

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

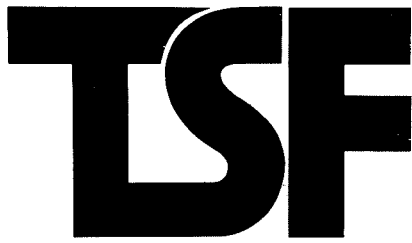
<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin-us.php



BULLETIN

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

MARCH-APRIL 1984

Vol. 7, No. 4 \$3.50

Mark Lau Branson Editor
Thomas H. McAlpine Managing Editor

ADVISORY EDITORS

Clark H. Pinnock, McMaster Divinity College
Paul A. Mickey, Duke Divinity School

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Ray S. Anderson, *Systematic Theology*
Fuller Theological Seminary
Stephen T. Davis, *Philosophy*
Claremont McKenna College
Donald Dayton, *News Analysis*
Northern Baptist Theological Seminary
Roberta Hestenes, *Christian Formation*
Fuller Theological Seminary
Robert L. Hubbard, *Old Testament*
Denver Seminary

Stephen C. Mott, *Ethics*
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Grant R. Osborne, *New Testament*
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Donald Tinder, *Church History*
New College, Berkeley
David Lowes Watson, *Evangelism & Missions*
Perkins School of Theology

PERSPECTIVES EDITORS

George Cummings Chicago Theological Seminary
Luis Cortes Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Nancy A. Hardesty Atlanta, GA
Thomas F. Stransky Mt. Paul Novitiate
Sze-kar Wan Harvard University

FACULTY CONTRIBUTORS

Bernard Adeney New College, Berkeley
Donald Bloesch University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
Geoffrey W. Bromiley Fuller Theological Seminary
Harvie M. Conn Westminster Theological Seminary
Charles Ellenbaum College of DuPage
Vernard Eller University of LaVerne
Elouise Renich Fraser Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary
David Gill New College, Berkeley
Larry Hurtado University of Manitoba
Susanne Johnson Perkins School of Theology
Richard Mouw Calvin College
Richard Lovelace Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
PHEME PERKINS Boston College
Bernard Ramm American Baptist Seminary of the West
Gerald Sheppard Union Theological Seminary
Charles R. Taber Emmanuel School of Religion
Keith Yandell University of Wisconsin
Gregory A. Youngchild New Haven, CT

On Pentecostals, Poets and Professors

An Interview with Eugene Peterson 2

Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies

Ecclesiasties Reconsidered
Tremper Longman, III 5

Contemporary Dispensational Thought

Robert Saucy 10

Responses to Ray Anderson's "Christopraxis"

Michael Hayes and
J. Deotis Roberts 12

Evangelization and Social Ethics— Some Reflections

Mortimer Arias 15

December Conferences

Evangelical Theological Society, Institute for
Biblical Research, American Academy of Religion 19

Unpacking the Vision: Inter Varsity's SF '83

Bill Chickering and
Mark Lau Branson 20

Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas— Report #2

Grant R. Osborne 21

The Wholeness of Evangelism:

A Bible Study (Part C)
Alfred C. Krass 23

Book Reviews (Itemized on back cover)

24

of spiritual formation. I would also want somebody who had some intellectual discipline and curiosity about how to understand and imagine the different ways in which life is experienced. Without that intellectual curiosity, the early experiences become clichés and are not reapplied in fresh ways in new situations. What starts out as a vital experience deteriorates into platitude. And so spiritual formation and intellectual curiosity are reciprocal because they keep each other growing and alive and fresh. That's what I'd look for. I said earlier that the twin pillars of ministry are learning and prayer, and I'd look for a desire for that.

TSF: You have talked about the temptation in ministry to lie about God. Do we lie about God out of a lust for power or out of a fear concerning an inability to answer questions?

Peterson: Both. I would think both of those things, but I think they're subtle. I think they would probably be unrecognizable if we were accused that way. We would say, "No, I don't want power, I'm not afraid." But I think part of that, Bill, comes because most people who go into ministry want to help people. We really are programmed to help people and that's good. When people ask us to do things, we want to do what they want to do. If they want answers, we give them answers because that's what they requested. So a lot of what I call lying about God, answers about God that obscure or distort certain ambiguities of life or a certain wholeness in the doctrine of God, is very well intentioned. I think we do it out of the best of motives which makes it very difficult to detect in yourself, because if your motives are right then you think what's coming out is going to be okay, too, especially if it's orthodox.

TSF: What part does doubt play in your own spiritual development?

Peterson: Doubt pushes me deeper. Doubt pushes me past the intellectualizing, past the superficial, and makes me deal with issues on a life basis where I can't understand and control everything. I

have to plunge in anyway. Doubt has never functioned in my life as a way to get out of things. It has always pulled me in further. I know it makes spectators out of some people but somehow it has never worked that way for me. It's caused me to be involved in dimensions of faith that I wasn't aware of before.

TSF: You spoke recently about the balance between striving for excellence and humility. How does that work? You say, "I really want to be an excellent people-helper," but you are always forced into the position of marketing yourself and your ability to help other people.

Peterson: That question, Bill, can't be dealt with very adequately in this setting, but it's one of the key questions for ministry because there's no area of the spiritual life that's more subject to pride, to ambition, to self-assertion, to non-humility than leadership positions in ministry. Yet there's no area in which the pursuit of excellence is more important either. Learning how to discriminate between excellence and ambition is a very difficult task. It requires lifelong scrutiny and a sense of discernment. I certainly think it's possible to learn how to do our best, discipline our lives in such a way that we get the best out of them (or the Lord gets the best out of them), and at the same time shut the door to self-assertion, to self-aggrandizement, to self-promotion. The problem is that most of the models for excellence that our culture provides feed ambition, so we don't have any models to work on. That's why we really need to saturate our imaginations with people like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Francis of Assisi, Gregory of Nyssa; these people who really did pursue lives of excellence in incredible humility and a complete indifference in terms of what people thought about them or whether they had any standing in life at all. It's too bad you have to go back five hundred years for your models, but that's better than nothing. Some helpful models are still around but we have to be very alert to spot them.

Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies Ecclesiasties Reconsidered

by Tremper Longman, III

Repeatedly in the Old Testament the Lord exhorts his people Israel to stay as far removed from the nations which dwelt around them as possible. The Canaanites were to be utterly destroyed, and the Israelites were to stay at home for fear that by coming into contact with other nations they would be led astray (Deut. 7:1ff). How surprising it is then to see so many similarities between the literature of the OT and that of the surrounding nations: details of the biblical flood story occur in the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic; Yahweh is described in language reminiscent of Baal, the Canaanite god of the thunderstorm; and biblical covenants are similar to Hittite and Assyrian vassal treaties.

The task of comparative studies as it relates to the study of the OT is to describe and hopefully explain the relationship between the Bible and its environment. At its best, comparative studies provide a deeper understanding of the OT, helping the interpreter to bridge the vast temporal and cultural chasm which separates the modern reader from the OT. Methodological and theological issues are raised by the comparative approach to the study of the OT, and the best way to approach these problems is to begin with a survey of three different attitudes toward the use of Near Eastern literature to illuminate the OT. Afterwards, the benefits of the comparative method will be illustrated by placing Ecclesiastes in its proper Near Eastern genre.

Tremper Longman, III, is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary.

1) *The Traditional Comparative Approach*

Mesopotamian tablets began to be deciphered in the middle of the nineteenth century. From the start the primary interest in these documents was the light they could shed on the Bible. Among the early discoveries of Assyriology were the Babylonian creation (Enuma Elish) and flood stories (Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic), both of which were immediately compared with the biblical stories of creation and flood. Indeed, George Smith, one of the early pioneers of Assyriology and a comparativist, raised financial support for further explorations in the Near East by sharing with potential donors his hope of finding more of the flood story, a hope which he fulfilled!

The point of the traditional comparative approach is to find "parallels" with biblical materials. The focus is on similarities. Thus defined, this approach to comparative issues has a long history and continues to the present day. Indeed, new discoveries have frequently fueled the impetus for such studies. The discovery of the archives of Ugarit (1929 A.D. and following) led to a new barrage of comparative studies (especially in the work of M. J. Dahood). The discovery of Mari prophetic texts and the Nuzi archive in the 1930's resulted in comparisons with biblical prophecy and the patriarchal period respectively. Most recently the uncovering of Tell-Mardikh (Ebla) has led to new attempts to find parallels with the biblical text.

But extreme forms of the traditional comparative method characteristically lead to distorted views of the material. The classic case of an extreme approach to biblical near-Eastern comparative research is the so-called pan-Babylonian school represented by Friedrich

Delitzsch!¹ W. G. Lambert has concisely characterized pan-Babylonianism as the view which assumed that "all ideas originated in Mesopotamia and moved westward."² In other words, Israelite religion, language, literary forms and so on are thought to originate in Mesopotamia.

Pan-Babylonianism was not accepted by many; it appears to be a position of the past. Pan-Babylonianism, however, was replaced in the 1930's and following by pan-Ugaritism where virtually everything in the Hebrew Scriptures was explained by Ugaritic phenomena. M. J. Dahood and his followers (some of them evangelicals) literally "rewrote" many of the poetic sections of Scripture based on "parallels" with the Ugaritic mythological texts.

Pan-Ugaritism or the tendency toward it has been severely criticized, and today there are few proponents of a position which could justly be labeled pan-Ugaritism. Just recently, however, a new sensation has entered the field of comparative studies—Ebla. Ebla is an ancient site whose recent discovery has resulted in the recovery of thousands of cuneiform documents (1977 and following), a healthy percentage of which are written in a language which is close to biblical Hebrew. The new texts have not even been adequately studied, and already certain scholars have argued that great portions of the OT are illuminated by these texts. D. N. Freedman, G. Pettinato and others claim that the Ebla tablets include creation and flood stories, covenant/treaty documents and have references to the institutions of prophecy and judgeship similar to those found in the OT. It appears that the next few years will see the development of a type of pan-Eblaism where everything in the Bible is explained on the basis of these new texts.

2) Rejection of the Comparative Approach

In the first part of the present century a negative reaction against comparative studies developed which continues until today. This reaction comes from both Near Eastern and biblical scholars. On the one hand, there was a strong reaction on the part of certain scholars whose specialties were in the study of the Near East (particularly Assyriology). One of the most powerful statements of a non-comparativist in Assyriology is found in B. Landsberger's seminal article "The Conceptual Autonomy of the Babylonian World."³ As T. Jacobsen summarized it in his preface to the translation of the article, Landsberger "insisted on the necessity of studying Mesopotamian culture for its own sake, in its own terms and within its own system of values."⁴

Landsberger noted and appreciated the fact that the generations of scholars who preceded him brought Assyriology into existence and prominence by connecting the new discoveries with issues which have contemporary relevance, or as he put it "made dead things alive by connecting them with ideas that are still of importance to us."⁵ This, in part at least, must allude to the traditional comparative approach which sought relevance for Assyriological discoveries by showing their impact on biblical studies. Over against this tendency, however, Landsberger pleaded that we must recognize that cultures are conceptually autonomous, and that therefore our understanding of a particular culture is distorted if we seek to understand it in the terms and through the concepts of a second culture, no matter how close the two are.

It is of note that Landsberger's position on the validity and advantages of the comparative method was shared by many in other disciplines in the pre-World War II era. R. Benedict illustrates and typifies a common position when she asserts that human nature and human cultures are characterized by unlimited flexibility. The famous anthropologist Malinowski argued on this basis that every culture must be studied on its own terms (highly reminiscent of Landsberger's position) and that every institution within a culture must be studied as a product of the culture within which it developed.

Critics of the comparative method may also be found among biblical scholars. A move away from the traditional comparative approach may, for instance, be discovered in the Biblical Theology movement of the 1950's and 1960's. N. Gottwald succinctly described the program of the Biblical Theology movement as one which "... sought to express the internal unity-in-diversity and the comparative uniqueness-in-environmental-continuity of ancient Israelite faith."⁶

A theological issue has been raised within the evangelical camp

against the comparative method and may be seen most articulately in a critique of M. G. Kline's use of Hittite treaties to investigate biblical covenants. In attacking Kline's method of study, G. Bahnsen is actually throwing a challenge at the whole comparative enterprise.⁷ As a theologian, he argues that the use of extra-biblical materials to elucidate the Bible is a threat to the doctrines of the sufficiency and perspicuity of the Scriptures. In other words, churches within the Protestant tradition have held that the Scriptures do not need outside help in being interpreted, that Scripture should only be interpreted in the light of the Scriptures themselves.

This objection is held by a surprising number of people and needs response. It is true to say that the Bible is both sufficient and clear, but only in regard to the central message of the gospel. No one needs Hittite covenants, Sumerian prayers, Akkadian autobiographies,

Ecclesiastes is constructed of two parts, the fictional autobiography of Qohelet which is filled with pessimism and scepticism and the orthodox assessment of the frame narrator.

Egyptian proverbs or Ugaritic epics to understand the central message of salvation which the Bible presents. The Bible is both sufficient and clear in regard to the gospel. And this is what the doctrines of the sufficiency and perspicuity of the Scriptures assert. On the other hand, as we will later observe, the twentieth century reader of the OT is culturally and temporally removed from the OT, and to recover many points of interpretation it is necessary to appeal to extra-biblical materials.

Nevertheless, we must listen to the non-comparativists, particularly Landsberger. There is not a one-to-one correspondence between any two cultures. A culture must be understood on its own terms and should not be smothered by the values of another. There are indeed similarities between cultures as well as contrasts. Both must be taken into account.

3) The Contextual Approach

The traditional approach's flaw is that it concentrates solely on the similarities which exist between the Bible and the ancient Near East. It is the contribution of the third approach to comparative studies to point out that by attending to similarities *and* differences there is less chance of distortion of the material and also increased insight into the relationship between cultures. Contrasts may be as illuminating as similarities.

W. W. Hallo of Yale University is presently leading the comparative method into a more mature phase of its history by recognizing that differences as well as similarities exist between the Bible and its environment. In his own words, "the intention is not to repudiate the comparative approach, but to define it, refine it and broaden it notably by wedding it to the 'contrastive' approach." Hallo prefers to call this method the "contextual" approach by which he means "... the entire Near Eastern literary milieu to the extent that it can be argued to have had any conceivable impact on the Biblical formulation."⁸

In summary, there are three types of approaches to the comparative method: 1) traditional comparative, 2) rejection and 3) the contextual approach. All three exist today. The remainder of this study will work within the contextual approach to comparative studies.

¹*Babel und Bibel*; Friedrich was the son of the orthodox Lutheran commentator, Franz Delitzsch.
²"A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis." *JTS* 16 [1965] 289.

³In *Sources and Monographs on the Ancient Near East* [Malibu: Undena, 1976], originally published in German in 1926.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶"Biblical Theology or Biblical Sociology? On Affirming and denying the uniqueness of Israel," *Radical Religion* 2 (1975):42.

⁷*Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley: Craig Press, 1979), 571-84.

⁸"Biblical History in its Near Eastern setting: the contextual approach." In *Scripture in Context: Essays on the comparative method*, edited by T. D. Evans, W. W. Hallo, and J. B. White (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980), p. 2.

The Procedure of the Comparative Method

One may compare cultures on a variety of levels. To name a few, one may compare words, images, literary themes, poetic devices, myths, religious systems, economic systems, institutions and genres. Each of these levels has its own methodological problems, but that should not hinder us from drawing some general principles.

Regardless of the type of comparison being made, six principles must be taken into account in order to determine whether a valid comparative connection is being established.

1) *Similarity/Contrast*. Along the lines outlined by the contextual approach, the contrasts as well as the similarities between the two poles of the comparison must be taken into account.

2) *The Context*. The phenomena being compared must be understood as thoroughly as possible in their original cultural context before being compared.

3) *Chronological distance*. The closer the two objects of comparison are to one another temporally, the more likely it is that the comparison is valid.

4) *Geographical distance*. The closer the two cultures are geographically, the more likely it is that they influenced one another's culture.

5) *Linguistic relationship*. If two cultures have closely related languages, then it is more likely that the languages and literatures interacted with one another.

6) *Generic similarity*. Uncertainty enters when texts from different cultures are compared when those texts also represent different genres.

These six guidelines do not bring scientific precision to the endeavors of comparative research. We are, of course, moving in the realm of probability not certainty. If a comparison is based on two texts which are close geographically, temporally, linguistically and generically and are based on a study of the texts in their original cultural context, then positive results of the comparison are highly probable, but not certain. And on the other hand, if the elements of a comparison are distant geographically, temporally, linguistically and generically, a positive comparison is possible, but less probable.

The Benefits of the Comparative Method

Before referring to an actual example of a biblical-Near Eastern comparison, we may reflect on the benefits of the comparative method for our understanding of the Scriptures.

1) The comparative method helps us recover a healthy cultural distance from the Scriptures. Our translations and our preachers spend much of their time making the OT relevant to our times. This of course is good, but we must realize that the Scriptures were written thousands of years ago in an ancient Semitic culture. Reading other ancient texts from Babylonia and Ugarit help remind us that the Bible too is a product of antiquity and needs cultural translation to speak to our generations. The first step to letting the Scriptures speak legitimately to our generation is to recognize that they were originally intended to speak to an ancient Near Eastern people of God.

2) Reading the OT with a knowledge of the literature of Israel's neighbors leads to a recognition of the extent to which the OT is contextualized to its environment. God is described in the language used to characterize Baal or Marduk (Pss. 29, 74, 77, 104, etc.) with the obvious intention of showing that Yahweh is better than these gods in the areas of their specialty. For instance in I Kings 18 Yahweh defeats Baal at his specialty—throwing fire from heaven (lightening).

3) Comparative studies function to explain infrequent or unclear phenomena in one culture which are frequent or known in a second. The clearest illustration of this is comparative philology. Words which occur only once or twice in the Hebrew Bible are often difficult to translate. Fortunately, a cognate word may occur more frequently in some other Semitic language with a more or less certain meaning. Though there are numerous pitfalls, comparative philology has allowed great progress in the translation of the OT, particularly such books as Job, Psalms, and Hosea.

Comparative research has further helped to explain unclear literary forms. The comparison of biblical covenants (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy) with Near Eastern treaties, though often overdone, has resulted in a better understanding of the literary forms and theological significance of the biblical material. In the next section, we will observe that the book of Ecclesiastes has a Near Eastern back-

ground which will help us decide some important interpretive questions.

4) The contrastive pole of the comparative method highlights the difference or uniqueness of each culture and informs us about the particular values of each separate culture. For example, the most common literary form in Akkadian is the omen. The omen was a way in which the future could be discovered through manipulation of animal innards, oil in water and so on. In contrast with this, the future in the OT is dealt with through prophets, people through whom God chose to speak.

The uniqueness of a culture may be seen not only in the contrast of cultures, but in an analysis of how cultures adapt materials borrowed from another. For instance, the use to which Israel put the proverbs borrowed from Egypt and the setting in which they were placed lifted those proverbs from the realm of so-called secular wisdom to the realm of theological significance.

5) Comparative studies preserve students of the OT and Near Eastern cultures from the danger of over-isolating one culture from another. This is particularly the case where Israel's uniqueness is asserted. Mode of revelation, holy war, deity acting in history and so on have at one point or another been claimed as "unique" to Israel, a claim only to be disproved by further comparative studies. There are unique elements of every Near Eastern culture, but it is the task of comparative studies to dispute false antitheses and establish correct ones.

Ecclesiastes as a Framed Autobiography

Many other values of the comparative method could be pointed out, but I would like to conclude by offering an example of a comparative study which aids our understanding of one of the most difficult portions of Scripture in the OT—the book of Ecclesiastes. The recognition that Ecclesiastes belongs to a well established genre of literature known also from Mesopotamia will help us decide on an overall approach to the book.

The main part of Ecclesiastes (everything except the prologue [1:1–11] and the epilogue [12:8–14]) contains the words of a figure given the name of Qohelet (often translated "the Preacher"). In 1:12 Qohelet introduces himself in the first person, in the next major section he recounts his experiences in the past (1:13–6:12) and the third and last section of the Qohelet's speech is composed mostly of advice which he gives to his readers and which flows from his experiences (7:1–12:7). What is of great interest is that there are a number of texts written in Akkadian which are autobiographical and also structured in this tripartite manner. The texts are didactic autobiographies, and the known examples of this genre include the Cuthaeen Legend of Naram-Sin, the Adad-guppi inscription and the "Sin of Sargon" text.

The most well preserved of the three texts is the Cuthaeen Legend

The royal fiction used in Ecclesiastes and the Akkadian didactic autobiographies was a literary convention to help strengthen the teaching of the book.

of Naram-Sin and so is the best representative of the genre of didactic autobiography in Akkadian literature. Four different versions of the Cuthaeen Legend are known to scholars, the two most important being 1) an Old Babylonian version (the oldest, from ca. 1800 B.C.) and 2) a neo-Assyrian version (7th century B.C.). Since the latter is the fullest version of the composition, it will form the basis for the following plot summary.⁹

The text opens with a self introduction which is formally similar to that of Qohelet's speech in the book of Ecclesiastes. Line three of the Legend reads "I, Naram-Sin, descendent of Sargon" which may be compared to Eccl. 1:12 "I, Qohelet, was king over Jerusalem." What is of special interest here is that in both cases the first person speaker was long dead by the time these compositions came into existence. In other words, both Ecclesiastes and the Cuthaeen Legend

⁹The only available English translation may be found in O. R. Gurney, "The Cuthaeen Legend of Naram-Sin," *Anatolian Studies* 5 [1955] 93–113.

are fictional autobiographies. Naram-Sin lived in the twenty-second century B.C., and "Qohelet" clearly represents Solomon who lived in the tenth century B.C. The Cuthaeen Legend was composed centuries after the death of Naram-Sin, and Ecclesiastes centuries after Solomon.

The Cuthaeen Legend continues at length with an autobiographical reminiscence of four years of Naram-Sin's life. These are years of hard experience for Naram-Sin, and they provide the basis for the advice which ends his autobiography. The opening lines of the text are extremely fragmentary, but already indicate that something is not right in Naram-Sin's kingdom. He calls the diviners in order to consult them. The trouble becomes clear in lines 31 and following in which a fantastic, demonic-appearing army is described: "Armies with the bodies of cave-birds; men whose faces were (those of) ravens." This army was under the leadership of King Anubanini, a king who is known to actually have been an opponent of the historical King Naram-Sin. The barbarian army conquered all the land surrounding Akkad (Naram-Sin's kingdom) to the north, the south and the east.

Naram-Sin wishes to go to battle with the hostile host, but he wants to first check their mortality and then consult with the gods. The king accordingly sends a soldier who determines that the enemy is mortal by sticking a captive with a pin and seeing that blood flows in his veins. Nevertheless, upon oracular consultation the gods signal that it is their will that Naram-Sin not enter the battle. Many legendary texts (e.g., The Curse of Agnade) portray Naram-Sin as a king who suffers from *hubris* by not following divine advice. Here too he violates their advice and engages the enemy at once. The results were devastating:

When the following year arrived, I sent 12,000 troops into their midst;
not one returned alive.
When the second year arrived, I sent 90,000 troops into their midst;
not one returned alive.
When the third year arrived, I sent 60,700 troops into their midst;
not one returned alive.

At this point Naram-Sin rethinks his earlier decision to rebel against the gods. He repents, and the result is that the victory ultimately is his.

This self-reminiscence section in the Cuthaeen Legend is similar in form to the first part of the speech of Qohelet in the book of Ecclesiastes. Here Qohelet reminisces about his futile search for meaning in life. He presents a kind of spiritual diary concerning the many avenues which he explored in an attempt to lift himself out of the futility of the world. He speaks of his excursions into wisdom,

***Mode of revelation, holy war, deity acting
in history and so on have been claimed
as "unique" to Israel, only to be
disproved by further comparative
studies.***

wealth and pleasure. That the speech of Qohelet as a whole is a kind of autobiographical narration is supported by the fact that it concludes with a long statement about death (12:1-7).

The third and last section of the Cuthaeen Legend contains the advice of "Naram-Sin" based on his experience on the field of battle and is directed to the rulers who will follow him on the throne. The advice which the third section contains is of interest in and of itself in that it is a rather unique statement of pacifism from the ancient Near East. The advice in a nutshell is that future rulers should avoid imperialistic expansion and should rather seek to expand the domestic strength of their kingdoms.

The speech of Qohelet within the book of Ecclesiastes does not compartmentalize the reminiscence and advice sections as neatly as the Cuthaeen Legend, but it is of interest to note that from 7:1 to 12:7 there is a preponderance of advice delivered by Qohelet to his readers, advice which is based on his life experience. His life

experience was depressing and his advice reflects this (7:15ff.).

In brief, the Cuthaeen Legend (as representative of the Akkadian genre) and Qohelet's speech bear structural similarities to the point that both may aptly be called didactic autobiographies.

Recognition of the generic tradition in Akkadian helps us solve a number of the difficult interpretive problems which face the student of the book of Ecclesiastes. E. D. Hirsch has demonstrated¹⁰ that the proper interpretation of a literary composition is inextricably bound with its correct genre identification. Thus, a new or modified genre identification will be followed by a new understanding of the book of Ecclesiastes. (Note the radical change in interpretation of the Song of Songs when the church finally read it as a collection of human love songs rather than as an allegory.)

The following are just a few implications of the discovery of the Near Eastern background to Qohelet's speech.

1) In the first place it lends support to the view that the third person sections which begin (1:1-11) and end (12:8-14) the book of Ecclesiastes were written by a person other than Qohelet. M. Fox¹¹ has argued on other grounds that the book of Ecclesiastes is the work of a second wise man who is instructing his son to avoid scepticism (12:12) using the words of Qohelet as a foil. The Akkadian texts demonstrate that the middle section (1:12-12:7) is a separate literary composition which was framed by a second writer.

This approach disputes the predominant evangelical position that the epilogue is written by Qohelet who for some unexplained reason chose to refer to himself in the third person at the end. Often scholars identify this Qohelet with the historical Solomon and hold that the epilogue contains the life assessment of a repentant Solomon.

On the contrary, Qohelet is an otherwise unknown wiseman who is sceptical of his nation's traditions. He has not rejected a belief in God (notice though that he never refers to God by his covenant name Yahweh), but doubts his personal concern for humanity (5:1ff). His religious scepticism leads him to a deep pessimism expressed most frequently by the well known refrain "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." The two most fearful aspects of his life are death (3:18-22; 9:1ff. and 12:1-7) and the realization that events and time are beyond one's understanding and control (3:1ff.; 7:13, 14; 8:7, 8; 9:12). These fears rendered every potentially meaningful area in his life as totally meaningless. For instance, since he is a wiseman (12:9), we would expect that wisdom would provide a source of meaning to him. Indeed we see that from an initial perspective he judges wisdom as superior to folly. However, upon further reflection he realizes that since the wiseman dies like the fool, both wisdom and folly are essentially worthless (2:12-16). The same evaluation is also given to pleasure (2:1ff.) and wealth (5:8ff.).

Qohelet never lifts himself out of his pessimism. The modern attempts to turn Qohelet the sceptic into Qohelet the preacher of joy¹² fail miserably because the "eat, drink and be merry" (2:24-26; 3:12-14; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7ff.; 11:7ff.) passages are statements of resignation, not optimism.

Qohelet ends on a note of death (12:1-7). If isolated from the book as a whole, his speech would plunge the reader into depression. A second wiseman, however, asserts himself at the close of the book (12:8-14, the so-called epilogue). He first summarizes Qohelet's conclusion in verse eight using Qohelet's own favorite refrain "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." Afterwards, he launches into a critique of Qohelet culminating in 12:12 where he instructs his son "Of these things be warned, of the making of many books there is not end and much meditation wearies the flesh." It is wrong to translate the first two words of this verse (*u^cyoter mehemah*) as "in addition to these" as if Qohelet's writings were exempt.¹³ In the last two verses the second wiseman gives the "OT gospel" in a nutshell. He reaffirms the three basic teachings of the OT: a) the fear of God, b) the law and c) the judgment. Each of these teachings had been questioned by Qohelet in his speech.

2) The comparison with the Akkadian texts reveal that the main body of Ecclesiastes (1:12-12:7) is an autobiography. This has not been perceived by scholars in the past, but explains why the main section moves from a very energetic beginning where the author is

¹⁰Validity in Interpretation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

¹¹"Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 [1977] 83-106.

¹²E.g., R. N. Whybray, *JSOT* 1982, 97-98.

¹³See M. Fox for a full translation of the epilogue.

actively seeking meaning in so many different ventures to an ending which dwells so poignantly on the subject of death. The main section of the book gives the strong impression that it is written by a man who is approaching death and wishes to pass on his experiences to those who are younger than he is before he dies.

3) The Akkadian texts also indicate that Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon, but that the experiences of Solomon were utilized to make the point that no matter how wise or rich or successful one may be one cannot find meaning in life apart from God. D. Kidner calls this royal fiction. If Solomon could not find meaning in wisdom and wealth, then who could (Eccl. 2:12)? It is interesting in this connection to observe that the Akkadian texts are all written after the death of the kings who have purportedly composed them. However, all the indications are that it was not the intention of the author to deceive their audience. In other words, the royal fiction used in Ecclesiastes and the Akkadian didactic autobiographies was a literary convention to help strengthen the teaching of the book.

4) The Akkadian parallels do not by any stretch of the imagination prove that the book of Ecclesiastes was an ancient composition (note Delitzsch's comment that "If the Book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language");¹⁴ but it does correct those who argue for the lateness of the composition due to their belief that this type of self-reflective autobiographical writing does not appear until later. The oldest of the Akkadian autobiographies was the Cuthaeian Legend which was composed by 1800 B.C. at the latest.

5) All in all it leads us to understand the structure and canonical significance of the book of Ecclesiastes in a way analogous to the book of Job. The book of Job is for the most part a series of wisdom debates between Job and his three friends. These two groups set themselves up as wisdom schools to debate the reason why Job is suffering. The final "answer" to the question posed by the book of Job does not come until God speaks out of the whirlwind. Thus, one cannot pick a section of Zophar's speech and out of context endow it with canonical authority. In the same way, recognizing partly on the basis of the comparative evidence that Ecclesiastes is constructed of two parts, the one being the fictional autobiography of Qohelet which is filled with pessimism and scepticism and the other being the orthodox assessment of the frame narrator, one can only interpret the canonical significance of any single statement by Qohelet in the light of the whole, particularly the concluding verses.¹⁵

6) Understanding the dynamics of the book of Ecclesiastes in its OT context prepares us as Christians living in the post-resurrection period to interpret the book in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

In the first place, we must recognize that the original intention of the book is still valid today. The original intention of the book was to criticize speculative wisdom thought in ancient Israel. The second wiseman openly criticizes Qohelet and then states in simple and brief terms the essential teachings of the OT. The same lesson may apply today. That is, while there is a place for doubt in the Christian life such doubt should not lead to the open scepticism of Qohelet.

But there is another lesson to be drawn from Qohelet's desperate yearnings for meaning, and this may only be recognized once it is clearly seen that Qohelet is a sceptic precisely because he has not allowed belief in God to inform his thinking. In other words, and I am aware that I am here following in a long line of interpretation of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet's problem is a direct result of his limiting his thinking to "under the sun," a phrase which I agree means basically "apart from the revelation and knowledge of God." Where I disagree with traditional interpretations is when they assert that this was merely a heuristic device on the part of Qohelet or when they assert that Qohelet repents at the end and rediscovers the true meaning of life.

With this as a starting point we can very easily see that the meaninglessness which Qohelet is so graphically describing and which fills him with such despair is a picture of people living without God, a picture of people feeling the full effects of the covenant curse. Of course it is the foundational teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 that God created the world and he created it "good." There was meaning in creation as created. In Genesis 3, however, humans fell and were subjected to the curse of God. This brought into the world meaninglessness, vanity, frustration. The NT describes this frustration to which the world was subjected in Ro. 8:18ff., a passage which contains the only explicit allusion to the book of Ecclesiastes in the NT:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of god to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

So in a sense Qohelet has hit the nail right on the head when he speaks of the world as meaningless, that is a world which does not take into account God. Of course what the NT tells us is that, contrary to what Qohelet teaches, the world is not just subject to an endless round of meaningless cycles, but on the contrary, there is something new and that something new is a person Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has rescued us from the meaninglessness of the curse which so plagues Qohelet.

The amazing fact is that Christ has rescued men and women from the vanity of this world by subjecting himself to the self-same vanity of the world. He who is God chose to subject himself to the conditions of a world under covenant curse in order to rescue the world from the effects of that curse. As Gal. 3:13 states it "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" As a matter of fact, the life of Christ may be surveyed from this vantage point, and it may be seen that his life is a record of moving from one situation of worldly vanity to another. He came into the world, but the world recognized him not, according to the beginning of the gospel of John. Indeed, the Synoptics with a birth narrative highlight the fact that his expectant mother could not even find a place of human habitation in order to give him birth. His life becomes a chronicle of one vanity after another, one rejection after another and this culminates in the last week as the people withdraw their support of him, his disciples leave him, Judas betrays him and Peter denies him. But the ultimate experience of the world under covenant curse, the world of vanity, is when his Father departs from him on the cross, and he cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At this point he dies, and he dies for a purpose and that purpose is to rescue men and women from the effects of the curse.

Conclusion

The examples of the value of the comparative method could be multiplied many times. As we look forward to future study of Scriptures, the comparative method will prove to be one of the most fruitful avenues of research into the OT. We must continue to refine our methodology, so that we will not slip into an illegitimate use of the comparative materials which would result in the distortion rather than the illumination of the OT.

¹⁴Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Reprint. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 190.
¹⁵See also G. T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," *CBQ* 39 [1977] 182-89.

CHURCH OF THE SAVIOR SEMINARS

During the last three decades, the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. has provided both spiritual and prophetic leadership for the North American Church. Students, pastors and laypeople have benefited from their retreats. Their orientation seminars provide a time to experience firsthand those ideas and practices which are the cornerstone of the church. This includes a brief silent retreat,

visits to various missions and discussions about the "inward-outward journey." Upcoming dates are March 15-18, April 23-26, May 24-27 and July 9-12. There are also a number of special events on the schedule: "Health and Healing," "Power and Intimacy," "Spiritual Direction." For further information, write to Wellspring, 11301 Neelsville Church Road, Germantown, MD 20874.