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Currid, John D. *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013. 153 pages. \$14.00. ISBN: 978-1-4335-3183-5, paperback.

John Currid (PhD, University of Chicago) is a Professor of OT at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina and senior minister at Ballantyne Presbyterian Church. He has extensive archaeological experience in Israel and Tunisia and has authored several books and commentaries.

*Against the Gods* offers a brief, but remarkably broad introduction to the question of how the OT relates and responds to certain prominent religious ideas of Israel's neighbors in the ANE. The nature of the relationship between the writings of the HB and other ANE literature is both complicated and controversial. Currid acknowledges this, but also recognizes the importance of this subject for a proper understanding of many passages in the OT. He characterizes his book as "introductory," that is, not specifically written for scholars; as "exemplary," that is, not exhaustive; and "not reductionistic," that is, not seeking to simplify the complexities that are there (pp. 9-10, *all page references are to the book under consideration*). The author's modest aim is "to advance the debate a little, stir up some thoughts, and perhaps to make progress in the discussion" (p. 9). He states his central thesis up front in the Prologue, a firm theological perspective that is reflected in his treatment of the various issues taken up in subsequent chapters: "the Old Testament worldview is unique in the ancient Near East, and this is immediately confirmed by its all-pervasive monotheism" (p. 9).

Currid leads off with two foundational chapters that lay the groundwork for specific topics or aspects of the debate that are dealt with thereafter. He thus begins with "a brief history of ancient Near Eastern studies" (ch. 1), followed by "the nature of polemical thought and writing" (ch. 2). His "cursory outline" (p. 11) of the history of ANE scholarship apportions the field into four temporal stages: First, "the beginnings of research in the ancient Near East (1798-1872)" (p. 12). Ancient historians, such as Herodotus, did not have much interest in archeological details. Therefore, according to Currid, the first great advance in the field may be dated to 1798 when Napoleon invaded Egypt, including along with his expeditionary force a number of scientists—"scholars, architects, and draftsmen whose primary purpose was to survey the ancient monuments" of the land (p. 13). During this period, some ground-breaking discoveries were made, such as the Valley of the Kings near Thebes (p. 13), the Rosetta Stone, whose hieroglyphic script was later deciphered to "open up the world of ancient Egypt" (p. 14), and over in Mesopotamia, the Annals of Sargon II, who epigraphically recorded his deportation of citizens from totally defeated Israel (p. 15).

Currid's second stage, "the period of suspicion" began with the discovery of the Assyrian flood story by George Smith in 1873 (p. 16). Thus,

many scholars of this period “believed that the biblical accounts of creation and the flood were stripped of their original polytheism and of many pagan elements,” though remnants of such elements “remained in the text” (p. 18), for example, the word *tehom* (‘deep’) in Gen 1:2. A (third) period of “new horizons” in ANE studies was initiated in 1906 when excavations at the Hittite city of Bogazkoy uncovered “thousands of inscriptions in several languages” (p. 19), including the previously undeciphered Hittite. Other important discoveries of this era included the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra, the Hurrian cuneiform archives at Nuzi, and a similar find at the Mesopotamian city of Mari, many tablets of which reflect a setting “quite similar to the patriarchal period of biblical history” (p. 20). Currid’s fourth and final stage, the “age of synthesis” (p. 21), began after the Second World War and continues to the present day. One of the few major discoveries of this period was that of “an archive at Elba (Tell Mardikh) in 1976,” Elba being the oldest known West Semitic language, and the Elba tablets preceding “the time of Abraham by at least 450 years” (p. 21).

In his second chapter, Currid begins by defining what he means by “polemical theology,” his key analytical concept and central theoretical perspective (p. 25):

Polemical theology is the use by biblical writers of the thought forms and stories that were common in ancient Near Eastern culture, while filling them with radical new meanings. The biblical authors take well-known expressions and motifs from the ancient Near Eastern milieu and apply them to the person and work of Yahweh, and not to the other gods of the ancient world. . . . Polemical theology is monotheistic to the very core. The primary purpose of polemical theology is to demonstrate emphatically and graphically the distinction between the worldview of the Hebrews and the beliefs and practices of the rest of the ancient Near East.

Currid then provides an initial selection of examples that illustrate the operation of such “polemical theology” with respect to two distinct categories: “expressions,” namely, idiomatic parallels, and second, “motifs,” which concern certain key aspects of ANE life and culture. Within the category of idiomatic expressions, he considers “a strong hand” (p. 26), the speech introducer “thus says” (p. 27), and the metaphor of “the heavenly rider” (p. 28). Under “polemical motifs,” Currid explores “the serpent confrontation” (p. 28), e.g. Exod 7:8-13, the occurrence of “drought” (p. 30), e.g. 1 Kgs 17:1, and the imagery of a “thundering deity” (p. 30), e.g. Exod 19:16, 18. He argues that in all of these instances the aim of the biblical writer was “to counter ancient pagan myths that [were] noxious to the Hebrew faith centered on monotheism” (p. 31).

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Each of the remaining chapters of *Against the Gods* then discusses in greater detail a notable topic of the OT that has one or more significant parallels in ANE thought and literature. These illustrative chapters all follow a certain general pattern, though this is stylistically modified in each case to avoid monotony: After a brief introduction to the subject at hand, Currid surveys some of the major ANE topical parallels to the biblical account. He then presents a summary of the principal *similarities*, often helpfully illustrated in the form of a chart, and proceeds to apply an argument based on the strategy of “polemical theology.” The latter normally involves an overview of the *critical differences* between the Hebrew text and its closest ANE correspondents, which leads to a concluding summary of the significance of these disparities for understanding the Bible’s Yahweh-focused content as well as the polemical aim(s) of its authors. In each of the outstanding instances of scholarly controversy, the salient options are considered: Did the OT writers simply “borrow” from their ANE neighbors; did they incorporate pagan texts after theologically “sanitizing” them; or did they go further and actually “polemicize” these issues by explicitly or implicitly demonstrating, in dramatic narrative literary form, the absolute superiority of Yahweh over all other gods with respect to moral character, decisive action, and divine purpose.

Space allows me simply to list the remaining chapter titles of this book and to document several of Currid’s important observations with regard to each subject area.

(III) *Genesis 1 and Other Ancient Near Eastern Creation Accounts*: The crucial question boils down to this: “Is the Hebrew creation account...merely another ancient Near Eastern myth that has been cleansed, or is it a radical, unique cosmological view? Or is it something in between?” (p. 35). Currid finds that “the dissimilarities are . . . of great magnitude and import” (p. 40) with respect to factors such as the nature and powers of the Creator (whether limited or not), the issue of pagan “theogony” (‘birth of the gods’), the use of magic, preexistent waters, creation *ex nihilo* with mankind as the *imago Dei*, and narrative style. With regard to the last point, “the style of writing of the cosmological texts from the ancient Near East is best described as ‘mythic narrative.’ . . . Genesis 1-2, in contrast, bears all the markings of Hebrew historical narrative” (p. 44). Furthermore, the Genesis references to the creation of “large sea creatures” as well as the heavenly “luminaries” may be construed as a polemic against ANE beliefs about their deities (p. 45). Finally, “the biblical account has as its chief purpose to glorify the one Creator God who is the sole God of all reality” (p. 46).

(IV) *Ancient Near Eastern Flood Accounts and the Noahic Deluge of Genesis 6-9*: Currid provides a useful summary of the primary surviving ANE flood accounts, namely: the Sumerian Flood Story (p. 48), the Death of Bilgames (which also mentions a great flood) (p. 49), the Epic of Atrahasis (p.

50), the Epic of Gilgamesh (p. 52), an Ugaritic Atrahasis account (p. 53), and the much later (278 B.C.E.) Berossos story (p. 53). Despite many superficial similarities, “the dissimilarities are profound” (p. 57), that is, in terms of theology, morality, the covenant concept, genre category, and numerous narrative details. “The sovereign control exercised by Yahweh over the floodwaters is in striking contrast to” the reaction of pagan deities, which seem to be at the mercy of nature (p. 62). Furthermore, “one of the unique aspects of the Noahic flood narrative is the Lord’s establishment of a covenant with Noah,” made manifest by the ubiquitous physical sign of a heavenly rainbow (p. 63).

(V) *Joseph, the Tale of the Two Brothers, and the “Spurned Seductress” Motif*: Currid first suggests a reason for the apparent intrusion of Gen 38 into the Joseph story, which spans chs. 37-50: “The tale (*or, ‘historical narrative’?*) is placed in its present position so that Judah would serve as a foil to Joseph” (p. 66), especially in relation to the episode involving Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39). Currid then traces the *leitmotif* of “the spurned seductress” in three ancient texts: the Egyptian “Tale of the Two Brothers” (p. 67), the Hittite “Elkunirsa Myth” (p. 71), and the Mesopotamian “Gilgamesh Epic” (p. 72). He asserts in conclusion that the Joseph pericope is a factual, historical account, which “serves as a polemic against” ANE folk tales by playing off of their mythological elements (p. 73).

(VI) *The Birth of the National Deliverer*: There are some “striking parallels between the birth story of Moses recorded in Exodus 2:1-10” and “accounts from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Hatti” (p. 75). Currid surveys three of the most important of these: the “Legend of Sargon” (p. 76), the “Myth of Horus” (p. 79), and a set of “Hittite tales” (p. 83). He then critiques them in comparison with the scriptural account with respect to facticity, theology, and anthropology (pp. 85-86). His conclusion is that “the writer takes the famous pagan myth and turns it on its head in order to ridicule Egypt and to highlight the truth of the Hebrew world-and-life view” (p. 86). However, this position raises the issue of literary priority, and perhaps genre as well: Were the Pentateuchal narratives composed *primarily* as an *historical* testimony of God’s varied interactions with chosen persons, and later a people—or as *polemical* discourses aimed at critically interacting with surrounding ANE religious beliefs and practices? Of course, one could simply answer “yes” (both—and), but personally I felt that at times the author was pushing his polemical agenda somewhat too strongly, thus deflecting from the prominence of the historical biblical record.

(VII) *The Flights of Sinuhe and Moses*: In this chapter only two texts are compared, the Egyptian Middle Kingdom “Story of Sinuhe” and Moses’ flight from Egypt as recorded in Exod 2:11-22. While these narratives have many elements in common, their endings are strikingly different: Sinuhe longs to

return to his homeland, Egypt, whereas Moses, due to his prior crime of murder, definitely does not. According to Currid, through this “use of a polemical ending, the author taunts Egypt and her nationalistic fervor: Moses doesn’t crave Egypt or her kingly deity; he longs only to serve Yahweh” (p. 95). But again, one wonders about the matter of compositional priority and intentionality: Was the biblical author primarily aiming to present a historical account of the facts of Moses’ flight from Egypt—or did he deliberately shape (bend?) a received story to serve a polemical end?

(VIII) *Who is “I Am that I Am? Moses 3 and the Egyptian Book of the Heavenly Cow*: The latter text with this strange title is apparently “the oldest extended mythical narrative from ancient Egypt” (c.a. 1300 B.C.E.), and is perhaps also a rare example “of polemical theology on the part of the ancient Egyptians in response to a major theological tenet of Hebrew theology” (p. 97). Currid traces the fascinating, but fragile historical and literary connections between a reference to Pharaoh, who personified the sun god Re, as “I am who I am” (*ywy ymy*) in the opening section of the Book of the Heavenly Cow and Exod 3:14 in the HB, shortly before the confrontation between Moses and the current Pharaoh. A natural question then is this: what was “Yahweh” doing in a pagan Egyptian creation myth, and how or why did he get there? Currid’s reasoning towards some possible answers to this question (which, he admits, cannot be conclusive), is too complicated to summarize, but one “polemical” option is as follows (p. 107):

Re and Pharaoh’s appropriation of the name “I am that I am” was a way to vanquish Yahweh and to abduct his character for themselves. Re and Pharaoh were thus claiming that they were the only eternal, unchanging deities!

During the course of his discussion, Currid also presents a helpful synopsis of the theological significance of the name “Yahweh” (*yhwh*) with reference to Exod 3:14 (pp. 100-101).

(IX) *The Rod of Moses*: In this case, a specific object used in a particular way in the HB serves as a subtle critique of Egyptian superstitious beliefs and magical practice. The “rod/staff/walking stick” (Heb. *matteh*) was an important symbol of power and authority in both Israel and Egyptian culture. Currid offers an unusually detailed study of its significance in both societies (pp. 111-116) and proceeds to discuss the twofold irony, judicial and linguistic, of the rod in chs. 5-15 of the Exodus account (p. 117). Moses was in possession of a divinely-supplied staff, “a highly esteemed Egyptian emblem, in order to humiliate and defeat the Egyptians” (p. 117). Thus Currid concludes that the author of Exodus (p. 119):

...simply polemicized Egyptian beliefs in order to exalt Yahweh as the true sovereign of the universe. That was accomplished not only

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by employing linguistic parallels but also by structuring the very events and objects of the episode as a critique of Egyptian practice.

But again this construal might raise the question: To what extent does such a prominent *polemical* motivation jibe with the actual *historical* veracity of the biblical account (at least as it textually presents itself)? Did the former concern perhaps even preempt the latter, for example, by “structuring” the rod creatively, or imaginatively, into the narrative in order to create a special rhetorical effect?

(X) *The Parting of the Waters of the Red Sea*: After introducing the account of the Red Sea crossing (Exod 14:13-31) as “the salient event in the history of Israel” (p. 121), Currid turns to a description of a mythic Egyptian parallel, as recorded in the Westcar Papyrus, also known as “King Cheops and the Magicians” (p. 122). Next he identifies three important polemical motifs in the Exodus narrative: the shameful eclipsing of the Egyptian sun deity Amon-Re (Exod 14:20), the earth “swallowing” the Egyptian army (lit. the “water covered” them, 14:28), and the unflattering “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart (14:4, 8). Thus, “it seems clear that the biblical writer regarded the event of the crossing of the Red Sea as a polemical parallel with the myth of [the Egyptian “chief lector-priest”] Djadjaemonkh’s separation of the waters of the lake...in search of a valuable charm” (p. 126).

(XI) *Canaanite Motifs*: In this final chapter Currid explores several of the chief correspondences between the Canaanite pantheon, as revealed in the Ugaritic texts discovered at Ras Shamra (e.g. the Baal Cycle), and the theology of the literature of Scripture. He notes that “the parallels are particularly striking in the poetical genre,” including the compositional device of parallelism (p. 135). Currid then investigates some of the key terms and concepts of Ps 29, which commentators such as Mitchell Dahood observe “have clear and distinct correspondences with Canaanite phraseology,” for example, “the sons of god[s]” (v. 1) and “the voice of Yahweh” (vv. 3ff) (p. 136). Currid argues that the reiterated divine name “Yahweh” probably serves as a *leitwort* which reveals this psalm to be “a polemic against Baal and Canaanite religion” (p. 137). He concludes this chapter, and his book with a comparative consideration of imagery relating to “the god of the mountain” motif, as expressed also in the Hebrew divine name *El Shaddai*, which most likely “means ‘God of the mountain’” (p. 138). Currid agrees with Dahood’s assessment that such terminology and the local imagery which it reflects functions as a polemical assertion of Israel’s God passing judgment upon all pagan deities (p. 140).

In conclusion, Currid reiterates his claim that “polemical theology” functions as an essential hermeneutical frame of reference which aids in the interpretation of biblical (Hebrew) passages manifesting some noteworthy intertextual correspondence with other ANE literature. This approach also

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serves as a critical evaluative “instrument to underscore the uniqueness of the Hebrew worldview in contrast to other ancient Near Eastern conceptions of” deity—as well as of God’s universe and how it operates (p. 141). Whether or not one agrees with all of Currid’s generally conservative theological opinions on the range of topics he discusses in this condensed overview of the field, one can certainly benefit from his concise summary of a relatively large number of ANE texts that have many significant parallels with the well-known accounts contained in the HB, the Pentateuch in particular. A substantial amount of scholarly literature on the subject is also referenced (in footnotes). There is some degree of repetition between chapters, which is probably due to their being generated from a series of seminary lectures (p. 10). However, the book is generally well organized (including a subject and a scripture index) and evinces a straightforward, easy-to-read style throughout. It would therefore serve as an excellent introductory text for a comparative literature course relating to OT narrative literature at the seminary or theological college level—or it could provide a handy review for those who have already taken such courses. *Against the Gods* introduces readers to some of the most ancient Near Eastern religious texts on record, but the different issues discussed from the author’s chosen perspective of theology with a polemical point are sure to be of interdisciplinary interest to those from various academic fields in today’s increasingly pluralistic age.

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