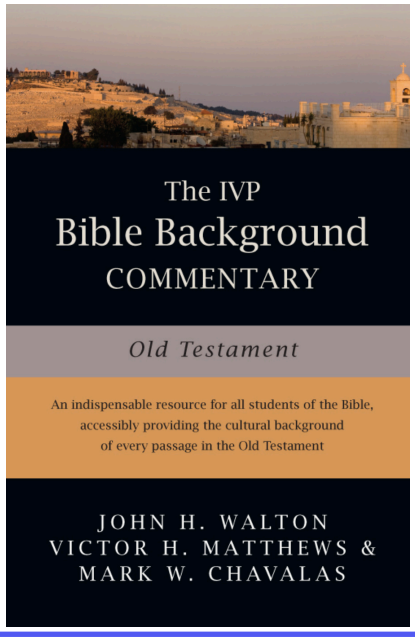


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Preface

This book is an attempt to fill a particular niche in the vast field of one volume commentaries on the Bible. Rather than addressing all the varied elements of theology, literary structure, word meanings, history of scholarship, and so on, we have focused on the task of providing background information to the text.

Some might wonder what significance background information has for the interpretation of the text. What is it that we might expect to gain from knowing what this commentary seeks to make available? It has been rightly observed that the theological message of the Bible is not dependent on knowing where the places are or what the cultural background was. It is also correct to observe that one could gather all the proof from history and archaeology that, for instance, there actually was an Israelite exodus from Egypt, but that would still not prove that God orchestrated it—and it is God's involvement that is the most important point of the biblical author. So why should we spend so much time and effort trying to understand the background of Israelite culture, history, geography and archaeology?

The purpose of this book is not apologetics, though certainly some of the information we present could find use in apologetic discussions. Nevertheless, it was not an apologetic agenda that dictated our selection or presentation of the data. Instead, we are trying to shed light on the Israelite culture and worldview. Why? When we read the Bible as a community of faith, we want to draw as much theological content out of the text as possible. As a result people tend to read theological significance into the details. There is an inclination to read our own cultural biases and our own perspectives and worldview into the text as a basis for understanding theological significance if we are not alerted to the differences that existed in the Israelite way of thinking. The larger ancient Near Eastern world becomes significant in that many times it can serve as a window to the Israelite culture. In many cases, by offering insight into the Israelite or ancient Near Eastern way of thinking, this book can help the interpreter avoid erroneous conclusions. So, for instance, the theological significance of the pillar of fire, the scapegoat or the Urim and Thummim can be understood in new ways once we make connections to the general culture of the ancient Near East.

We have not limited our identification of similarities to precisely delineated time periods. We fully recognize that the occurrence of some cultural element in the town of Ugarit in the mid-second millennium may not have any relationship to the way Israelites of the mid-first millennium thought. Nevertheless, often our interest has been in merely indicating that certain ideas or concepts existed in the ancient Near Eastern cultures. It is not impossible that such ideas could have represented aspects of the general cultural matrix of the ancient world. We bring

assume a flat homogeneity across the eras, regions or ethnic groups of the ancient Near East. In our own day, for instance, it would be foolhardy to speak of "European culture" given our awareness of the significant differences between, for example, the Italians and the Swiss. We have attempted to show some sensitivity to these issues but have not imposed strict limitations on the information we offer.

The issue at hand is not a question of whether the Israelites "borrowed" from their neighbors or not. We are not seeking to discover a literary path and feel no need to establish that Israelites would have been familiar with this or that piece of literature in order to employ similar motifs. We have avoided terms like "influence" or "impact" to describe how information was shared. That is because we are trying to look at those elements that may simply be part of the cultural heritage of the ancient Near East. That heritage may be reflected in various pieces of literature, but the Israelites need not have had knowledge of, or been influenced by, those pieces of literature. They simply are a part of the common cultural matrix. God's process of revelation required that he condescend to us, that he accommodate our humanity, that he express himself in familiar language and metaphors. It should be no surprise then that many of the common elements of the culture of the day were adopted, at times adapted, at times totally converted or transformed, but nevertheless used to accomplish God's purposes. Indeed, we would be surprised if this were not the case. Communication requires a shared circle of common conventions and understandings. When we speak of "daylight-saving time" we assume the person we are speaking to understands this strictly cultural convention, and we do not explain it. Someone from a different era or culture that had no such practice of adjusting clocks would be absolutely clueless as to what was meant by the phrase. They would have to become familiar with our culture in order to understand. The same holds true as we try to penetrate Israelite literature. Therefore, if circumcision is to be understood in Israel's context, it is helpful to understand its ancient Near Eastern form. If sacrifice is to be appreciated for what it represented in Israel, it is helpful to compare and contrast what it represented in the ancient world. While sometimes this search for knowledge can result in problems that are difficult to resolve, maintaining ignorance of those problems would not mean they did not exist. And more often than not, our new knowledge has positive results.

Sometimes the information we provide is simply to satisfy curiosity. As teachers, however, we have found that much of our task is taken up with developing in our students a curiosity about the text and then attempting to satisfy, in some degree, that curiosity. In the process it is often possible to bring the biblical world to life—to help us become alert and informed readers. When information is presented in an entry, it is not necessarily being offered to help interpret the passage but perhaps only to provide data that may be pertinent to interpreting the passage. So information in Job 38 about mythological images of creation in the ancient Near East does not serve as a suggestion that the thinking in Job should be thought of in the same terms. The data are simply being provided for comparison.

This book is intended to serve a nonprofessional market rather than the aca-

original publications, we would end up with a multivolume work too detailed to be of any use to the lay people for whom we are seeking to provide a service. Though we often found it excruciating to omit references to journals and books, we here acknowledge our debt to our colleagues and hopefully the few bibliographic references we provide can lead the interested reader to them. We have additionally tried to be very careful with proprietary information and ideas so that a standard of integrity could be maintained. Another consequence of targeting the nonprofessional market is that our references to the primary literature have of necessity been somewhat vague. Rather than citing text reference and publication resource, we have had to be content to say, "Babylonian laws contain . . ." or "Hittite regulations include . . ." or "Egyptian reliefs show . . ." Knowing that the typical layperson would not have the opportunity or the inclination to go look up the text and that many of the citations would be obscure and inaccessible to nonspecialists, we concentrated our efforts on giving the pertinent information rather than on offering a research trail. We recognize that this will create some frustrations for those who would like to track the reference for further information. We can only recommend going back to some of the bibliography we have listed and tracing the information from there. As an aid to readers unfamiliar with certain terms that arise repeatedly, we have provided a glossary at the back of the book. Asterisks (*) in the text point readers to terms that can be found there.

For the lay reader, it is possible that the information will occasion some confusion. It was our objective to provide information, not to go into detail to show how that information should be used or what it proves or does not prove. The reader may well often ask, What am I to do with that information? In many cases there may not be anything that can be done with the information, but having that information may prevent one from doing something with the text that should not be done. For instance, information given concerning the "circle of the earth" in Isaiah 40:22 may not solve the readers quandaries concerning how to account theologically for Scripture's use of old-world ideas about the shape of the earth, but it will give the reader sufficient information to avoid the misconception that the text incorporated modern scientific ideas between its lines. More generally, it is hoped that even when the specific information may not be usable in one's context, there will be a greater appreciation developed for the many ways in which Israel and the Old Testament reflect the cultural heritage of the ancient Near East.

Other Resources for the Cultural Context of the Old Testament

This list provides the reader with some of the significant sources we found useful in developing the information we present. It is not a "beginning bibliography" in that some of the sources listed are fairly technical or advanced in nature. Neither is it a comprehensive bibliography—many fine works, even standard works, have been omitted. However, these would be the key works to refer to if the reader wants to find more information or discussion on the topics presented.

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