impact on life in Judah in the seventh century, Avraham Faust contends, “A systematic examination of the cultural and social reactions in Judah to the intensifying interaction with Assyria reveals that avoidance, subversion, and resistance were far more prevalent than emulation.” Using very different data, namely, the texts of Enochic Judaism, Amar Annus explores Judaic subversion of Mesopotamian mythological constructs and their theological underpinnings. Selim Ferruh Adalı compares Babylonian cartographical principles and the “mental map” found in Ezekiel. *The Gospel of Thomas* exploits cuneiform number symbolism to portray God’s kingdom (Baker).

Alice Mandell, adducing the earliest examples of complex literary composition from Palestine (the Amarna letters), detects a fascinating variable geometry of adoption and adaptation between cultures: cuneiform literary techniques, which were adopted by first-millennium biblical writers, were modified by Canaanite scribes in the late second millennium. Her paper prompts us to question current assumptions regarding the provenance of the Bible’s use of those techniques. Does it derive uniformly from the period of Mesopotamian hegemony in the Levant and its aftermath or do some of their expressions betray Israelite absorption of Canaanite literary traditions? As Scott Noegel reminds us, comparative analysis is not necessarily always about influence.

Some of the authors approach their investigations philologically (Baker, Damsma, Hess, Mandell, Noegel). There is, coincidentally, some overlap in the words they investigate. Alinda Damsma and Noegel, in discussing necromancy, examine the meanings of *etemmu* (GIDIM) and *’ob*. Richard Hess provides a philological analysis of the name of the goddess generally referred to as Asherah. Tallay Ornan also considers this deity and her status in pre-exilic Israelite religion. Using art history perspectives, she probes the development of Hebrew monotheism and the related topic of aniconism. She argues that the latter was affected by Babylonian use of non-anthropomorphic divine emblems in the public sphere. In their study of late Babylonian priestly theology and practice, Céline Debourse and Michael Jursa point to the narrowing of local focus on the gods in Babylonia—Babylon became all about Marduk; the other divine kings of ancient Mesopotamia, Anu and Enlil, are absent from its late cultus.

Debourse and Jursa define a central tenet of Babylonian priestly belief: “divine forces may empower outside forces up to the point where they disrupt the flow of temple worship, which ultimately leads to catastrophe and destruction.” This statement resonates with the belief system found in much of the Hebrew Bible and can be compared with the theodicy for the Babylonian devastation of Jerusalem given in Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It raises the following questions: What impact did the absence of temple, ritual sacrifice and a functioning priesthood have on the exilic Judahite understanding of the cosmos, and how does the Bible reflect it? These questions invite further exploration.

Many of the papers remind us of just how influential Egypt remained in the cultural landscape of the southern Levant, even during the period of Mesopotamian hegemony (see also Collins 1975, p. 31; Carr 2005, pp. 86, 157). The many breakthroughs in the biblical–Assyriological cross-discipline, of which these papers are examples, provide a firm basis to extend the scope of future research to include, where possible and appropriate, an Egyptian dimension, as Noegel has done here. Studying the theological and epistemological interplay between Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel in the Bible’s formation will elucidate it further.

This volume showcases the extraordinary breadth of current research on the Bible's relationship with ancient Mesopotamia. A sequel, which focuses forensically on any one of the major themes raised by these papers, would further enrich the cross-discipline.

I thank our authors for accepting the invitation to participate in this project and for delivering a wealth of scholarly insight. We are grateful to the reviewers who put us through our paces, sharpening our contributions as a result. I am especially indebted to Evelyn Zeng of MDPI who initiated the project and steered its development throughout. Her unfailing helpfulness, patience and efficiency at every stage contributed immensely to the pleasure of editing this book.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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