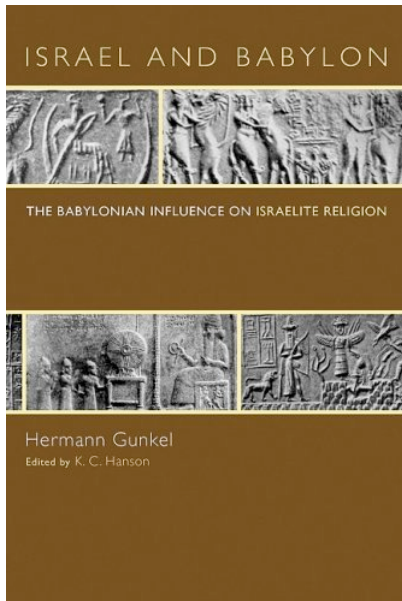


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Gunkel, Hermann

K. C. Hanson, ed.

Israel and Babylon: The Babylonian Influence on Israelite Religion

Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2009. Pp. xvii + 78, Paperback, \$13.00, ISBN 9781606082508.

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The alliteration is easy to remember, but “Babel-Bible” remains one of those scholarly ciphers instructors want their students to fully comprehend, historically as well as ideologically. The present book helps provide this comprehension via K. C. Hanson’s new translation of Hermann Gunkel’s classic rebuttal-essay, *Babylonien und Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903), a point-by-point response to the 1902 lectures of Friedrich Delitzsch delivered to the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft attended by Kaiser Wilhelm II and his staff. Professor of Assyriology at the University of Berlin, Delitzsch attempted in these lectures to “prove” that the Hebrew Bible, when read in light of the recently discovered cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia, is not just indebted to or dependent upon the Babylonian traditions but is “naïve, derivative [and] inferior” to them (Hanson’s words, viii). So great a firestorm was generated by these lectures that Gunkel’s colleagues implored him to respond, and the result has become a classic.

In terms of *substance*, this rebuttal sharply criticizes Delitzsch for (1) getting his facts wrong; (2) failing to take into account the influence of oral tradition; and (3) failing to consider the parallels between the Hebrew and Mesopotamian traditions in terms of *degree* (i.e., to assess how much of the Old Testament is indigenously Hebrew versus how much might be originally Babylonian). The first of these points he illustrates by simply

listing the major mistakes he sees in Delitzsch’s presentation, such as (1) his decision to substitute קטל (“kill”) for the more specific term רצח (“murder”) in his discussion of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17); (2) his decision to translate קרנים מידו literally in Hab 3:4 (“horns from his side”) instead of figuratively (“rays from his hand”), totally disregarding the metaphorical usage of קרן elsewhere; (3) his inexplicable decision to translate the generic term for “God” (אל) as “Goal”; and (4) his decision to translate קרא in Gen 12:8 as “preach” instead of “invoke” (among several other anomalies and mistakes). With regard to the second point, Gunkel first praises Delitzsch for recognizing the parallels between the Hebrew and Babylonian flood/creation stories but then chides him for imagining this dependence to be solely literary, proposing instead “that the stories came to Israel by oral tradition” (38)—a criticism hardly surprising from the father of *Formgeschichte*. With regard to the third point, Gunkel points out that, because Delitzsch fails to understand the powerful influence of oral tradition on the character and development of ancient literature, this forces him into an “ominous one-sidedness” from which he unsurprisingly concludes that the Babylonian traditions must possess a “purer and more original form” than the Hebrew (39, citing F. Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902], 1:29).

In terms of application, it is a bit surprising to note how often Gunkel pastorally encourages his Christian readers, in the midst of this academic rebuttal, (1) to appreciate the true nature and extent of divine revelation, that is, that it is hardly limited to the Hebrew Bible (57–63); (2) to take the Hebrew Bible seriously and teach it responsibly in the light of contemporary research (“What kind of faith would it be that is afraid of facts, which abhors scholarly research?” [31]); and (3) to “rejoice that the world is opening itself to us and that we see God’s rule where we formerly had not suspected it” (32). (Note: Hanson’s suggestion that Gunkel’s proverb on p. 14 might come from Germanic sources—“the one who sets off for battle is not esteemed the same as the one who returns home”—overlooks the possibility that he might be paraphrasing here the proverb preserved in 1 Kgs 20:11: “one who puts on armor should not brag like one who takes it off” [NRSV]).

Comparing this English translation with E. S. B.’s earlier English translation, published in Philadelphia in 1904 by John Jos. McVey (available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/israelbabyloninf00gunkiala>), the question arises as to whether or not a new translation is truly needed. From the perspective of the 1904 translation, for example, the foreword insists that the central question of the Babel-Bible debate is: “Do the results of Assyriological science destroy the possibility of a unique revelation in the Old Testament” (6)? Hanson’s 2009 translation, however, avoids such theological questions to focus instead on questions about method, such as “Where do things stand after a century of research in Assyriology and the Old Testament” (x)? Thus, unsurprisingly, where

something is lost, something is also gained. Where the latter translation corrects several “deficiencies” from the earlier one, especially omissions of several phrases and sentences from the German original and ambiguities in several passages where it is difficult to distinguish Gunkel’s sentiments from those of his translator. From a purely pedagogical perspective, Hanson’s introduction is much more sensitive to the needs of twenty-first-century students, especially those unaware of the history of nineteenth-century European scholarship about this (and many other important) debates.

In short, Gunkel’s response to Delitzsch remains one of the clearest and most irenic responses to pan-Babylonianism ever written, and Hanson’s 2009 translation of it more effectively introduces it to twenty-first-century students. Many thanks to Hanson for taking the time to update this translation.