

CINCINNATI CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

ANALYSIS OF *LUDLEL BEL NIMEQI* AND *JOB* IN LIGHT OF JOHN OSWALT'S  
CONTINUITY/TRANCENDENCE DIFFERENTIATION: A COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
ANALYSIS

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ANALYSIS OF *LUDDLEL BEL NIMEQI* AND JOB IN LIGHT OF JOHN OSWALT'S  
CONTINUITY/TRANCENDENCE DIFFERENTIATION: A COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

To some, it is a startling fact to discover that the biblical text more often than not has some correlation to texts found within the broader ancient Near East but outside of the Israelite community. Ranging from creation myths to wisdom literature, it is discovered that our Israelites of the Old Testament are in fact a people within a time and culture after all. Of course, much is said about the similarities (for good and bad), but is there actually a difference deeper than simple cultural similarities?

In his book, *The Bible Among the Myths*,<sup>2</sup> John Oswalt gives a rather interesting comparison of ancient Near Eastern and Biblical texts. In his view, there is one major difference that carries across the board – what he calls the difference between continuity and transcendence. Here, I would like to test this theory, using Oswalt's work as a guide, on *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi* and the book of Job.

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<sup>1</sup> The text of *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi* used in this analysis comes from George Aaron Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* (American Sunday-school union, 1916). Unfortunately, this text is now outdated as some major advancements have been made.

<sup>2</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Zondervan, 2009).

To establish a difference, Oswalt gives us common features of both ideals. Concerning continuity, an idea that all things that exist are part of each other (what Oswalt assigned to all works outside of the Israelite community), we are given the following common features: polytheism, images, eternity of chaotic matter, personality not essential to reality, low view of the gods, conflict is the source of life, low view of humanity, no single standard of ethics, and a cyclical concept of existence. Concerning transcendence (or the Israelite worldview), we are given these common characteristics: monotheism, iconoclasm, first principle is spirit, absence of conflict in the creation process, a high view of humanity, the reliability of God, God is supra-sexual, sex is desacralized, prohibition of magic, ethical obedience as a religious response, and the importance of human-historical activity.

Unfortunately, not all of these will find correspondence with either *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi* or the book of Job; nonetheless, there are significant differences when viewed through the lenses of Oswalt's guide of characteristics/features. Before those can be identified an analysis of both texts is in order, but seeing that most readers are already at least somewhat familiar with the book of Job, a deep analysis will consist only of *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*.

#### Analysis of Ludlel Bel Nimeqi

If we were to summarize Ludlul Bel Nimeqi with three simple phrases, it would look something like this: impiousness typically brings destruction, no one can understand the gods, but nonetheless, Marduk is great and can heal. There is more, of course, but these three ideas seem to gravitate toward a central theme. Several minor themes arise, including the following: most conjurers could not figure out the problem (vv. 13-16), the gods didn't help (vv. 17-18), the sufferer's body was a disease ridden prison (vv. 2-13), and more. These minor themes may

illuminate the major themes when the story is read as a whole and when analyzed within their proper significance. For instance, the seven examples given of the dreadful disease, along with the unmentioned theme of being at the moment of death (vv. 19-20), strengthen the speaker's argument that no one can truly understand the gods (second major theme), for typically speaking the impious are the ones stricken with such illnesses (the first major theme). Thus, in this analysis, we will begin with a summary of the first major theme, including its various sub-themes.

#### Impiousness typically brings destruction

The sufferer, later noted as one Tabu-utul-Bel of Nippur<sup>3</sup>, appears to be quite distraught, and for good reason - as is typically thought, suffering is for the impious. The sufferer even begins his story with this important idea, for after introducing himself as one who has reached the allotted life-span - and thus one who knows quite well how the world should function - the sufferer states that "Oppression is increased [but] uprightness I see not" (v. 3).

Not too long after that quick note of oppression, and after an additional note concerning a lack of help on the part of both the gods and the conjurers, the sufferer exclaims: "How deeds are reversed in the world!" This phrase introduces the first major theme present in *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, that impiousness typically brings destruction, as it is followed by a series of eleven examples of such, with an additional five examples within a complimentary sub theme. Verses 10-22 relate these initial eleven examples:

How deeds are reversed in the world!  
I look behind, oppression encloses me  
[E1] Like one who the sacrifice to god did not bring,

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<sup>3</sup> Note that later editions of *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi* understand the sufferer to be named Subshi-meshre-Shakkan.

[E2] And at meal-time did not invoke the goddess  
 [E3] Did not bow down his face, his offering was not seen;  
 [E4] (Like one) in whose mouth prayers and supplications were locked,  
 [E5] (For whom) god's day had ceased, a feast day become rare,  
 [E6] (One who) has thrown down his fire-pan, gone away from their images.  
 [E7] God's fear and veneration has not taught his people  
 [E8] Who invoked not his god when he ate god's food;  
 [E9] (Who) abandoned his goddess, and brought not what is prescribed,  
 [E10] (Who) oppresses the weak, forgets his god  
 [E11] Who takes in vain the mighty name of his god; he says, I am like him.

These examples are explained by certain impious acts, including the following: a lack of sacrifices, a lack of an invocation over meals x2, lack of offerings, lack of prayers, lack of celebrating feast or "sabbath" days, lack of burning to images, lack of fear/veneration of the deity, lack of following prescriptions, lack of obeying deity's law concerning helping the weak, and a lack of acknowledging the greatness of the deity.

Indeed, these impious acts typically should bring on opposition, disease, and trouble, but in the case of the sufferer, "deeds are reversed in the world" for he, himself, is a very pious man who is in fact suffering! To help prove his point, the sufferer continues his text with a series of five examples in parallelism of his own pious nature, including the following (taken from vv. 23-33):

But I myself [...]  
 [E1a ...] thought of prayers and supplications--  
 [E1b] Prayer was my wisdom, sacrifice, my dignity;  
 [E2a] The day of honoring the gods was the joy of my heart  
 [E2b] The day of following the goddess was my acquisition of wealth  
 [E3a] The prayer of the king, that was my delight,  
 [E3b] And his music, for my pleasure was its sound.  
 [E4a] I gave directions to my land to revere the names of god,  
 [E4b] To honor the name of the goddess I taught my people.  
 [E5a] Reverence for the king I greatly exalted,  
 [E5b] And respect for the palace I taught the people;  
 For I knew that with god these things are in favor.

The righteousness of the sufferer bears out in the simple fact that he "knew that with god

these things are in favor," thus showing that his devotion came from a strict knowledge of things prescribed. This fact is complicated by multiple examples of conjurers not being able to establish any violation on his part. Note that verses 6-9 and 13-16 both imply and describe this:

The seer by his oracle did not discern the future;  
 Nor did the enchanter with a libation illuminate my case;  
 I consulted the necromancer, but he opened not my understanding.  
 The conjurer with his charms did not remove my ban.

and ...

My sickness baffled the conjurers,  
 And the seer left dark my omens.  
 The diviner has not improved the condition of my sickness-  
 The duration of my illness the seer could not state

The point is taken, if the conjurers find it difficult to illuminate the case of the sufferer, then this is indeed contrary to what one typically finds in the world around.

Perhaps at this point the actual suffering of Tabu-utul-Bel should be brought to light, for it does in fact illuminate his case to modern readers. This force of his suffering is explained on the backside of the first tablet, and is read as follows:

Into my prison my house is turned.  
 Into the bonds of my flesh are my hands thrown;  
 Into the fetters of myself my feet have stumbled.  
 ...  
 With a whip he has beaten me; there is no protection;  
 With a staff he has transfixed me; the stench was terrible!  
 All day long the pursuer pursues me,  
 In the night watches he lets me breathe not a moment;  
 Through torture my joints are torn asunder;  
 My limbs are destroyed, loathing covers me;  
 On my couch I welter like an ox;  
 I am covered, like a sheep, with my excrement.

Indeed, shortly later in the text, the sufferer even goes so far as to exclaim that he was on his deathbed, for he states:

The coffin yawned; they [the heirs] took my possessions;

While I was not yet dead, the death wail was ready.

No one can understand the gods

The sufferer goes through some pains to ensure that his readers understand the fact that no one can truly understand the gods – which then in turn acts as a sort of proof and an understanding of his situation.

Again, we must remember that his “sickness baffled the conjurers,” for he has proven his innocence in the matter. Nonetheless, from verse 34 of the front side of tablet one and following we find the sufferer state in parallelism:

- [E1a] What is innocent of itself, to god is evil!
- [E1b] What in one's heart is contemptible, to one's god is good!
- [E2a] Who can understand the thoughts of the gods in heaven?
- [E2b] The counsel of god is full of destruction; who can understand?
- [E3] Where may human beings learn the ways of God?
  - [E3a] He who lives at evening is dead in the morning;
  - [E3b] Quickly he is troubled; all at once he is oppressed;
  - [E3c] At one moment he sings and plays;
  - [E3c] In the twinkling of an eye
  - [E3c] he howls like a funeral-mourner.
- [E4] Like sunshine and clouds their thoughts change;
  - [E4a] They are hungry and like a corpse;
  - [E4b] They are filled and rival their god!
- [E5a] In prosperity they speak of climbing to Heaven
- [E5b] Trouble overtakes them and they speak of going down to Sheol.

A summary of these five examples could simply be that we, mere humans, have no way in which to comprehend the actions of the gods.

Implied within these statements is the idea that the god, himself, is the reason for the calamity of the sufferer. In fact, one may understand such statements as “the counsel of god is full of destruction” and “with a whip he has beaten me; there is no protection; with a staff he has transfixed me; the stench was terrible” as directly related to the god in question. Just in case one

is not certain, though, a later conjurer makes this startling claim concerning the sufferer:

[He who made woman] and created man  
Marduk, has ordained (?) that he be encompassed with sickness (?)."

This is not an unfounded accusation, but rather an explanation of why the sufferer is diseased. It appears that Marduk was not shaken by this for he eventually does heal the man through the conjurer.

The final theme of *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, that theme featuring healing from disease, while prominent in the story, goes beyond the scope of our analysis and comparison here. Yes, Job was healed from disease, but our focus shall stay on the first two themes and their comparison with Oswalt's continuity/transcendence contrast.

Features of continuity within *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi* contrasted with characteristics of transcendence  
within the book of Job

Comparison of features/characteristics

Several of the features of continuity and transcendence noted by Oswalt emerge in the respective texts. Below we find Oswalt's features along with examples from within each text. For simplicity reasons, only one or two representative examples will be chosen to convey the significance of each.

### ***Polytheism in Ludlel Bel Nimeqi***

This concept is self revealing and emerges from within a contrast of a god and a goddess found throughout the work, though no other god is mentioned outright. Two examples of this contrast from within the work are as follows:

I cried unto god, but he showed not his face.  
I prayed to my goddess, but she raised not her head.

Like one who the sacrifice to god did not bring,  
And at meal-time did not invoke the goddess

### ***Monotheism in Job***

This characteristic of Ludlil bel Numeqi stands in direct contrast with what we find in the book of Job. Throughout the pages, the Israelite god is referred to by both the Tetragrammaton and the generic *elohim*, but no goddess or the possibility of another god is referenced. Indeed, creation itself is designated as Yahweh's doing by both the sufferer and the deity himself.

### ***Images/idols in Ludlil Bel Nimeqi:***

By images, Oswalt is referring to the fact that the gods are recognized by idols or by other shapes within this world. Within the text being analyzed, the "image" reference is made in connection with the initial theme of impiety bringing disaster and is read: "[One who] has thrown down his fire-pan, gone away from their images." Thus, an impious man is one who does not burn to an idol.

### ***Iconoclasm in Job***

In contrast, the book of Job makes no mention of idols or images, but instead delivers the speeches of Yahweh from within a whirlwind, and thus expresses the deity as a spirit. Some have attempted to interpret Job 31:1 as Job's denial of Asherah worship, but this is not conclusive.

### ***Low view of the gods in Ludlel Bel Nimeqi***<sup>4</sup>

A low view of the gods, their lack of trustworthiness and their abundance of selfishness, comes through quite clearly in *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, especially in the second major theme: no one can understand the gods. A good representative example of the complete mutability of the gods can be confined within example four of the above-mentioned theme:

- [E4] Like sunshine and clouds their thoughts change;
- [E4a] They are hungry and like a corpse;
- [E4b] They are filled and rival their god!

In essence, this gives the gods more of a human personality than it does a divine nature, in the sense that divinity equals purity and therefore immutability.

### ***High view of deity in the book of Job***<sup>5</sup>

This, of course, is arguably the one transcendence quality that is only apparent at the end of the book. During Job's suffering, he states: "Your hands have shaped me and made me, but now you destroy me completely" (10:8).

By the end of the book of Job we find several chapters of monologue directly from the deity and all centered on the central idea that Job's god is in fact trustworthy, if only Job will place his focus upon the deity. Within the sufferer's response to Yahweh, we find that Job finally admits that "no purpose of [god's] can be thwarted," showing a real intention in the harm

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<sup>4</sup> One will note that not all of Oswalt's features are present within the text of *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, though they do appear in the broader ANE writings. While there may be some representation of these features, e.g., conflict can be seen in the idea that when filled the gods rival their gods (chief deities), since the features are not explicitly stated within the text, they are to be left out.

<sup>5</sup> Oswalt lists two characteristics that I have joined together as the title of this section. These two characteristics are "first principle is spirit" and "absence of conflict in the creation process," where Oswalt describes the nature of God as spirit and not matter as well as the utter holiness of God in the sense of a perfect creation by the will of the one deity.

previously caused (versus Marduk's purposeless harm).

### ***Low view of humanity in Ludlel Bel Nimeqi***

If a low view of the gods is evident in *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, then a low view of humanity is very much evident. Within the text, Marduk is in fact both the inflictor of disease and the healer from it, but no lesson is intended. Note first Marduk's ordination of the disease:

[He who made woman] and created man  
Marduk, has ordained (?) that he be encompassed with sickness (?).

It is important to note, as noted in the analysis above, that this quote is not from the sufferer but from the conjurer sent to consult with Tabu-utul-Bel, the sufferer. Instead of being an accusation against Marduk, it is simply the truth stated; yet, Marduk appears to take no offence to this truth. Simply put, Marduk did what he did, and as Tabu-utul-Bel has already said, "Who can understand the thoughts of the gods in heaven?"

### ***High view of humanity in the book of Job***

In contrast, while Job's initial thought is that his god devalues humanity by paying too much attention to them in order to harm them, as evidenced by Job 7:17: ("What is mankind that you make so much of them, and that you pay attention to them?"), Job is corrected when his god eventually answers this question himself – rather than by an interceding conjurer. In fact, that Yahweh actually took the time to answer the question himself shows a rather high value for Job, but then Yahweh proceeds to speak not only to the truly pious but also to the impious comforters – establishing not only their importance but his will for them to once again find favor with the deity.

*No single standard of ethics in Ludlil Bel Nimeqi:*

Directly in line with the low view of both the gods and humanity is the lack of ethical standards amongst the gods. In fact, this appears to comply with both the first and second major themes expressed within the document. The simple fact of the matter was that it was a common belief among the worshippers that if one follows the prescribed paths, then one will receive good from the gods, nonetheless, things became “reversed” in the world, as the sufferer apparently lived his whole life in view of what he “knew that with god these things are in favor.” This topsy-turvy world is expressed well in the following illustration:

What is innocent of itself, to god is evil!  
What in one's heart is contemptible, to one's god is good!

or perhaps ...

In prosperity they speak of climbing to Heaven  
Trouble overtakes them and they speak of going down to Sheol.

The reliability of god in the book of Job

Although Job does in fact doubt his god’s purpose in Job’s suffering, Job is ever faithful. From the beginning Job states, “Should we receive what is good from God, and not also receive what is evil?” (2:10). At times Job wishes for death and even curses the day he was born, but in the end he states concerning all he has said in complaint: “I have declared without understanding things too wonderful for me to know” (42:3). As stated above, the reliability of Yahweh is seen not in his explanation of why Job is suffering, indeed only the reader knows this answer, but in the sufferer’s willingness to adhere to his god even in such pain: “no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2).

### Underlying major difference

When comparing *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, or any other ancient Near Eastern text for that matter, with the book of Job, and when looking at them through the lens of Oswalt's continuity/transcendence theory, some surface problems do arise. For example, within the book of Job there is in fact serious doubt of the deity's reliability and the deity's view of humanity, due in part to the deity's participation in the harm inflicted upon the sufferer. This can be seen clearly through both the words of Job's comforters and even with Job himself – making a striking comparison with *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*. When analyzed as a whole, both the reliability of Yahweh and his view of humanity does come to surface in line with Oswalt's claims. On the other hand, the same might be said about Marduk in *Ludlel Bel Nimeqi*, for Marduk also does bring healing at the end, though this healing appears to serve no purpose other than appeasing the cajoling conjurer.

The difference between these two deities within these two texts – and thus the texts themselves – should be noted. As stated above, Marduk shows no signs of a purpose for his infliction whereas Yahweh uses the infliction to teach a valuable lesson to the sufferer and the comforters – namely answering the question as to from where true wisdom actually comes. Wisdom as to why suffering was occurring was attempted by the comforters and misunderstood by the sufferer. Indeed, it could be said that Job's comforters had more in common with Tabu-utu-Bel than Job himself, for the wisdom of these four appear quite the same;<sup>6</sup> on the other hand, Job, as a sufferer, is forced to recognize that all wisdom comes from Yahweh, and that his resting upon Yahweh's purpose is of utmost importance.

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<sup>6</sup> Walton contends, "[...] the three main friends function as archetypes that represent the revered wisdom of the ancient Near East at large." John H. Walton, "Job 1: Book of," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008) 337.

In the end, Tabu-utul-Bel finds healing and the story is finished; conversely, Job finds comfort in his disease only to be healed after he has been comforted/shown the source of true wisdom.

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