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## REPORT ON THE HABILITATION THESIS

### THESIS TITLE:

*Challenging the Beast: An Alternative to the Empire  
A Literary-Critical, Comparative, and Theological Reading of the Primeval History*

### THESIS AUTHOR:

Dr. Tamás Czövek

### REFEREE:

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### REPORT:

I, the undersigned Prof. Dr. Habil. Marcel-Valentin Măcelaru, having been appointed as academic referee for the habilitation paper identified above, and having undertaken a thorough evaluation of Dr. Tamás Czövek’s work, submit the following:

#### General observations

Following the general scholarly consensus on the matter, Dr. Czövek presents a reading of the Primeval History (Genesis 1–11) within the context of Ancient Near Eastern myths and culture, aiming to establish in what ways this narrative, its content and its thematic emphases, have been influenced by the Mesopotamian ethos within which it emerged. Specifically, the author establishes the 6th Century Babylon as context for Genesis and the Pentateuch. This is the historical context that provides a framework for the interpretation of the biblical text analysed.

The paper opens up with an *Introduction*, which effectively sets the stage for the thesis by providing background information and the motivation for the research. Also, here the author explains the scope of his work and the challenges such a research pose, such as the complexity of issues and the numerous contributions to the topic one has to deal with, thus demonstrating a realistic and humble approach to the research task.

The first section of the paper, entitled *Context and Method* is the place where the author provides the necessary research context, objectives, and methodology for the study. It also highlights the significance of Mesopotamian culture and the 6th century Babylonian context in understanding the biblical text, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis. The section contains relevant references to previous scholarly work and a literature survey that solidly grounds the argument within the general field of Genesis studies. This is crucial as it shows that the research being undertaken is building upon established knowledge in the field. Methodologically, the author is advocating strongly for a synchronic approach, within which the text of Genesis is studied as a self-contained literary unit, against the backdrop of the various Mesopotamian texts selected for the exercise. Based on this comparison, which challenges key elements of Babylonian culture (city, kingship, and shrine), the author proposes a reading of the Genesis text as a counter-narrative to Babylonian culture, that advocates an egalitarian worldview, in favour of commoners. This hint at the potential the Genesis narrative has to function as social and cultural critique is most significant.

The second section of the paper, entitled *The Primeval History: An Alternative to Babylon's Metanarrative*, accounts for the most part of the analysis. Theological aspects of the Genesis creation narrative are discussed in relation to Mesopotamian myths, particularly the Enuma Elish and Atrahasis, but not limited to these. The intention of the author is to deconstruct and compare these narratives, highlighting similarities and differences between the biblical account and the myths studied, with the purpose of enriching the understanding of the theological implications of the Genesis narrative. Regarding Genesis 2, elements that are accentuated and of much merit for the theme of the thesis are:

- God's active role and direct involvement in creation, as opposed to the "absence" of the mythical Babylonian deities.
- The centrality of the Garden of Eden as a common good and its symbolism as sanctuary, as opposed to the exclusive use of gardens within the Babylonian royal imagery and the centralisation of worship in temples and other such places.
- The claim for universality expressed in the topographical symbolism of Genesis 2, as opposed to the exclusive preoccupation with a geographical territory (Mesopotamia).
- The emphasis on relationships based on a principle of equality in the Genesis account of the creation of woman, as opposed to the Mesopotamian hierarchical model of humanity.
- The democratic vision implied in the concept of *Imago Dei* in the biblical account as opposed to the exclusivist Mesopotamian royal ideology that ascribed such representative role to kings only.

Regarding Genesis 3, the author provides an analysis in connection to Adapa and Gilgamesh stories. It also delves into the role and symbolism of the serpent in Genesis, the consequences of disobedience, and the broader themes of wisdom and knowledge in the biblical text. The analysis starts off with the central question behind the Genesis narrative: why are humans like gods in having knowledge but unlike gods in being mortal? The answer highlights the difference between the biblical and mythical views exposed, showing that humans bear the responsibility for the deterioration caused by sin.

Genesis 4-5 are discussed from the perspective of their rich theological nuances. An explorations of the concept of being created in the image of God and its implications for human creativity, procreation, and the capacity for both good and evil is offered, in relation to Mesopotamian perspectives on these themes. Furthermore, building on Genesis

4, Genesis 5 offers a unique perspective on human history and the origins of civilization, emphasizing the idea that each person born is bearing the image of God. The emphasis that the biblical account focuses on moral and ethical dimensions rather than on the semi-divine nature of kings present in the Sumerian myths is a worthy example of the many insights provided in the analysis. Overall, the analysis of these chapters underscores the importance of diversity, both in the natural world and in human societies, as a reflection of God's creative intent. It also highlights the concept of equality within the human race as a key message in the creation narrative of Genesis.

Genesis 6-9:19, the next section analysed provides the author with the opportunity to once again compare the biblical account with the myths of the land, in this case the myth of Gilgamesh. The ambiguous nature of certain elements in the biblical story, such as the shift in God's character and motivations, are observed. Also the author points to the ethical basis for the flood as given in the Genesis account. Of particular note is the emphasis the author places on the themes of God's conversion, the establishment of a covenant, and the shift from un-creation to re-creation, all of which are used as arguments to support the view that in this part of the biblical narrative we are presented with an evolving divine character – one may call this a process theology in the making.

Genesis 9:20-10:32, the aftermath of the flood, is interpreted as a transitional text, from the story of the flood to the patriarchal narrative. Several points of contrast between the Genesis account and its Mesopotamian counterparts are explained, as, for example:

- Noah's work is a blessing that continues after the flood, as opposed to the Mesopotamian view of labor as curse.
- The emphasis on a common ancestry for all humankind, emphasising a universal perspective in Genesis, as opposed to the exclusivist Mesopotamian genealogies that single out specific ethnic groups. Within this context, the transition to the story of Abraham provided by the singling out of Shem's genealogy is important.

Genesis 11, the final section of the Primeval History, is tackled in an innovative way, as a text that serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it rounds off the previous chapters of Genesis. On the other hand, it is argued that this section (the Tower of Babel) should be seen as a critique of the Babylonian empire. The traditional interpretation of the Tower of Babel story is that it represents human arrogance and divine judgment. However, the author points out that the possibility that it is related to political unity and empire-building rather than a vertical challenge to God. This gives the author an opportunity to discuss the significance of building projects in Mesopotamia, particularly the construction of cities and ziggurats, in relation to empire-building. Seen in this way, Yahweh's intervention prevents the establishment of kingship and empire – clearly a critique of Babylon's imperial ambitions.

The third section of the thesis, entitled *Prospects: A New Genealogy and Beyond*, offers a detailed analysis of the connections and themes within the book of Genesis, particularly focusing on the transition from the Tower of Babel story to the narrative of Abraham and the significance of these narratives in the broader context of the Pentateuch. It highlights Terah's unsuccessful attempt to leave the Empire and Abraham's success on the matter as a symbolic move meant to transmit a message to exilic Jewry, inviting them to follow in Abraham's footsteps.

The extended *Conclusion* of the paper is devoted to presenting the implications of the study for the interpretation of the Primeval History and for the application of its

teachings, particularly if understood as a counter-story to Babylonian ideology. It touches upon the three key themes identified in the Primeval History – city, kingship, and shrine, showing the preference of the biblical account for land over city, commoners over kings and righteousness over shrine. Seen in this way, the Primeval History is really an alternative to the Mesopotamian worldview. It offers a more egalitarian perspective, where creation is not used to justify the power structures of cities, kingship, or temples, but to advocate in favour of the common man. The author also highlights the fact that the biblical account is characterized by universalism, challenging the hierarchical and exclusive politics of Mesopotamia, and by doing so giving an alternative vision of a humankind created in God's image.

By way of summary, the author hints that there are several implications which may prove relevant to various communities, including Christians living in non-Christian or hostile environments. The Primeval History provides tools for presenting an alternative vision of society, politics, and culture based on righteousness and God's authority.

### **Evaluation:**

Although much could be said about the valuable insights offered in this thesis, the evaluation hereby focuses on just a few key points, which the present referee considers more significant.

Firstly, the topic chosen by Dr. Tamás Czövek is both relevant and necessary. Undoubtedly, the Primeval History has been the object of much discussion in Old Testament scholarship, as competently shown in the interaction provided in the thesis. However, the approach undertaken by Dr. Czövek has an element of novelty which justifies the focus on this much studied biblical text. The detailed comparison between the biblical account and the Mesopotamian myths, soon enough turns to a contrast between two different worldviews that provides insightful ideas, not only for further Old Testament research on the matter, but also for contemporary Christian communities facing "empires" and their ideologies.

Secondly, the title proposed by Dr. Czövek is quite fit for purpose. It highlights in unequivocal terms the role the author ascribes to the Primeval History as a counter-narrative to Babylonian culture, an alternative to the ideology of the empire. As such, the title and the presentation of the essay are appropriately matched.

Thirdly, the use of primary literature, as well as the interaction with scholarly works, are to be commended. Dr. Czövek, is evidently an experienced researcher who takes no shortcuts in the analysis provided. Although the typical approach in such comparisons is more historically oriented, Dr. Czövek's synchronic methodology succeeds in making use of the Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the Primeval History in important ways, not least in regard with the ideological underpinnings that are evident in the narratives analysed.

Fourthly, the analysis provided is competent and clear. The arguments converge and support the central theme of the paper, which makes for an easy and enjoyable read. At points one feels the need for more inept exegetical analysis. However, given the comparative methodology undertaken, such analysis would not add anything to the ideas already expressed. Of course, fundamentally, the context against which the author reads the biblical account - the Babylonian exile, raises questions of historical nature that are not addressed in the paper. Yet, the argument is complete as it stands and the conclusions

provided make a lot of theological sense within larger biblical themes such as justice, equality, *shalom*, etc.

Fifthly, the conclusion of the thesis is to be commended. The results of the analysis are properly summarised and the implications provided are relevant and related to the argument. Moreover, although this is not the purpose of the work, the author also manages to draw a few short implications for contemporary faith communities that may find themselves in situations similar to the Babylonian exiles. At this point one is left wanting more, a fact which may actually be a plus, because it provides a hint to where the research can go next.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. How would a historical-critical analysis change the direction of interpretation? Would the role of the Primeval History as a counter-narrative still be possible?
2. How does the theme of the Primeval History as posed in the thesis fits within the larger theology of the Bible?
3. Where would the findings of the thesis take us if undertaking further research on the topic?

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Given all the above, I conclude that Dr. Tamás Czövek's habilitation paper, entitled *Challenging the Beast: An Alternative to the Empire: A Literary-Critical, Comparative, and Theological Reading of the Primeval History*, meets, and indeed, in certain aspects surpasses, the established standard requirements for a Habilitation Thesis in Theology, as commonly expected within the European Higher Education framework, and therefore strongly recommend the positive resolution of Dr. Tamás Czövek's habilitation application, in accordance with established legal procedures under the Hungarian Law of Higher Education.

Arad, Romania, 2 October 2023



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Prof. Dr. Habil. Marcel V. Măcelaru