

## ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE: AN EXPLORATION IN DANIEL 7:1–14

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**Abstract:** *This study argues that understanding the ANE cognitive environment contributes to TIS readings of OT texts. While there are numerous definitions of and approaches to TIS, a review of recent literature on the discipline finds a broad consensus that TIS readings affirm Scripture as the revelation of the Triune God to his people. Because the Triune God revealed himself in an ANE context, understanding that context increases our understanding of God's self-revelation. The present study demonstrates the value of such an approach by undertaking a TIS reading of Daniel 7:1–14 with attention to its ANE context, revealing theological facets of the text that would be missed if the ANE context were not considered. Additionally, the research demonstrates that TIS and historical-cultural methodologies do not have to be at odds. Readings that consider both methodologies avoid both ignoring the historical meaning of the text and denying that the primary purpose of Scripture is to convey theological meaning.*

**Key words:** *theological interpretation of Scripture, regula fidei, Trinitarian hermeneutics, Daniel, ancient Near East, Enuma Elish*

Historical-critical scholarship recognizes the ancient Near Eastern context of the OT as essential for determining the meaning of the OT texts.<sup>1</sup> The role of the ANE context in theological readings of the OT is less clear. In his recent work *Old Testament Theology for Christians*, John Walton develops a methodology that privileges the ANE background of the OT in doing OT theology. Walton argues that ANE context is essential for the task, in part because OT theology “must be approached independently from NT theology.”<sup>2</sup> Walton stands in line with a prominent tradition that stretches back (at least) to Johann Gabler’s 1787 lecture on the need for separate dogmatic and “biblical” theologies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East*, illustrated ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 3–40; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 3–32.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 20–21.

<sup>3</sup> Johann P. Gabler, “An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each,” in *Sources for Biblical and Theological Study*, vol. 1: *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 597–606.

The methodology Walton proposes for OT theology stands apart from readings that align with theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) and sees the OT and NT as part of a coherent whole.<sup>4</sup> The ANE cognitive environment is far from a cornerstone of TIS readings of the OT. This is no wonder given the fact that one of the goals of some advocates of TIS is to reverse the dominance of the historical-critical methodology that tends to privilege historical context over theological exegesis.<sup>5</sup> The stark contrast between TIS approaches and methodologies that traditionally have given attention to ANE context raises the question of what, if any, role ANE context can have in TIS readings of the OT. Determining what value ANE context has in a TIS reading depends on how TIS is defined.

## I. THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. *Defining theological interpretation of Scripture.* TIS recognizes that the goal of Christian readings of Scripture is to understand how the Triune God reveals himself through the Old and New Testaments. Heath Thomas argues, “What God discloses to humanity as he speaks is *himself*.”<sup>6</sup> TIS, therefore, is not opposed to critical approaches to the text, but uses them to move toward a higher purpose.<sup>7</sup> TIS readings affirm that God has revealed himself in Scripture and any tool that is helpful to understand that revelation is valuable but is not an end in itself.

Because the Triune God revealed himself in an ANE context, understanding that ANE context increases our understanding of God’s self-revelation. The value of considering the ANE context in TIS readings of the OT can be demonstrated in several ways, three of which are highlighted in the current study. First, because the Triune God reveals himself within an ANE context, information from within that context can contribute to theological readings that adhere to the rule of faith.<sup>8</sup> Second, the contrasts between the broader ANE cognitive environment and the OT text contribute to theological exegesis, often exposing theological facets of passages that will not be seen if the ANE context is ignored.<sup>9</sup> Finally, attention to the ANE

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 204–5.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 12–14.

<sup>6</sup> Heath Thomas, “The Telos (Goal) of Theological Interpretation,” in *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Heath Thomas and Craig G. Bartholomew (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 199.

<sup>7</sup> Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> For context on the centrality of reading within the rule of faith or *regula fide* in TIS see J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 17–22; R. W. L. Moberly, “Suspicion and the Rule of Faith,” in Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, 464–80; Adriani Milli Rodrigues, “The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation in Evangelical Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *Them* 43.2 (2018): 257–70.

<sup>9</sup> John Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 26–27; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 40. Note that neither Oswalt nor

context of the OT points toward the enduring theological meaning of the Scriptures beyond the context of contemporary or ancient readers.<sup>10</sup> Drawing theological conclusions from within the culture of the distant past helps guard contemporary interpreters against chronological snobbery. TIS readings without attention to the historical context privilege the world of the reader over the meaning of the author. Historical-critical readings that fail to consider theological dimensions of the text relegate the OT to history and neglect its witness to the Triune God who is the continuing object of Christian worship.<sup>11</sup>

2. *Regula fide*. TIS readings focus on reading within the rule of faith.<sup>12</sup> Defining the rule of faith, like defining TIS, is a difficult endeavor. The spectrum of what interpreters mean by the rule of faith runs from reading Scripture through the lens of various interpreters throughout history to a more regulated focus on the apostolic tradition, often the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed.<sup>13</sup> Embedded in questions about the appropriate definition of the rule of faith is the question of what kind of reading TIS should produce. Some advocates of TIS celebrate its openness to producing multiple readings.<sup>14</sup> Others view the openness of TIS to multiple meanings as a limitation of the methodology. So that reading within the rule of faith does not become yet another tool of postmodern exegesis, interpreters need to define the scope of the rule.<sup>15</sup> Adriani Rodrigues suggests "contemporary evangelical definitions of the rule should be more cautious regarding its scope. In other words, the rule should be situated within the boundaries of the apostolic tradition."<sup>16</sup> Rodrigues's suggestion is helpful as it delimits what is meant by the rule of faith. Because the rule of faith is based in the apostolic tradition, the early creeds of the church are helpful in defining the rule.<sup>17</sup>

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Walton is arguing for TIS readings, but their work does demonstrate the need to properly interpret the Bible within its conceptual framework.

<sup>10</sup> Charlie Trimm, "Evangelicals, Theology, and Biblical Interpretation: Reflections on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *BBR* 20.3 (2010): 314.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis coined the phrase "chronological snobbery" in his autobiography. He elaborates on the concept in greater detail in his introduction to John Behr's translation of Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017); C. S. Lewis, "Introduction," in *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series 44B (Yonkers, NY: St. Vincent Press, 2011), 9–15.

<sup>12</sup> See Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide*, Cascade Companions 20 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015); Steven W. Tyra, "When Considering Creation, Simply Follow the Rule (of Faith): Patristic Exegesis of Romans 8:19–22 and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8.2 (2014): 251–73.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of current positions, see D. Christopher Spinks, "Catching up on a Conversation: Recent Voices on Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *AT&R* 99.4 (2017): 769–86.

<sup>14</sup> Tyra, "When Considering Creation, Simply Follow the Rule (of Faith)," 272–73.

<sup>15</sup> Trimm, "Evangelicals, Theology, and Biblical Interpretation," 317.

<sup>16</sup> Rodrigues, "The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation in Evangelical Theological Interpretation of Scripture," 269.

<sup>17</sup> David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *JTR* 45.4 (2002): 371–84.

As creeds developed in the first centuries of Christianity, their messages were shaped by Trinitarian formulae already present in the NT text.<sup>18</sup> While the earliest creeds were developed to respond to doctrinal concerns, they were based on language inherent in the New Testament.<sup>19</sup> Those who use these creeds as the basis for the rule of faith are still reading in a way that locates the authoritative meaning of Scripture in the text because the text of Scripture formed the basis of the rule.<sup>20</sup>

While the apostolic doctrine contained in the creeds is an acceptable starting point for defining the rule of faith, interpreters may define the rule still more broadly by reducing its definition to the core affirmation or the creeds—that God is Triune and that the persons of the Trinity are working to bring about salvation for the people of God.<sup>21</sup>

3. *The value of ANE cultural context for TIS readings.* ANE cultural contexts can contribute to reading the OT within this broadly defined rule of faith. In the Old Testament, the God who is Triune reveals himself and the story of the salvation he is bringing about for his people within an ANE context.<sup>22</sup> The cognitive environment of the ANE context, therefore, deepens the understanding of both the revelation of the Triune God and the salvific narrative he is shaping for his people.

The value of the ANE cultural context for TIS readings can be demonstrated throughout the OT. In the current work, an examination of Daniel 7:1–14, a passage with well-recognized connections to a specific genre of ANE literature, is sufficient to demonstrate the value of ANE context for TIS readings.

## II. A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE READING OF DANIEL 7:1–14 WITHIN ITS ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

In Daniel 7, the Triune God reveals himself within the context of a world saturated with tales of the gods defeating the forces of chaos. Interpreting the passage in that context demonstrates that the vision Daniel received in Daniel 7 emphasized the authority of the Ancient of Days and that the authority of the Son of Man flowed from the Ancient of Days, granting to him “dominion, glory, and kingship” (7:14). Historical-critical resources often discuss the ANE background of Daniel 7,<sup>23</sup> but even Christian interpreters who discuss the ANE background of the passage do not bring the ANE context to bear on Christological application of the message.<sup>24</sup> Recent theological interpretations of Daniel 7 (particularly verses 13–14)

<sup>18</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1982), 27–30.

<sup>19</sup> Cory Ryan Barnes, *From Creed to Canon: An Examination of the Influence of Creedal Language on the Transmission of the New Testament Text* (Mountain Home, AR: BorderStone, 2014), 19–38.

<sup>20</sup> Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2021), 27–28.

<sup>21</sup> Scott Swain, “A Ruled Reading Reformed: The Role of the Church’s Confession in Biblical Interpretation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14.2 (2012): 188.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that a fully formed doctrine of the Trinity is present in the OT. Scott Swain argues the OT “adumbrates” the revelation of the Trinity. See Swain, “A Ruled Reading Reformed,” 11.

<sup>23</sup> See John J. Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 274–324.

<sup>24</sup> For examples, see John Goldingay, *Daniel*, WBC 30, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 192–93; Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 193.

focus on the relationship between the passage and its use in the NT as well as interpretations of the passage in the pre-critical period.<sup>25</sup> While some TIS approaches to Daniel 7 do use ANE context to understand certain parts of the passage,<sup>26</sup> they tend to use this context to clarify background issues rather than to inform theological conclusions about the Triune God's revelation of himself.

Daniel 7 is often read Christologically because of the connection between the "Son of Man" in Daniel's vision and the use of "Son of Man" as a title for Jesus in the NT.<sup>27</sup> Beginning with the church fathers and carrying through into contemporary interpretations, Christians have interpreted the account of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man in Daniel 7 as providing insight into the actions of the Father (the Ancient of Days) and the Son (the Son of Man).<sup>28</sup> Neither early Christian interpretations nor contemporary TIS readings, however, give attention to how the ANE context of Daniel 7 informs how the passage reveals the Triune God.<sup>29</sup>

1. *Ancient Near Eastern chaos combat myths and Daniel 7.* The narrative of Daniel 7 shares themes common to ANE stories such as the Enuma Elish, Myth of Anzu, and the Ba'al Cycle. The common themes in these myths lead Walton to include them in the category of "chaos combat myths."<sup>30</sup> He argues that the original audience of Daniel 7 was likely familiar with multiple chaos combat myths and that the stories impacted the meaning of the passage in its original context.<sup>31</sup>

2. *Similarities between Daniel 7 and ancient Near Eastern literature.* ANE parallels to Daniel 7 emphasize the nature of the victory of the Ancient of Days over the beasts rising from the sea (7:3–7). The imagery of beasts rising from the sea would have catapulted the minds of ANE readers of Daniel's vision to the imagery of the cosmologic myths that permeated their cultural imagination.<sup>32</sup> In the ANE chaos combat myths, the motif of beasts rising from the primordial ocean presented a real

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Wells and George Sumner, *Esther and Daniel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 171–74.

<sup>26</sup> Joe Sprinkle, *Daniel*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 186.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1980).

<sup>28</sup> Bogdan G. Bucur, "The Son of Man and the Ancient of Days: Observations on the Early Christian Reception of Daniel 7," *Phronema* 32.1 (2017): 7–24; Kathleen Corrigan, "Visualizing the Divine: An Early Byzantine Icon of the 'Ancient of Days' at Mount Sinai," in *Approaching the Holy Mountain: Art and Liturgy at St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai*, ed. Sharon E. J. Gerstel and Robert S. Nelson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 8–10.

<sup>29</sup> Determining which ANE literature provides the appropriate context for Daniel 7 is difficult. The research below considers the influence of "chaos combat myths," but others (especially those who advocate a late date for Daniel) propose a variety of other literature that may have influenced the book of Daniel in general and Daniel 7 in particular. See Tawny Lee Holm, *Of Courtiers and Kings: The Biblical Daniel Narratives and Ancient Story-Collections*, EANEC 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 331–479.

<sup>30</sup> John Walton, "The Anzu Myth as Relevant Background for Daniel 7?," in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, ed. John J. Collins and Peter Flint, 2 vols., VTSup 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:70. See also Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> Walton, "The Anzu Myth as Relevant Background for Daniel 7?," 85.

<sup>32</sup> See Goldingay, *Daniel*, 185.

threat to the divine order. In Enuma Elish, Tiamat, Kingu, and their allies come from the sea against Ea and the pantheon. Yaam, himself the embodiment of chaos waters, challenges the authority of El in the Ba'al cycle. In the Anzu Myth, though the monster in this case does not rise from the ocean, Anzu—who is described as a winged lion—threatens the rule of Enlil and the pantheon by stealing the tablet of the norms.<sup>33</sup> In these narratives, the monster from the sea renders the head of the pantheon speechless. These types of myths call divine authority into question.

The fourth beast in Daniel 7:7–8, 11—specifically the horn that begins to grow from his head—speaks “arrogant” or “boastful” words, calling to mind the raucous and defiant noise commonly made by chaos monsters in ANE chaos combat myths.<sup>34</sup> Again, this challenge conforms to norms of ANE chaos combat myths in which the action of chaos monsters serves as a challenge to divine authority.<sup>35</sup> The mocking words of the little horn on the fourth beast are words that mock God and his rule over his people and his creation.

Daniel's original audience would likely have understood that the vision Daniel reports is one where the authority of God is challenged by chaotic beasts, which readers are told are symbolic of human empires and their kings (7:17). The ANE context makes the challenge to divine authority clear. The ANE background, therefore, guides Christian readers to come to Daniel 7:1–14 with an understanding that the vision explores how the Triune God will fare in a confrontation with the chaotic forces of human power that threaten his sovereignty. The little horn—who in Daniel's vision becomes the spokesman for the powers that have set themselves against God and his saints—mocks the Triune God. As the vision progresses, the theological question becomes clear. How will the Triune God respond to the threat and mockery from the powers that revolt against him and his people?<sup>36</sup>

3. *Points of contrast between Daniel 7 and ancient Near Eastern literature.* The Triune God revealed himself in an ANE context, and so understanding that context contributes to understanding his revelation of himself. To this point, the ANE context contributes to a TIS reading of Daniel 7 by highlighting similarities in the expectations from ANE chaos combat myths and Daniel 7. The revelation of the Triune God, however, does not come solely through similarities to the ANE context, but also through distinctions between the ANE expectations of how a deity might behave and the true God's revelation of himself. Perhaps the most valuable material for TIS readings of the OT is not the way in which the OT Scriptures are like the ANE context in which they are given, but in how they provide intentional contrasts between ANE expectations and the revelation of the Triune God.

<sup>33</sup> Walton, “The Anzu Myth as Relevant Background for Daniel 7?” 75–78.

<sup>34</sup> On the use of בָּר in Daniel 7 see HALOT 2:2; Collins, *Daniel*, 299.

<sup>35</sup> Collins argues that the intent of the little horn on the fourth beast to mock God is paralleled by the similar speech of the king of the north in 11:36. Collins, *Daniel*, 299.

<sup>36</sup> That the beasts revolt against the people of God as well as God himself is made clear in the heavenly messenger's explanation of the vision to Daniel in 7:21, where we are told that the horn “made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them” prior to the arrival of the Ancient of Days.

The arrival of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9–10 unfolds in a manner very different from that expected in ANE chaos combat myths. The Ancient of Days coming into the divine throne room calls to mind gods such as Ea, Enlil, or El present before the pantheon to address the beasts that have risen from the sea and that mock the authority and divine order. In other ANE chaos combat myths, the chief deity of the pantheon is cowed into silence because of the threats of the chaos monster. El cowers and submits to the requests of the chaotic Yaam in the Ba'al cycle,<sup>37</sup> Ea enters a "dark silence" when challenged by Tiamat and her consort Kingu in *Enuma Elish*,<sup>38</sup> and Enlil is speechless when the monster Anzu carries off the tablet of the norms.<sup>39</sup> Daniel 7 seems at first to continue this theme of a speechless chief deity, but readers soon find that the silence of the Ancient of Days is a different sort than that of the flailing head deities of ANE chaos combat myths. The Ancient of Days enters the scene, not as the senile head of a frightened pantheon, but as the reigning monarch who rules over a divine court and is more than capable of dispensing judgment.

In the Myth of Anzu, Enlil loses the tablet of destinies to a chaos monster who has usurped his authority. By contrast, the Ancient of Days is in control of the books of judgment, which are opened before the divine court (7:10).<sup>40</sup> Rather than cowering like the chief deities of ANE chaos combat myths, the Ancient of Days comes in glory—described in ways that make clear his power and purity as he rules over the divine gathering assembled to judge the beast.<sup>41</sup> God is presented in Daniel 7 as full of sovereign power when he encounters the monsters of chaos, not as one who cowers and waits on deliverance from a lesser god within the pantheon.

The question of how God will respond to the challenge to his divine power is answered. The Triune God is not like the gods of ANE chaos combat myths. He answers the boastful words of the little horn with a sovereign authority and power that defies the expectations of the ANE context. TIS readings should recognize that the contrast in Daniel's vision is an intentional way the text emphasizes the authority of God over the forces that would challenge his authority. The ANE context of Daniel 7:9–10 allows for a better reading of the passage. Now we see in fresh ways that the Triune God is the God almighty.

Because of its affinities with chaos combat myths from the ANE, the way Daniel 7 presents the hero deity is noteworthy. In the ANE epics, the entire purpose of the myths was to recognize the exploits of a member of the pantheon, typically to explain the exaltation of the hero deity as the god whose temple was in the

<sup>37</sup> Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 51.

<sup>38</sup> *ANET* 63.

<sup>39</sup> *ANET* 515.

<sup>40</sup> "Books of judgment" are common to both the OT and later Jewish literature. See Collins, *Daniel*, 303. While distinct from the tablet of destinies, the contrast here is that the Ancient of Days possesses the necessary document as opposed to Enlil, who loses the essential tablet in the Anzu Myth.

<sup>41</sup> Paul R. House, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 27 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 130.

city where the myth originated.<sup>42</sup> The God of Daniel 7:1–14 needs no lesser member of his pantheon to rescue him from monsters; however, the vision God gives to Daniel also uses themes from chaos combat material to draw attention to the “one like a son of man” who joins the Ancient of Days in 7:13–14.

The themes of chaos combat material in Daniel 7 contribute to theological exegesis based on the contrast between what is expected in the genre and what unfolds in the vision. The Son of Man possesses few of the characteristics of the stereotypical heroes of chaos combat myths. Instead of lengthy epithets chronicling superior strength and non-human characteristics, the champion of Daniel’s vision is human in appearance.<sup>43</sup> His victory is not won through superhuman strength, as with Marduk, nor is it based on cunning or divine instruments, as with the heroes Ninurta and Ba’al. Instead, the one like a son of man inherits the effortless victory that flows from the sovereign judgment of the Ancient of Days. The dominion of the Son of Man rests on the sovereign authority of the Ancient of Days, not on a cunning victory in one battle. The kingdom he rules is given to him by the Ancient of Days, who has put down the beast that challenged his authority. The beast of human power boasts of his authority and is condemned by the Ancient of Days after attempting to usurp the glory that belongs to God alone. The Son of Man then receives the position to which the beasts of human power are pretenders.

The nature of the kingdom that the Son of Man inherits is distinct from the kingdoms of the hero deities of ANE literature. The victory of the hero gods of ANE chaos combat literature became their claim to authority over a particular people and place.<sup>44</sup> The victories they won were cosmic in nature, but those stories served as the foundation on which regional deities could be used by the particular people who worshiped the hero deities to establish their own empires by recreating the violent battles of the gods they worshiped. Simply put, their empires could expand because their gods could give them victory as mighty warriors.<sup>45</sup> No matter how large the empire might become, however, the chaos combat narratives that justified their conquest were always relegated to a particular people in a particular place. The temples of the hero deities are located in particular places, and they are worshiped in a particular language.

The kingdom of the Son of Man, however, differs from the kingdoms of gods in the ANE myths. He receives a kingdom filled with all peoples, nations, and lan-

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<sup>42</sup> Jeremy A. Black, “The New Year Ceremonies in Ancient Babylon: ‘Taking Bel by the Hand’ and a Cultic Picnic,” *Religion* 11.1 (1981): 39–40. The *Enuma Elish*, for instance, is meant to exalt Marduk as the champion of the pantheon and thus the city of Babylon. In Babylonian mythology, Babylon is the “home base” of Marduk, though his presence is not confined to the city. The relationship of Marduk to Babylon is on display in the “Marduk Prophecy,” which tells of Marduk leaving, but always returning to the city of Babylon. See *COS* 1.149.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Marduk is described as “perfect . . . doubleheaded . . . four were his eyes, four were his ears; when he moved his lips, fire blazed forth. Large were all four hearing organs, and the eyes, in like number scanned all things.” *ANET* 62.

<sup>44</sup> See Black, “The New Year Ceremonies in Ancient Babylon,” 39–40.

<sup>45</sup> Glenn S. Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 219–20.



guages. The authority that he has over these kingdoms is not based on his violent conquest, but on the authority of the Ancient of Days who has given him this kingdom to rule. The boundaries necessary for all other kingdoms—boundaries of culture, language, and time—are not applicable to the everlasting kingdom of the Son of Man (Dan 7:14).

Christian readers have no doubt of the identity of the Son of Man.<sup>46</sup> Jesus's consistent use of the term in the NT to describe himself makes clear that he is the one Daniel sees in his vision who receives the authority over the nations.<sup>47</sup> With the identity of the Son of Man well established, Christian readers should engage in theological readings of the text to explore what Daniel's vision reveals about Jesus. The ANE context of Daniel 7 assists in understanding the revelation of the Second Person of the Trinity in the passage.

4. *Reading Daniel 7 within the rule of faith.* Reading within the rule of faith equips Christian readers to be aware of how the Triune God is revealing himself and his saving work throughout all the Scriptures.<sup>48</sup> In Daniel 7, the ANE context of the passage highlights unique ways God has revealed himself and his saving work. First, the ANE context of the passage draws attention to the essential nature of Father and Son in the victory the Triune God has for his people. Reading within an ANE context creates an expectation that the hero deity will need to step in and fight for the offended head of the pantheon. The text, however, demonstrates that God the Father—the Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth—is not in need of a defender. Instead, the victory of Jesus the Son—the one who is seated at the right hand of God the Father, who is the king of the kingdom that will never end—is given his kingdom because he shares the authority of the Father.

Unlike ANE hero deities, the kingdom of Jesus is not based on violent conquest. This is not to say that he is not a conqueror. He sits enthroned after the victory of the Triune God over the foes that revolt against him, a fact that Christian readers learn from Daniel 7 and also from Isaiah 11, Mark 14:24–27 and its synoptic companions, Revelation 20–21, and a host of other passages. Christ does not reign by winning sovereignty in a battle. He wins the battle because he is sovereign.

As Jesus's victory is not like the victory of the ANE hero deities, the nature of his kingdom is also unique. All the earth will submit to his sovereignty, not because he has violent dominion, but because he has a glorious and undeniable rule founded in the sovereignty of the Father.

The vision given to Daniel comes during the oppression of God's people.<sup>49</sup> The kingdom of their captors was based on ability to dominate enemies, much like

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<sup>46</sup> See the unanimous opinions of ancient interpreters in Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Glerup, eds., *Ezekiel, Daniel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT 13 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 235–39. Similar unanimity held in the Reformation period: Carl L. Beckwith, ed., *Ezekiel, Daniel*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture, OT 12 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 339–41. For a contemporary approach, see Hamilton, *With the Clouds of Heaven*, 147–54.

<sup>47</sup> See Simon Gathercole, "The Son of Man in Mark's Gospel," *ExpTim* 115.11 (2004): 366–72.

<sup>48</sup> Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible*, 129–30.

<sup>49</sup> Regardless of the date one assigns to the composition of Daniel, the narrative setting of Daniel 7 is in a time of captivity and oppression for those who identify themselves as God's people.

their ANE hero deities won victory based on their ability to dominate (through strength or skill) the forces of chaos. But the hope of the saints then and now is that they will be ruled by the Son of Man whose never-ending kingdom is based on his identity as the one who rules in true sovereignty (Dan 7:27).

### III. ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT, THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE, AND CHRONOLOGICAL SNOBBERY

One may ask why we need ANE context at all if we are content with TIS readings. The above examination of Daniel 7:1–14 did not result in any *new* theological understandings, nor for that matter did the investigation lead to a particularly innovative interpretation of Daniel 7. The influence of ANE context and literature in Daniel 7 is acknowledged in mainstream scholarship and many of the theological insights from the above reading of 7:1–14 might still be identified without attention to ANE context. So why would we need to combine the methodologies?

Daniel Hays and Scott Duvall caution interpreters, “We should not be so arrogant and prideful as to think that God cared nothing about the original audience but was merely using them to get a message to us.”<sup>50</sup> One danger of TIS readings is that they may ignore the original context of the Scriptures and focus only on theological meanings of the texts. TIS readings that give no attention to historical-cultural context are in the greatest danger of becoming subjective readings that are based as much in works of systematic theology—or worse, the theological whim of the interpreter—as they are in the text of Scripture.

Interpreters—especially evangelicals—who advocate a historical-grammatical approach for reading the OT warn against ignoring the context of the original authors because they might miss the intent of the passage. Fee and Stuart’s famous maxim “a text cannot mean what it never meant” roots the meaning of OT and NT texts in the intention of the biblical authors.<sup>51</sup> While TIS readings that ignore the context of the biblical authors risk privileging their theological understanding over the text, historical readings that do not explore the revelation of the Triune God fail to understand the purpose of the Scriptures. Texts may not mean what they never meant, but as our knowledge of the Triune God grows through the revelation of the OT and NT Scriptures, so does our ability to understand the meaning of the Triune God’s revelation in individual texts.

The value of recognizing ANE context while also engaging in TIS readings is that it protects against chronological snobbery both ancient and modern. The biblical authors were writing within the context of the ANE and in some texts, like Daniel 7, intentionally used motifs from ANE literature in their work. The inspired message of these texts is shaped by the cognitive environment of the ANE world.

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<sup>50</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 111.

<sup>51</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 30.

Readings that ignore the ANE cognitive environment of Daniel may miss important theological themes that were a concern for the original audience.

In Daniel 7, the ANE context draws theological attention to perceived threats to the sovereignty of the Triune God. This theme may not be foremost among contemporary theological concerns, but the ancient context of the passage highlights an enduring theological truth as essential to the saints today as it was in Daniel's setting.<sup>52</sup> Without an awareness of the ANE setting, readers may miss that the vision of Daniel 7 presents a challenge to God's sovereignty and thus the overwhelming glory of the Ancient of Days who answers the challenge in sovereign power.

Chronological snobbery can apply to the past as well as the future. Just as attention to the ANE context helps protect against privileging our own context, a TIS reading informed by the rule of faith prevents privileging the ancient context to the point that all interest in the text is reduced to history. TIS readings of the OT Scriptures that consider how the ANE context is an intentional part of God's revelation of himself allow readers to encounter the Triune God who was, is, and is to come.

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<sup>52</sup> For example, see Vanhoozer's warning about the threat of social imagination replacing biblical imagination in the life of the disciple. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019).