

Sarah Peden

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OT504.OA

ANE Context of the Bible

In Walton's book, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, he covers many topics of importance in the Ancient Near East (ANE) to help others understand the thoughts and mindsets of the people of that time. One topic he covers is cosmic geography, which he defines as, "how people envision the shape and structure of the world around them"¹. It is clear from the information that Walton provides that the ANE viewed the world around them differently than the modern reader. This paper will use the information learned and apply how the ANE viewed cosmic geography to the passage of Psalm 8. From this it will be seen that this information sheds light on God's (Yahweh's) superiority over all other gods and the difference of Yahwism to the other religions in the ANE.

Before information on cosmic geography is applied to the passage, let us first read Psalm 8:

"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.² Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? ⁵Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. ⁶You have given him dominion over the

¹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 131.

works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,⁷ all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,⁸ the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.⁹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8, ESV).

This passage is full of references to the geography and structure of the world around them and alludes to the ANE’s view of cosmic geography. One ANE allusion that can be seen is in verse 1 where it says, “You have set your glory above the heavens”. According to Walton, “The heavens were primarily the place where the gods dwelled”². One thing to note is the Hebrew word used for heavens in this verse is “šāmayim”, which means “heaven, heavens, sky”³. The Israelites shared the viewpoint with the rest of the ANE in this structure and that the heavens were where God dwelled.

Another ANE allusion that can be seen is in verse 3 where it says, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place”. Walton points out that in the ANE, “Neither the sun nor the moon was recognized as a physical object; they were gods and lights”⁴. Something clear in verse 3 is that it was Yahweh who created, put into place, the moon and the stars. They were not gods or the doing of other gods, it was only Yahweh who created them. Also, in Walton’s book it states, “YHWH is the one who upholds the pillars of the earth; he alone created the heavens and the stars”⁵ and then states that the difference between ANE thinking and the Israel (in relation to cosmic geography) is that, “rather than

² Ibid, 134.

³ "H8064 - šāmayim - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 12 Mar, 2023. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h8064/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

⁴ Walton, 133.

⁵ Ibid, 143.

manifestations of the attributes of deity, they were instruments for his purposes”⁶. From this it is seen that even though Israel shared in some viewpoints of cosmic geography, there was difference in how they viewed who put the moon and stars in place and their purpose.

From the allusions to the ANE thinking referenced above it definitely sheds new light on this text for me. One thing illuminated for me is that I see how the Psalm is pointing to how Yahweh is deserving of the praise being given in the beginning of the Psalm and the end of the Psalm. The Psalmist praises God and says how majestic Yahweh is in all of the earth. The Hebrew word used for majestic is “*adîr*”, which means, “powerful, excellent, great”⁷. So why is Yahweh so powerful, excellent, great and deserving of this praise? From the allusion to the cosmic geography, we see in verse 1 that his glory, honor is set “above the heavens”. This means it is in the place that deity dwells and above all. From this it shows he has honor and in a place that is evident to all. Additionally, in verse 3 it points to Yahweh being the creator of the moon and stars. This alone shows that he has power and authority to give form and function to things. As discussed before, the ANE thought of the sun and moon as gods. This shows that Yahweh has ultimate authority to put these things in place and not the work of any other gods. From this I get this greater perspective of how powerful and mighty God is, which not only shows he is worthy of praise, but also makes it so much more impactful what the psalmist points out in verses 4-9. The Psalmist says “what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:4, ESV). God is so mighty that He is able to put the moon and stars in place and He does not need us humans to serve Him to meet his “needs”. This is quite different than the viewpoint of the rest of the ANE. Walton states, “In Israel people also believed that they had

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "H117 - '*adîr* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 12 Mar, 2023. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h117/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

been created to serve God. The difference was that they saw humanity as have been given priestly role in sacred space rather than as slave labor to meet the needs of deity”⁸. In the Psalm we see that it is God who cares for the needs of humans and that He gives humans roles that are of a priestly role that care for creation He made. The uniqueness, power, kindness and care of Yahweh is evident and worthy of praise. This sets Him apart from the other gods worshiped in the ANE. All of this it changes how I read this text. The change in my understanding is really more of an expansion into how much more I can draw from this text and that it continues to confirm the amazing God I serve and why He is worthy of my praise.

Something that surprised me in general was how many similar thoughts and ideas that the Israelites had to the rest of the ANE in regards to cosmic geography. Something that is evident is that Yahweh set these people apart from other nations and maybe I assumed that most things would be different in order to show that Yahweh was superior and the one to follow. What is interesting is that even through the similarities, Yahweh still uses them to show his superiority. As seen in this text the Israelites saw a lot of the cosmic geography similarly to their ANE neighbors, but what differed was their perspective that Yahweh did it all and what He created, “were instruments for his purposes”⁹ and that His people had a “priestly role in sacred space rather than as slave labor to meet the needs of deity”¹⁰.

Overall, it can be seen that looking at scripture through the ANE lens is critical for interpretation and brings a whole new perspective that can differ from our modern lens. From the study done in this paper the Psalm became even richer for me. It was seen that God is superior and worthy to be praised. He was over all other gods that were worshiped in the ANE and even

⁸ Walton, 186.

⁹ Ibid, 143.

¹⁰ Ibid, 186.

though there may be similarities in cosmic geography viewpoint there was difference of Yahwism to the other religions in the ANE. Not only was Yahweh over all other gods, but he also cares for his people and is mindful of them. God doesn't need us to serve Him to meet his "needs", He created us and loves us and that is why we worship Him.

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