

Gateway Seminary

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Parallels and Skews

A Look at Matthews and Benjamin's *Old Testament Parallels*

Book Review

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Parallels and Skews

Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin's *Old Testament Parallels* is a widely read anthology of ancient Near East texts, with copious references to connect them with passages in the Old Testament. It is a valuable reference but like all references should be examined closely for trustworthiness. All references to page numbers are from the paperback fourth edition, ISBN 978-8-8091-4989-6.

Structurally, the book is laid out well to enable the reader to easily find a parallel for a given book or short passage. On a macro scale, texts are ordered by the book(s) of the Old Testament with which they share the most parallels, primarily by theme but occasionally chronologically, and the collection as a whole roughly follows the Christian Old Testament canon. Reading through the book in the order presented will allow the reader to discover the parallels along the way, as Bible citations are plentiful throughout both the introductions and the texts themselves. The introductions provide provenance for, and lay the groundwork to understand the setting of, each of the texts.

If the reader is looking for parallels for a particular verse or passage, there is a rather exhaustive index ordered by Bible book, chapter, and verse, with a brief note of the type of parallel and a word or two detailing specifics. Unfortunately, not every page reference in that index is accurate, but the name of the parallel text is present, and finding the relevant line of the text is not difficult.

The authors attempt to handle the texts equally and distinctly, giving a perspective on the gamut of civilizations in the ancient Near East, in terms of beliefs, laws, and daily life. In explaining the set of texts selected, the preface states,

We want to take advantage of all that these traditions have to offer to better understand Israel and its culture, but not to blur the distinction between all the cultures of the world of the Bible, or to imply that the cultures of Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt have value only insofar as they relate to the Bible. We also do not wish to destroy the distinctiveness of the Bible by overstating its similarity with the traditions of surrounding cultures (pp. xiv-xv).

By and large, the authors succeed in this goal. The creation stories share a few common elements but also diverge widely. Similarly, there are multiple examples of legal codes from different Mesopotamian cultures, each with penalties ranging from compensations to fines to capital punishment, with different codes considering a given offense much differently. This gives the reader some insight into what was important to each lawgiver, and what was deemed abominable by everyone (e.g. murder).

The book reveals how the Mesopotamian cultures are interrelated, as the various kings make claims of succession back to prior kings of older cities. Nebuchadnezzar claims the title King of Akkad for his father and then for himself (p. 210). Cyrus II includes Akkad in his decree after conquering Babylon: “I am Cyrus, ruler of the world, of Babylon, of Sumer, and Akkad, and of the four corners of the earth” (p. 222). Sumer and Akkad had been gone for fifteen centuries, but this claim is still key to establishing the right to rule over his present.

Some of the connections are better than others, even within the same passage. From the *Annals of Azitiwada*:

In my time, Adana enjoyed all the good things in life, full storehouses, and general prosperity. I filled the storehouses of the city of Pahar (Gen 41:47-49), and greatly increased the number of horses and supplies of arms as well as the size of the army at the command of Ba'al and the divine assembly (1 Kgs 10:26) (p. 196).

Azitiwada is boasting about all he accomplished and taking credit for all of it.

Genesis, on the other hand, is describing Joseph being a good steward of God's provision to prepare for the famine that is about to come. The connection to Solomon, however, is pretty solid; his prodigal buying habits led him to acquire chariots he could not even use.

The authors' views on Scripture occasionally leak through in their introductions. Their stance on the inspiration of Scripture is at best Neo-orthodox. Their use of a late-exodus timeline rules out a literal orthodox reading of the time frames for the Patriarchs. This timeline appears in their *Outline of Israelite History* (p. 401) and is alluded to in their discussion of the Hyksos in the introduction to the *Annals of Kamose* (pp. 62-63).

Beyond just the timeline, we see almost a hostility toward the notion of the veracity of the New Testament. One example surfaces when they compare Adapa to Mark and Luke's accounts of Jesus calming the storm. "The Gospels of Mark (Mark 4:35-41) and Luke (Luke 8:22-25) portray Jesus in the role of Adapa dueling with a windstorm on a lake" (p. 32). This wording betrays a view that the Gospels are at least in part rooted not in actual events but in Mesopotamian folklore. The contrasts between Adapa's story and Jesus' rebuking of the storm are numerous and significant. Adapa's boat is wrecked by the storm before he acts. In his anger, Adapa prays for strength to break the wing of the south wind, accidentally stopping the wind entirely for a week, resulting in famine and pestilence. Jesus speaks with authority, directly to the storm, and halts it while the boat

He shares with the disciples is still sound. No mention of far-reaching consequences is given in Mark or Luke. This is no duel. This is the Master telling a subject to obey.

Furthermore, the authors go so far as to inject into the Old Testament narrative things which are not there. And they do this at the expense of the previously mentioned goal of keeping the Bible distinct from the other works. The introduction to *The Birth Story of Sargon I* states, “A parallel to the *Birth Story of Sargon I* can be found in the *Birth Story of Moses* (Exod 1:22-2:10), where the motifs of unwanted pregnancy, secret birth, abandoning a newborn, being drawn out of the water, and adoption by a stranger also appear” (p. 91). Three out of five of these motifs are present in Exodus 2, but two are absent, and one of those two would be antithetical to the text. There is no evidence that Moses is an unwanted pregnancy, and he is clearly not abandoned. His mother carefully prepares the basket for him and hides him in the reeds. His sister watches over him until he is found and then arranges for Pharaoh’s daughter to hire their mother to nurse him as he is adopted into Pharaoh’s household.

In short, while *Parallels* does give considerable insight into the beliefs and customs and historical records of the ancient Near East, the orthodox reader must be on guard against the authors’ bias slipping in. The book does not fully meet the goal of guarding the distinctiveness of the Bible as laid out in the preface statement quoted above. I will keep this book on my shelf for what it does well, giving me ancient Near East context, but I will not take everything it says about the Bible at face value.