

Department of  
**Semitics and Old Testament**

**PARALLELS TO THE PSALMS IN NEAR  
EASTERN LITERATURE**

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Many good examples of parallels to the Psalter in the hymns and songs of Babylonia and Egypt are to be found in G. A. Barton's *Archaeology and the Bible* (1937 edition), in R. W. Rogers' *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, and in the essays of G. R. Driver on the Psalms in the light of Babylonian research and of A. M. Blackman on the Psalms in the light of Egyptian research in *The Psalmists*, edited by D. C. Simpson. The temptation is to give representative ones from each group, but we shall choose but two examples to illustrate the close resemblance between these hymns and songs and the Psalms of the Old Testament. In the matter of parallels we do well to heed the warning of Rogers. He rightly points out that the hymns and prayers of Babylonia and Assyria have at times been too highly esteemed, because they have so often been judged by extracts alone, by too short passages, which sometimes leave out qualifying contexts that set the examples in an altogether different light. Resemblances are at times misleading, and scholars, as we shall see later, differ widely in their adjudications of these products of the ancient Near East. One of the most famous of all the parallels is the hymn of Ikhnaton to the Sun-god.

Thou appearest in beauty on the horizon of heaven  
Thou living Sun, the first to live.  
Thou risest on the eastern horizon,  
Suffusing all lands with thy beauty.  
Glorious art thou, and mighty,

Shining on high o'er the lands;  
Thy rays encircle the countries.  
To the farthest limit of all thy creation;  
Thou art reaching out to their uttermost border,  
Subduing them for thy beloved son.  
Far off art thou, yet thy beams touch the earth;  
Thou art seen of man, but thy pathway they know not.

Thou settest in the western horizon,  
And the earth becomes dark as death.  
Men rest in their chambers,  
With head enveloped, no eye sees aught.  
Should their goods be taken that lie under their heads,  
They would fail to perceive it.  
The lion comes forth from his lair,  
And the serpents bite.  
Darkness rules, and the earth is still,  
For he that made all rests in the horizon.  
When the earth becomes light, thou risest on the horizon,  
And, as the sun, dost illumine the day;  
The darkness flees when thy rays thou dost spread;  
The two lands rejoice,  
They awake, stand up on their feet,  
When thou hast raised them up;  
They cleanse their bodies and clothe themselves,  
Their arms give praise, for thou hast appeared.  
The whole earth goeth forth to labour.

The cattle are satisfied with grass;  
The trees and the herbs grow green,  
The birds from their nests fly forth,  
With their wings they offer thee praise.  
The beasts spring up on their feet,  
The birds and every flying thing  
Live, when thou art risen.  
There go the ships, down-stream, up-stream,  
All paths are free, since thou art arisen.

The fish in the sea leap up before thee,  
For thy rays penetrate to the ocean's depths.<sup>1</sup>

The resemblances between this hymn and Psalm 104 are striking indeed. The references to the light, heaven, and the foundation of the earth are similar to the first verses of the Psalm. The allusions to the beasts of the field, the birds of the heaven, man, the lions, the darkness of night at the setting of the sun, the sea, the ships, and the ocean fish, all mentioned in the Psalm, closely approximate what is found in Ikhнатon's Hymn to the Sun-god. But there are also similarities in prayers for help from God. The cuneiform prayer is in keeping with its polytheistic background. One such prayer is pointed out as resembling Psalm 13, where the psalmist cries out to God that He forget the suppliant no longer. God has turned away His favor and the psalmist is filled with sorrow all the day. Enemies on every hand surround the praying one, and he must have the help of God if they are not to triumph over him. He closes with the expression of his faith in the loving-kindness of God, whom he will yet have cause to praise for His bountiful dealing with the needy. The parallel to this Psalm from the cuneiform is addressed to a goddess.

How long, my goddess, wilt thou be angry with me, wilt  
thou hide thy face from me?  
How long, my goddess, wilt thou be offended, and thy  
heart be full of wrath?  
Turn thee unto me again, him whom thou didst cast off,  
Incline thy countenance to a word of pity;  
Let thy heart be assuaged, like the soft-flowing waters of  
the river.  
Suffer me to tread upon mine enemies, as I tread down  
upon the dust;  
Them that hate me cast down, and let them grovel at my  
feet.

<sup>1</sup>Oesterley, W. O. E., *A Fresh Approach to the Psalms*, pp. 16, 17.

My prayer and my supplication, let them come before thee,  
 Thine abundant mercy, let it be granted unto me.  
 They that meet me in the way shall extol thy name,  
 I myself will praise thee before the adversaries, thy god-  
 head and power will I glorify.<sup>2</sup>

The similarities between this prayer and Psalm 13 are clear. Not all examples from the cuneiform parallels are so marked in their resemblances to the Psalms. For instance, the Hymn to Ramman, the Weather God, dated about the third millennium B.C. (according to Rogers), is said to remind one of Psalm 29 on the voice of the Lord in the storm. The first ten lines of this cuneiform hymn, repetitious to the point of pain, give no impression of a storm; they are a praise to the god Ramman for his exalted character. Twice in these lines it is said that he rides the storm. The remaining verses of the hymn do depict a storm, but quite differently from Psalm 29, as even the most superficial perusal will reveal.

What conclusions are we to draw from these parallels and others? First, no one will be so foolhardy as to deny the definite resemblances. Second, he will be quick to note the many differences also. Third, the matter of date will be given prominence. Hymns that can be dated to the third millennium B.C. or to the fourteenth century B.C. (the date for the Egyptian hymn of praise to the Sun-god, composed by Pharaoh Amenophis IV, called Ikhnaton) surely bespeak for psalmody early origins. Fourth, the superior beauty and power of the Hebrew hymns will be recognized.<sup>3</sup> Rogers finds the Babylonian and other parallels marked by a sameness of phrase and deficient in individual character.<sup>4</sup> Peters notes by a comparison of the rituals that the Hebrew psalmody reveals no such use of incantation or sorcery as is found in the religious liturgies of the other Semitic nations of the time. He calls it astonishing. In contrasting the He-

<sup>2</sup>Oesterley, W. O. E., *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 20.

<sup>3</sup>Oesterley, W. O. E., *op. cit.*, pp. 11-15. See also his *The Psalms*, Vol. I, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup>Rogers, R. W., *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, p. 141.

brew and the Babylonian psalms he concludes that the former are monotheistic, spiritual, and pure, while the latter are full of polytheism, superstition, and sensuality.<sup>5</sup> Gunkel saw that the chief difference between the hymn of Ikhnoton and Psalm 104 was this: the Egyptian god is the Sun and is bound up with nature, whereas the Hebrew God created the sun and is above nature. So much and more can be said of the diversities between the two, but there are similarities which must be explained. With regard to the parallel to Psalm 104, Albright suggests two explanations which he deems most plausible: (1) the Psalm has been adapted from a Canaanite hymn which had been influenced by the Egyptian; or (2) the Egyptian composition was familiar to the Israelites in Egypt, from whence it was brought to Palestine. He prefers the first position as the more probable.<sup>6</sup> Obermann, in comparing the psalm literature from Ras Shamra to that of the Old Testament, points out that the former have all the characteristics of form present in the Biblical Psalms as to liturgical features: the three-fold division of contents into ritual, supplicatory, and hymnal, the antiphonal rendition, the parallelism of speech, and the metrical rhythm.<sup>7</sup> With Oesterley, Barton, Albright, and others we understand the similarities to arise, not from borrowing but from the same background of world thought. There were a common geographical environment, a common material culture, and a common language.<sup>8</sup> Adaptation rather than imitation may better explain the resemblances. Yet this does not answer all the questions. Though the Hebrew psalmody will be seen as a part of a world literature, yet it must be

<sup>5</sup>*The Psalms as Liturgies*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>"Recent Developments in Bible Lands," in supplement to Young's *Analytical Concordance*, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>"An Antiphonal Psalm from Ras Shamra," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. LV, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>Barton, G. A., "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," in Grant, E. ed., *The Haverford Symposium on Archaeology and the Bible*, p. 67; Albright, W. F., "Recent Progress in North-Canaanite Research," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 70, p. 24.

regarded as *sui generis*. It has the inspiration of the Spirit of God and a boundless power of its own.

The cogent arguments of G. R. Driver against those who would derive much of the Hebrew Psalms from the Babylonian and other parallels of previous centuries are noteworthy and must be considered. In many instances the comparisons drawn are clearly unfair. An example in point is taken from Psalm 2:7:

I will tell of the decree:  
The Lord said to me, Thou art my son;  
This day have I begotten thee.

This verse is said to echo the law of adoption in the Code of Hammurabi, by which a man may acknowledge sons born to him by a handmaid with the words, "[They are] my sons." Driver argues that Babylonian influence could not have weighed largely with Hebrew psalmody, because the age when Sargon gave the West a unified medium of expression was followed by a time of turmoil not conducive to the sharing of cultural influences. During a period of uninterrupted wars the trader will scarcely bring much culture with him across an expanse of several hundred miles of scorching desert. Furthermore, that which is allowed even the least cultured peoples to invent by way of form cannot be denied a race like the Hebrews. Driver denies that subject matter and its arrangement reveal dependence of the Hebrew upon the Babylonian or the Egyptian, because no definite underlying principle of arrangement can be discerned in either case. Even in the case of the hymn of Amenophis IV the order is different, an instance where both may have been expected to follow the natural order. Such themes have been the subject of meditation and poetry the world over. The common Semitic ancestry of these peoples explains the similarities. It is a truism that figures drawn from everyday life arise independently in the minds of many different peoples. Even more, why should the Hebrews, who were far more

advanced spiritually than the Babylonians, borrow from their less gifted neighbors? He concludes, therefore, that the Babylonian hymns exercised no real influence on the work of the Hebrew poets. Most of the Babylonian poems are on a lower level of thought; any apparent monotheism in them is but the enthusiasm of a devotee trying to raise his god above the others; these poems lack that great emphasis on ethics which is so important a feature of Hebrew monotheism. The resemblances are superficial, while the differences are most significant. How does Driver, then, explain the similarities? He holds, "I am convinced that many, if not the majority, of them are the result of independent reflection; for it is possible to shew that not only a number of figures of speech but also certain definitely theological ideas recur in the religions and mythologies of other peoples who, as far as it is possible now to say, owe nothing to Babylon. Due allowance must therefore be made for the common instincts of mankind."<sup>9</sup>

Other resemblances are laid to the common origin in the prehistoric period before the Semites expanded and formed separate nations. Driver does not deny, and this he inserts by way of a conclusion, the possibility of indirect influence from Babylon which may have functioned in several directions. Blackman, in his discussion of the influence of Egypt on the Psalms in the same series of essays, feels there was direct or indirect influence of Egypt upon Hebrew psalmody through the medium of Phoenicia (cf. Jezebel). He even asserts that the outlook of both peoples was so close that it may almost be said that the Songs of Zion were sung in a strange land before they were sung in Zion.

Our position is this: the resemblances, which are far fewer than the differences, are to be explained by the common experiences of man and the common heritage and background of all the Semitic peoples. To essay an evaluation on the basis of direct or indirect borrowing is both precarious

<sup>9</sup>Driver, G. R., *op. cit.*, p. 173. For the entire discussion see pp. 109-175.

and difficult of substantiation. Agreement is lacking and positions of scholars differ too widely for any confidence in such attempts. The differences, which are great in extent, are to be interpreted by the superior genius of the Hebrew psalmists and ultimately to the personal activity of the inditing Spirit of God. Sellin has stated it somewhat as follows: "The literatures of Ancient Egypt and of Babylon show us that in respect of religious lyric, as of prophecy, the people of the Revelation reached a height absolutely unique among the nations of the Ancient East. In spite of all the formal affinities of style, imagery, etc., it is here alone that the ethical is set free from the bondage of the natural; it is here alone that a consciousness of salvation is attained which in places already bears an almost New Testament character; it is here alone that the keynote is the hope of a kingdom of God which is to embrace all nations, along with the heavens and the earth a kingdom where 'mercy and truth are met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed one another.'"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>*Introduction to the Old Testament* (trans. by W. Montgomery), pp. 205 f.

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Thanks to Kaylen Mallard for help with proofing.