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# THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

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## Introduction

Some years ago when working with itinerant families, I consulted material in the Brotherton Library, Leeds. While there I was introduced to a folklore handbook. It was a substantial volume. The unusual feature was that it consisted almost entirely of questions. Although not following that method, this paper makes no attempt to give a definitive or comprehensive account. Adopting instead an open-ended approach, I wish to suggest, at least implicitly, a range of questions that can be addressed without losing a sense of the dynamic nature of the biblical witness.

The *Macmillan Encyclopedia* (London, 1981) defines 'geography' as 'the study of the features of the earth's surface, together with their spacial distribution and inter-relationships, as the environment of man'. Following a brief historical survey it states, 'The discipline is now divided between the physical and social sciences. Physical geography includes geomorphology,... biogeography,... and climatology.... The main branches of human geography are historical geography,... economic geography, urban geography and political geography.' We are concerned here mainly with the category of 'human geography'. The entry quoted is written from a geographer's understanding. In it 'historical geography' is understood as, 'studying spacial change in an area over a period of time or reconstructing past landscapes'. However, in current studies from a biblical-geographic perspective 'historical geography' is concerned with the physical setting of events and the movement or resistance to movement of people in a space-time setting. It covers all social geographies where relevant.

'Theology' is often regarded in a very restricted way. Here the understanding is a very broad one, for it is not possible to be a Christian without being a theologian. Each one is influenced both consciously and unconsciously by a personal belief-system. Anyone who decries theology is by that very

act speaking theologically. We do not have a choice whether or not to think of life-issues theologically. Our choice is whether to be content with our present theological understanding or to be open to the possibility of improving it, with all that that entails for practice as well as belief.

### Two Modern Approaches

One of the most helpful approaches to the Bible lies in the concept of 'salvation-history', or 'Heilsgeschichte', which sees historical events in the Bible as specific acts in which God saves his people. Such an understanding is a Christian interpretation of biblical events. It is a matter of faith, not proof, but it fits well with the biblical witness. Although geographical considerations have not escaped the notice of the exponents of this approach, it is history that takes centre stage. This has led Grogan to ask if there is not also a 'Heilsgeographie', a 'salvation geography' (G.W. Grogan 'Heilsgeographie: Geography as a Theological Concept', in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 6, 1988, p.81). Since events in human experience cannot take place in time without also taking place in space, the answer would appear to be 'Yes' – unless the geography does no more than locate.

Increasing attention is being given to another approach, which sees an understanding of the geography of Bible lands, and especially the Holy Land, as essential in biblical study. In this, geography is the handmaid of archaeology. It gives colour, holds our attention and, most importantly, removes some obscurities. In many studies the theological dimension is incidental and, while some give serious *ad hoc* theological consideration, there is very little evidence of concern for thoroughgoing theological and geographical integration. Anthropological, sociological, zoological and other insights may be very exciting but do little to sustain Christian faith and understanding!

The Bible is a collection of documents, each of which has a Middle Eastern provenance apart from Paul's prison epistles (unless, of course, these were written from Ephesus or Caesarea – and even if from Rome were written by one brought up in the Middle East) and possibly apart from Luke and Acts. Throughout, but most noticeably in the Old Testament books, despite their rich variety, theology and historical geography continually interact. At times this is very

obvious. At other times it is just below the surface. And the theology is not monolithic. It may be very developed or embryonic, and may be operative at different levels in the same passage concurrently.

I propose to develop my theme under three heads: 1. Geography and Salvation-History; 2. Geography and Biblical Literary Categories; and 3. Geography and Culture. But first an illustration might prove helpful. Acts contains theological statements related to an historical geographical setting. For example, 'The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything' (17:24-5), spoken in first-century Athens. Some statements are also theological interpretations. For example, 'This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up...' (2:23-4), addressed to first-century Jerusalem. A major theme in Acts is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. However, the book in its entirety is theology as well as history. In the selection of material and its balance, theological influences are present, and the history is not history in a secular twentieth-century sense, but salvation-history concerned with bringing the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, the result of the continuing activity of the Lord (cf. 'began' in 1:1). Note that the way in which Luke executes his work is culturally conditioned. There is a striking similarity between Acts 1:1, 'In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt...', and Josephus' *Against Apion* 1:1, 'I suppose that, by my books of the Antiquities of the Jews, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have made it evident...', and 2:1, 'In the former book, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have demonstrated....'

### **1. Geography and Salvation-History**

The central and over-arching theme that runs through the Bible is the kingship of God. The major focus in the exposition of that theme is God's covenantal relationship with his people. In Genesis, although covenant is probably implied in 1:27-8 and made explicit in 6:18 and 9:9, the major focus is on the covenant God established with Abraham in chapters 15 and 17. Some scholars argue that the closest parallels to this

covenant are the Hittite vassal treaties such as the treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J.B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ, 1955), pp. 203-5. Cf. Alan Millard, *Treasures from Bible Times* (Tring, 1985), pp. 60-4). The Hittite empire came to an end c. 1200 BC and with it that type of treaty. Others believe that much later Assyrian parallels are important (G.E. Mendenhall and G.A. Herion, 'Covenant', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York, 1992) pp. 1188-9, and M. Weinfeld, 'berîth', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 270-1). Millard, however, maintains, 'When other treaties become accessible to us, in Assyrian and Aramaic texts of the eighth century BC and later, the pattern has changed' (*op. cit.*, p. 64). Although further research is necessary for clarification, it is clear that this is one of a number of instances in Scripture where revelation is culturally relevant both historically and geographically. In the Abrahamic covenant we see both selectivity and adaptation. God cannot be reduced to the level of an earthly king, nor does he share his glory with any other. There is theology in these facts – not just antiquarian interest.

There are two major parts to the promises enshrined in the Abrahamic covenant. The first is the promise of numerous descendants. The other is the promise of a land which is to be the home, as subsequently becomes clear, of those descendants that constituted the children of Israel. There is no vagueness about where that land would be, although precise boundaries are not given. 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites...' (Gen. 15:18-19). And not only so, but the promise is made for all time: 'I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God' (Gen. 17:8). The land is theologically significant. Other lands and the peoples who occupy them are also significant, but their significance is bound up with Israel and her land and depends on both as the promise is outworked. There was nothing automatic about it as defeats and exile were to show. The promise was conditional on obedience, yet the promise was not withdrawn. God's saving activity involving the land was recounted and

celebrated in prose and poetry, in thought and in liturgy, in personal reflection and in community.

Let us turn now from promise to law, for that too has a significant role to play. This is not the place to assess all the pertinent issues entailed in Israel's legislation but some points can be suitably raised. Any study which ignores the most significant law codes of neighbouring countries already discovered, and most notably that of the Babylonian king Hammurapi c. 1700 BC, would be impoverished. Although it is clear from the Bible that theology and legislation are integrally related, careful comparison with other codes enables us to reach a clearer understanding and brings into sharp focus the issues we have mentioned relating to covenant and treaty.

It should be noted that a very significant and distinctive feature of Israel's legislation is the repeated theme of purposive development (in contrast to a cyclical understanding), centred in the Lord's promise to give Israel a land. There are several significant passages in Exodus and even more in Leviticus, while in Deuteronomy it assumes major proportions: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.... Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you' (Exod. 20:2, 12); 'You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and do them; that the land where I am bringing you to dwell may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I am casting out before you' (Lev. 20: 22-3); 'The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey' (Deut. 26:8f.).

The land was a gift. Yet the gift was not an absolute one. The children of Israel could not do what they wanted with it. It was given to them in trust. The Lord remained the owner and retained the right to decide what was to happen to it – whether to grant a qualified ownership in whole or in part or even to take it from his own and give it to others. 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall grant a redemption of the land' (Lev.

25:23-4). The concern in Leviticus 25 was not only the merciful protection of the poor Israelite, but also to ensure that no part of the land was lost, not even to a fellow Israelite. This was also a concern for the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 36. For this reason the settlement of the tribes in Joshua 13-19 is also theologically significant, with lists of tribal boundaries, cities and villages. Taken in context this section 'is a partial account of Israel's taking possession of its divinely given territory, and of that territory's distribution to the tribes' (R.S. Hess, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI, 1988), p. 912).

While obedience would result in blessing, disobedience would result in curse. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 26-30. Obedience would ensure security and prosperity in the land. Disobedience would lead to exile even although that would not be the Lord's final word. Restoration would follow repentance. The Lord, however, would not be manipulated. He remained sovereign. In the Book of Judges we see Israel teetering on the brink and being rescued by the Lord when they cried to him. His deliverances were sovereign acts of grace, astonishing grace – not the reward for repentance which, except in chapter 10, seems to be conspicuous by its absence. And after many vicissitudes throughout the period of the monarchy – exile, first for Israel and then for Judah. This surely has a bearing on the eternal aspect of the gift of the land.

And the land itself – what a strange choice it seems at first glance! A land vulnerable in the power struggles of the great states of Egypt and Mesopotamia. A land vulnerable to attack from neighbouring nations and desert raiders. A land which for geological reasons was difficult to unify and control. A land where in places malarial swamp lay close to fertile ground. A land prone to drought and famine. Clearly more was at stake than obedience. It was in Monson's words 'God's testing ground of faith' (J.M. Monson, *The Land Between: A Regional Study Guide to the Land of the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 14).

In eschatological passages in the Prophets the land has a central place. Yet when we turn to the New Testament it is absent, which is all the more surprising since in Judaism it becomes increasingly important! God's chosen race has a

unique place in the thinking of Paul, even although he was the Apostle to the Gentiles, as Romans 9-11 makes clear, but the land loses its special character. Like Israel's ritual, the land is obsolete with the Incarnation. It was in that land, outside the city wall of Jerusalem, that our Lord was crucified, but with the resurrection apparently all lands are 'clean'. 'The hour is coming when neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father' (John 3:21). 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Matt. 5:5. To apply this beatitude to the Jews and their land would create more serious problems than it is intended to solve.) Luke tells of one who came to Jesus saying, 'Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.' In an Old Testament context that would be a very important request. Things are different now. The request is quite trifling! The Lord replied: 'Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?' And this from the Messiah who was to put all things right! For Jesus, however, the important issue is one the man had not thought about: 'Take heed, and beware all covetousness; for a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' ( Luke 12: 13-21).

Christian Zionism does not sit easily with the New Testament witness. (In passing we note that some contemporary ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel regard the State as a sign of apostasy. Only the Messiah can legitimately establish a State of Israel.) The return of Jews to the land of their ancestors and the establishment of the State of Israel are unquestionably significant theologically, but they do not get their significance from fulfilled prophecy, although many parallels can be drawn. The significance is to be found elsewhere – in the providence of God. (Some would argue from passages such as Ezekiel 37 and Zechariah 12-14 that the present return of Jews to the land is prophesied. But the characteristics of the modern State are in some very important respects very different from those of the kingdom of the Messiah, closely associated with return to the land, and Zechariah on a literal understanding speaks only of a presence and not of a restoration from exile.)

It is in the providence of God that the State of Israel exists for Jewish people with their aspirations for security and prosperity. It is in the providence of God that there are Palestinians in that land who have not thrown in their lot with



the Jews (as some of their own have) but have their own aspirations for autonomy and self-determination. 'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?' says the Lord. 'Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?' (Amos 9:7) - and that under the old covenant! It might be argued that it matters little whether an event is the result of prophecy or of providence. The distinction, however, is very important. If the return of the Jews is regarded as the fulfilment of prophecy it gives this and associated events a special legitimacy and a considerable degree of finality.

In the continuing struggle the Christian cannot encourage those whose aim is to undermine and destroy the State of Israel. Equally, the Christian cannot support unjust and oppressive treatment of the disadvantaged. Even under the old covenant Israel was told, 'When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God' (Lev. 19:33-4).

## **2. Geography and Biblical Literary Categories**

We look now at the interaction of theology and historical geography on another level. In Old and New Testament we find both poetry and prose frequently integrated and at times unexpectedly juxtaposed.

The Psalms, the Wisdom literature and the prophets have many passages in poetry with geographical context. Particularly important are the references to Jerusalem, often referred to as Zion, a trigger designation that serves particularly well to bring out the theological importance of the city, the place where the Lord dwells, 'the city of the great King'. It was not only the centre of the national life of the united kingdom under David and Solomon and subsequently of the kingdom of Judah but also the site of the temple, one of the factors that made the kingship theologically significant. The king is God's vice-gerent, a concept closely related to that of the awaited Messiah.

We find, too, the celebration of the conquest and subsequent victories, both local and national, and the anticipation of return from exile. There are assertions that the Lord would vindicate his sovereignty in the subduing of

Israel's enemies, e.g. Moab, Edom, Philistia, Assyria and Egypt. But there is also censure for the 'chosen people', e.g. wholly in Amos 2:4-16 and partially in Judges 5:15-17. And there is expression of desolation: 'Is there no balm in Gilead?' (Jer. 8:22) and 'By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion' (Ps. 137:1).

Turning to prose we find a number of different types of literature including narratives, letters, apocalyptic writing and legal documents. Many contain geographical material. In the Apocalypse in the New Testament this is often symbolic, yet rich in theological significance. But Revelation also contains the letters to seven churches where allusions are made to concrete features which match the message or are a foil to set off the glories of the reigning Lord and reinforce the encouragement to Christians facing persecution. In a way this is a kind of practical theology. Our understanding of the New Testament letters is also greatly enriched by a knowledge of the religious, philosophical and socio-political characteristics of the localities to which they were sent.

Weiser notes, 'As contrasted with the narratives in poetry, a strong realistic impulse underlies the prose narrative. This impulse brings to the forefront the internal historical connections of what has happened' (*Introduction to the Old Testament* (London, 1961), p. 64). Care must be taken not to fall into the trap of the allegorists. Approaching these passages we should ask, 'Does the geography merely locate the event? Is it really significant or does it merely constitute part of the scenery?' In many cases it will simply earth the event – although even that will not be insignificant. Biblical faith is very much rooted in this world. However, it should not escape our notice that biblical writers tend to be very economical with description, and that should alert us to the possibility that some details may be very significant.

To the modern mind the capture of the strategically important city between Ebal and Gerizim where the covenant was to be renewed is much more important than the capture of Ai, probably no more than an outpost of Bethel at that time, which was only one of the steps on the way, yet the capture of Shechem is merely implied in Joshua while almost fifty verses are given to that of Ai. (Ai, always with the definite article, is not a name, but a description – 'the ruin'.) It might be argued that the writer had a disproportionate amount of

material at hand concerning Ai and virtually nothing about Shechem. It is much more likely, taking the passage in context, that very significant theological points are being made. It is the Lord who is sovereign and requires to be glorified in the absolute obedience of his people. It is he who withholds and grants victory. The victory he gives involves his people not only in moral obedience but also in careful military strategy and daring.

There are other ways in which geographical detail may be significant. Attitudes can unintentionally be passed down the generations in families, communities and nations and these attitudes come to be associated with regions and localities. 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites... "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me..."' (Mark 7:6). 'As your fathers did, so do you' (Acts 7:51). Think of the contrasting tribal reputations of impetuous Benjamin, docile Asher, powerful Ephraim, nationally irrelevant Simeon. And yet the pattern can be broken. Jeremiah from Benjamin! Jesus from Nazareth!

In the Old Testament the universal rule of the Lord was proclaimed in contrast to the localization of the gods worshipped by Israel's neighbours (e.g. Deut. 12:2, 2 Kgs. 17:29-31; cf. 1 Kgs. 20:23, 2 Kgs. 5:17-19). 'Each national group had its own gods or principalities which had separate names and identities' (V.J. Sterk, 'Territorial Spirits and Evangelization in Hostile Environments', in *Territorial Spirits*, ed. C.P. Wagner (Chichester, 1991), p. 152). If it were simply a question of the superstitious worship of lifeless idols such worship could simply be dismissed. However, idols and demons are linked in Deuteronomy 32:17, Psalm 106:36-8 and 1 Corinthians 10:20. Deuteronomy 32:8 in the Septuagint (supported against the Massoretic text by a fragment from Qumran) is particularly interesting, since 'sons of God', in a context in which worship does not feature, could include good spiritual beings (cf. J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (London, 1974), p. 299). Daniel with its references to 'watchers' from heaven executing God's will on earth (4:13, 17; cf. 'principalities and powers' in Eph. 6:12, etc.) also speaks of spiritual beings which are associated with territories and peoples - 'the prince of Persia', 'the prince of

Greece', 'Michael, your prince' – and of heavenly conflict that affects the outcome of world events (Dan. 10). This is taken up in the New Testament at a number of points, most obviously in Ephesians 6 and Revelation, as well as in Judaism. There are no New Testament passages where spirits are associated with specific territories except Mark 5:10, where Legion 'begged him (Jesus) not to send them out of the country'. However, such an association could well be one of the factors underlying the uneven response to the gospel in Acts. In evangelism among hostile people a new openness will sometimes be found after the influencing powers are confronted in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, but this will not invariably happen. Our Lord did not pursue this line of action with Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (*cf.* Matt. 11:20-4), nor presumably did his followers after Pentecost. Apparently with these towns it would not have been consonant with the will of God.

Following the spiritual histories of localities can be very revealing. Think of Hebron with such promise initially but losing its significance early in the monarchy. Follow Old Testament Shechem through to New Testament Sychar and beyond. Or think of Zebulun and Naphtali: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light' (Matt. 4:15f). (Incidentally, an important by-product of this is the help it can give to the memory. When sections of Scripture are geographically located and illustrated with maps and photographs the impression left on the mind is much more vivid than that obtained by colour coding.)

Decision-making is frequently present in biblical narrative. The theologically very significant ark of the covenant features prominently in Joshua 3-8. Yet it does not directly account for the movements of the Israelites and their direction and timing in chapters 1-8. These depended on the belief that the Lord was communicating unequivocally in rational human speech. Without this the ark would have been reduced to a magic prop. In Genesis, God communicated with Abraham in a similar direct way. But when famine struck the land of Canaan shortly after Abraham arrived, there was no direct voice from heaven. He panicked, lost faith and went to Egypt (Gen.12). In Ruth, when famine hits Bethlehem, Elimelech takes his wife and family to Moab. There is no censure here, either stated or implied, of a possible lapse of faith. As the, to

us, strange ending shows – with its double climax on the name of David – the theme is how the Lord providentially incorporated a Moabite into the direct line of David's ancestry. The famine was not a test of faith but a providential happening which led Elimelech to Moab. Later in Jerusalem, Hezekiah stood his ground by faith – a very practical faith since it was supplemented by the construction of the Siloam tunnel and the strengthening and extending of the fortifications – against the Assyrian army which besieged the city. But was it faith in the Lord that led Omri to move his capital from Tirzah to Samaria (1 Kgs. 16:24)? Certainly not, as the following verses make clear. Or think of Paul the great strategist who was yet open to the Holy Spirit. He changed his plans and the gospel spread powerfully into Europe (Acts 16). There are indications in the New Testament that others had taken the gospel to Europe earlier, but in the biblical narrative this occasion is particularly significant.

### 3. Geography and Culture

The more that is discovered about the cultures contemporaneous with the Bible within the Holy Land and neighbouring countries, the clearer it becomes that revelation is given expression in ways appropriate. Although culture is not hermetically sealed it is a geographical as well as theological concern. Genesis 1-11 comprises a variety of related material with extensive treatment given to creation and the Flood. What is the relationship with parallel material in the myths of other countries? We might conceive of a dependence of Scripture on extant myths, albeit with adaptation, and trace a movement of ideas and stories from one location to another. For example, we might conjecture a transmission of a creation myth in a general westerly direction from Mesopotamia to Canaan. However, the case is not that simple.

In the first place, as D.J. Wiseman states: 'No myth has yet been found which explicitly refers to the creation of the universe' ('Creation: III, Ancient Near Eastern Theories', in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edit. (Leicester, 1982), p.247). The most relevant one is the Sumerian cosmogony known in its adapted Babylonian form – the *Enuma Elis*. However, no extant version pre-dates the first millennium, with antecedents going back most probably to the early second millennium. But

we now have the following lines from Ebla, near Aleppo in Northern Syria, from the third millennium, c. 2500-2300 BC:

Lord of heaven and earth:

the earth was not, you created it,

the light of day was not, you created it,

the morning light you had not made to exist.

(G. Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla* (New York, 1981), p. 244)

Contemporary with this is a reference to creation discovered in Egypt. Was the movement, then, from south to north and from west to east? More probably we have a theme of universal interest and with parallel developments. How are we to understand Genesis 1:1-2:4a in its cultural context? It is a statement of faith with a polemic edge. Explicitly it declares the uniqueness of God and his relation to creation – responsible for it, yet not part of it. Implicitly it rejects the polytheistic pantheon with its petty quarrels and absence of transcendence. Although subsequent passages in Genesis 1-11 differ in style and are not of the same intent, comparable theological dynamics are present there too. It is reasonable to account for similarities with extra-biblical material in at least three ways. Israel was living in the same physical universe as her neighbours and was experiencing the same phenomena, although the interpretation might differ. There were cultural experiences and understandings not inimical to Israel's faith which were common property. If cross-cultural communication is to take place there must be a certain amount of common ground in the vehicle of expression.

Parallels can be drawn between a number of brief passages, particularly in the Psalms, and the conflict between Baal and Yam (the sea) in Ugaritic literature. For example,

Thou dost rule the raging of the sea;

when its waves rise, thou stillest them.

Thou didst crush Rahab like a carcass,

thou didst scatter thy enemies with thy mighty arm (Ps. 89:9-10).

Even if 'Rahab' is Egypt (*cf.* Ps. 87:4; Isa. 30:7), the description is hardly one of sober prose!

Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,  
that didst pierce the dragon?

Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep? (Isa. 51:9-10).

Correspondence there certainly is with Canaanite mythology, yet we do well to be cautious. 'The *exact* relationship between Baal's fight against the Sea and Yahweh's conflict with the primeval waters is uncertain' (A.A. Anderson, *Psalms*, New Century Bible (London, 1972), vol. 2, p. 635). Polemicism seems muted, if in fact present, in the biblical passages containing these allusions. As the contexts show, the writers do not have a Canaanite mindset. The allusions seem to serve the purpose of graphically asserting the complete adequacy of the Lord in every circumstance and his unrivalled position. The writers were no more reverting to paganism than was Milton when he used classical allusions in his poetry. Similar caution must be exercised when comparing Canaanite, Egyptian and Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature with Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. A comparable New Testament passage is 2 Peter 1:3-4. Michael Green notes, 'These two verses abound in rare and daring words. Peter is very subtly using language uncommon in the New Testament but full of meaning in the pagan world, as we know from the Carian inscriptions' (*2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (London, 1968), pp. 64f.).

Examples of interaction are legion – which is not surprising since no part of the Bible was written in a cultural vacuum. Every verse has a historical geographical context, whether or not we can precisely determine date and location.

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