

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 20

Taking the Bible's Own Context Seriously (Part 5 of 5-part series on Learning to Study the Bible): Books for ANE and OT Study Recorded in 2012

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Summary

We've talked in previous episodes about how the best way to understand the original context of the biblical writers is to immerse yourself in the worldview of the civilizations with which the biblical writers had regular contact. We've already spent several episodes on my recommendations for accessing the texts of the ancient Near East and Second Temple period – the intellectual output of the civilizations and cultures that form the original contexts of the Old and New Testaments. In this episode and the next, I want to recommend the best books and reference sources for understanding the religion and culture of the ANE and Second Temple period. Scholars who are steeped in this material have produced many essays explaining the worldview of these civilizations and how that worldview matters for biblical study and interpretation. My goal is to direct you to the best of those resources. As is our pattern, we'll devote this episode to the ANE, the context for the OT, before moving to the Second Temple period, the context for the NT, in the next episode of the podcast.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

We're still in the early stages of a series on Bible study. We began the series talking about how essential it is to interpret the Bible in its own context—that context, of course, being the world of the ancient Near East (with respect to the Old Testament) and the Second Temple period (with respect to the New Testament). Interpreting the Bible in these contexts means thinking like a person living at these times in which the biblical writers did. The best way to do that is to immerse yourself in the worldview of the civilizations of these eras, with which the biblical writers had regular contact and which they were a part of.

We've already spent several episodes on my recommendations for accessing the texts of the ancient Near East and Second Temple period—the intellectual output of the civilizations and cultures that formed the original context of the Old and

New Testaments. In this episode and the next, I want to recommend the best books and reference works for understanding the religion and culture of the ancient Near East and Second Temple periods. Scholars who are steeped in this material have produced many essays explaining the worldview of these civilizations and how that worldview matters for biblical study and interpretation. I want to direct you to the best of those resources. As is our pattern, we'll devote this episode to the ancient Near East (the context for the Old Testament) before moving to the Second Temple period (the context for the New Testament) in the next episode of the podcast. As always, you'll find links to these resources at www.nakedbiblepodcast.com under the "Bibliography" tab [or use the active links in this transcript].

Reference Works (Sets)

Let's start with the books that I recommend most for Old Testament study, keeping the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern context. These are really reference works. One of the best sets that you can get (because it covers virtually all areas of religion and culture and history—things like poetry and medicine and science—pretty much everything you can think of that would be part of a person's world in the ancient world in one set) as it pertains to the ancient Near East is a set called [Civilizations of the Ancient Near East](#). The editor is a fellow named Jack Sasson. Originally, this was published in four volumes. You can purchase it now in a two-volume set. It's a little expensive, but there's really nothing better that I could recommend. Every once in a while, you'll find this set (four volumes bound in two books) on sale on Amazon or in a used bookstore or something like Christian Book Distributors (CBD). Personally, I got my set for less than \$100 and it's been well worth it.

The next set I'd recommend is a set that is published by Intervarsity Press. These are the *Dictionary of the Old Testament* series. There are four volumes. This is a wonderful set. It breaks the Old Testament up into the [Pentateuch](#) (that's one volume, edited by Baker: [digital version](#)), [Historical Books](#) (ed. by Williamson: [digital version](#)), [Wisdom, Poetry & Writings](#) (ed. by Enns: [digital version](#)), and the [Old Testament: Prophets](#) (ed. by Boda: [digital version](#)). This is a dictionary set aimed at the academic study of the Old Testament, but the articles within them on any given subject really pay attention to the ancient Near Eastern worldview, of which the Old Testament is a part. If I could put a personal plug in here, there are great articles in the Wisdom, Poetry & Writings volume and the Prophets volume on the Divine Council. You can guess why I'm recommending that... because I wrote them! I also have two articles in the Prophets volume on chaos and destruction. So you tell just by those kinds of articles (especially chaos and destruction) that these dictionaries are really aimed at Old Testament symbols and motifs—the kinds of things that Old Testament writers are using. You'll see them in the Old Testament, but they have a very wide, yet specific, context in the ancient world in which a biblical writer lived and wrote. This series of reference works by Intervarsity is just wonderful for helping you get right to the heart of the matter in any given topic as it relates to Old Testament study.

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The last reference work that I think is essential and that I just think is top-of-the-line is the [Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, Second Edition](#) (ed. by van der Toorn). If you've been paying attention to any of my websites for any amount of time, you have heard of this resource before. I often tell people this is probably the only reference work that I have that I could just read cover to cover. And I've read most of it. There's just nothing like it. It's specifically aimed at divine beings—anything that sort of relates to gods and angels and all sorts of other worldly, spiritual realm sorts of topics in the Old Testament. Every entry is written by someone versed with their eye tuned to the ancient Near Eastern context. This reference work I'll also recommend when we get to the Second Temple podcast because they do the same thing. The writers in this volume, if they're writing on something that pertains to New Testament study, they are deeply entrenched in Second Temple period sources that really help you. So this is just a wonderful set. (digital [version](#))

Monographs

With respect to specific books that you would not call reference works (or multi-volume reference works, anyway), there are really two types. There are recommended books that help you understand and learn about a particular civilization in the ancient Near East (let's say ancient Egypt). And then there are books that do what those reference works do. There are individual volumes on specific issues that will take ancient Near Eastern material and relate it immediately to the Old Testament. So I want to cover both.

History and Culture

With respect to books about the ancient Near East, when it comes to history and culture, I have some recommendations. When I say "history" I mean the flow of the history of these civilizations, and when I say "culture," part of that is religion, but I'm going to give you some specific titles that are just about ancient Near Eastern religion. Part of the culture is the religion, but it's also science, how normal people lived in everyday life in the ancient Near East, how they made a living, how they cooked, what they ate, what they wore... It could be how their government worked, their institutions... It's wider than just religion, but religion is a special interest of mine so I'll be hitting those separately. But just for ancient Near East history and culture, I recommend the following.

The book by Al Hoerth and other editors (Mattingly, Yamauchi) called [Peoples of the Old Testament World](#). This is just what it sounds like. Every chapter takes another culture group, another civilization of the Old Testament world, and gives you a complete overview of that civilization. There'd be a chapter on the Edomites, a chapter on the Moabites and the Ammonites, along with the Egyptians and the Babylonians and so on and so forth. It's a very good resource in one volume.

White's book, [Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt](#), is highly recommended, as is its counterpart by Bertman: [Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia](#). These two books do a nice job of covering everyday life in ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia.

Von Soden's introduction to the ancient Near East called [The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East](#) is also excellent. He has a chapter on all facets of ancient Near Eastern culture. He excludes Egypt. He's an Assyriologist by training (or he was), so his focus is on Sumerians and Babylonians and the Assyrians—that sort of thing. But that's an excellent introduction.

10:00

Barbara Mertz's book, [Red Land, Black Land: Daily Life in Ancient Egypt](#), is also excellent. It's written for the non-specialist and it's sort of written in non-academic language. But it definitely has academic content.

Two histories I would recommend, both by the same author, Mark Van de Mieroop: [A History of Ancient Egypt \(Blackwell History of the Ancient World\)](#) and then [A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000 – 323 BC \(Blackwell History of the Ancient World Series\)](#). Of course, the one on ancient Egypt is focused on ancient Egyptian history and the other volume is the rest of the ancient Near East—mainly Mesopotamia, but also the civilizations with which Mesopotamia had contact (other than Egypt)... things like the Hittites and the Mitanni and so on and so forth. Those are excellent volumes. I actually used both of those volumes in the undergraduate courses I taught at the local college here on ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia.

Ancient Mesopotamian Religion (Sumer, Assyria, Babylon):

Let's talk about religion. There are some major works on ancient Mesopotamian religion that anyone who's interested really should have and read. Tammy Schneider has [An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion \(History of Religion\)](#). There's no such thing as a systematic theology of ancient Mesopotamian or Egyptian religion, but her book actually arranges things in some familiar, topical ways. She'll have a section on religious ritual. She'll have a section on religious calendar. She'll have a section on the gods of the pantheon—the Divine Council of ancient Mesopotamia. It's a nice survey.

Jean Bottéro, [Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia](#), is also quite good. It's a little more academic than Schneider in terms of the way it's written, but you can trust the content of both.

Jacobsen's book called [The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion](#)... Jacobsen was a Sumerian scholar, and this book really aims to sort of understand the religious epics of ancient Sumer and ancient Mesopotamia in a developmental way—how these works demonstrate the development of Mesopotamian religious ideas.

Black's book (a little slim one-volume book) called [Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary](#)... So it is sort of a reference work, but it's one volume. I thought I'd include it here because it's solely focused on religion. The entries are short, but the bibliography information is good, as well. If you wanted to start with one of these four, I'd start with Black just to give you a basic orientation, and then move on to one of the others.

Ancient Egyptian Religion

As far as ancient Egyptian religion, Pinch has two recommended volumes. One is [Egyptian Myth: A Very Short Introduction](#). This is part of the *Very Short Introduction* series by Oxford. This goes through all the major Egyptian religious myths (the mythic epics) and gives you an overview of what's going on there, what Egyptians thought about their own history and the activity of the gods in the primeval times, and so on. Her other book is called [Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt](#). It's a fuller version of her *Short Introduction* book.

The one I would most recommend here is by Emily Teeter: [Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt](#). Again, there is no systematic theology of ancient Egyptian religion, but I really like the way she categorizes things in groups/topics to go through the breadth of ancient Egyptian religion. It's not just about their mythologies—about how the gods created everything and then how Egypt came about—it's just much broader. It covers everything—priesthood, liturgy, Egyptian magic, that sort of thing. It's the best thing I think there is right now on it. If you can get the book by Stephen Quirke on ancient Egyptian religion, I highly recommend that, as well. That's out of print, but you may see it in a used bookstore online somewhere.

[Not mentioned on podcast, but included on the Bibliography page:
Assmann, [The Search for God in Ancient Egypt](#)]

Old Testament Israel

As far as Old Testament Israel, specific books (instead of multi-volume reference works) that focus on Old Testament Israel and, even more precisely, understanding the Old Testament in light of its original culture (which, of course, means the broader ancient Near East and also culture in ancient Canaan). This orientation is the biblical worldview/context. Our contexts (no matter how familiar they are to us) are foreign to the Bible. These sorts of works will really help you frame the context of the Bible correctly. These are the ones that are going to be written by people who are steeped in ancient Mesopotamian religion or ancient Egyptian religion (those other books that I just mentioned), and then they're going to write these works specifically focused on ancient Israel and distill a lot of that ancient Near Eastern information for you and apply it directly to the Bible.

15:00

The best volume here.. If you don't buy anything else I mention, I recommend this one above all others. That is John Walton's [Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible](#). (digital [version](#)) The title says it all. It tells you just what the book is about. He's going to go through all aspects of ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament thought (prophecy, cosmology, law, ritual, the afterlife—all these sorts of topics), showing you how the ancient Near East informs your reading of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).

Walton has another book I recommend here just on cosmology and Genesis 1. That is [The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate](#). It's excellent. If you've been in Memra courses, you've read this. We've used this. I've blogged about it before. I have some minor disagreements with Walton, but I heartily recommend the book. To me, viewing Genesis 1 for what it is (an ancient Near Eastern creation story) really undermines the whole debate about how we understand Genesis. The answer to that question is we ought to understand Genesis for what it was when it was written—in its own context, not our context (scientific or otherwise).

Regarding Israelite religion, there's a very good survey book that is often used in undergraduate courses (or even some graduate courses) by Patrick Miller, called [The Religion of Ancient Israel \(Library of Ancient Israel\)](#). It has a nice section on the Divine Council, but it delves into priesthood and cult (the sacrificial system). He has discussions of what sacred space means, clean and unclean—all those sorts of things that you would associate with Israelite religion. I recommend this very highly.

Mark Smith, [The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel \(Biblical Resource Series\)](#)... Smith is going to be writing from a critical perspective (meaning a non-evangelical stance). I don't want to suggest that evangelical scholars are not critical thinkers. That is not how the term is being used. But that's just so that you know where Smith is coming from. I like Smith's material. I have disagreements with it, as readers know, but this is a great survey for getting into Divine Council material, all the debates about whether the Israelites were originally polytheist or not, what's going on with "El" names for God (like YisraEL and El Shaddai, El Olam—and then Yahweh with no "El" element). El, of course, is the primary name for the god of Canaan that we know from Ugarit. The Hebrew Bible uses it, as well. So what's going on with all that? It's really a good volume for getting you into the discussion as academics have it, whether they are evangelicals or not. (digital [version](#))

Richard Hess, [Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey](#)... Hess is an evangelical scholar, and he's a leading figure in Israelite religion and that area of study. This is a survey of basically all the issues and who holds what view, and it focuses on the archaeological material. Again, this is the kind of thing that you probably see required in a seminary course or graduate course in Israelite religion. But I highly recommend it. (digital [version](#))

Tryggve Mettinger's book [In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names](#) is a good one-volume introduction to the names for God in the Old Testament and what their religious significance was in their original context.

20:00

As far as the culture and life in ancient Israel, I think the best resource that I could recommend here... It's amazingly detailed. It's sort of a no-stone-unturned approach on just literally every aspect of life in ancient Israel, whether you're a common person or you're royalty. It's really, in my mind, unsurpassed. It used to be a two-volume set, but you can get it in one now. That is Roland de Vaux's [Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions](#). It's just excellent. I think if you get one book on culture and everyday life in ancient Israel (religious and non-religious aspects, all the social strata, marriage and family, pastoral and agriculture practices), this is it. It would be hard to find something that you'd really want to care about in terms of Israelite life that de Vaux doesn't cover. It's just excellent.

Bruce Wells has a recent book called [Everyday Law in Biblical Israel: An Introduction](#). This is Wells' specialty (ancient Near Eastern and Israelite biblical law). This is an introduction and overview of that field and different types of laws. Of course, you get into crime and punishment and that sort of thing. Wells' book is excellent.

William Dever has just come out with a book called [The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: When Archaeology and the Bible Intersect](#). In some ways, this would update the information in deVaux, but by no means will it touch de Vaux. It will not surpass that. My frank opinion is that de Vaux's is just *it* for this sort of thing. But if you're specifically interested in archaeology and you want it to be more current, I decided to add Dever's book to the list.

Lastly, Ebeling's book [Women's Lives in Biblical Times](#) I think is really worth considering having in your library and reading. Again, it's not going to surpass de Vaux. De Vaux will certainly touch on the life of women in ancient Israel. But again, it's current and up-to-date and I wanted to make sure I added it to the list.

Well, that's my list of the most highly recommended works for learning about the ancient Near Eastern context of the Bible, and specifically directing you to books where scholars have spent years in that material and have produced volumes or specific essays doing the work for you, telling you, showing you how the biblical material can be read (and needs to be read) through the lens of—through the context of—the world in which the biblical writers actually lived (the worldview that they were part of). I hope you'll take advantage of at least some of these resources.