

Interview with David Toshio Tsumura of Japan Bible Seminary

Professor David Toshio Tsumura [DTT] is one of the world's leading experts on Ancient Near Eastern cosmology. He has published a range of academic works on Hebrew and Ugaritic poetry, Semitic linguistics, the books of Samuel, and Gen 1–11. With more than forty years of experience at Japan Bible Seminary (Tokyo), he is an accomplished teacher with a heart for the church in Japan.

Would you please narrate for us your journey into academics? What began your interest in biblical studies and the Ancient Near East? What (and who) were some of your most important early influences?

My mother started going to church when I was in kindergarten. It was one started by a British faith mission, the Japan Evangelistic Band. I went regularly after that and was baptized at the age of fourteen. I attended Hitotsubashi University, one of the top universities in Japan, and majored in economics. My father ran a small factory and had great expectations that I, his only son, would be active in the business world. However, during college the Lord put the burden in my heart to study the Bible deeply and use my knowledge to train ministers in Japan, where the theological education was still a new area. My father in particular opposed my decision as a foolish choice rejecting a promising future, but I persisted.

One pastor encouraged me to go into the specialized study of the Bible, but some were concerned that too much academic pursuit might make me stray from a spiritual life. Therefore, how to balance academic life and spiritual life has always been a major concern of mine. During my college days I was exposed to a number of intellectual Christian students. So, I wanted to study the Bible in its original language, and in my junior year began studying Greek and read Plato's *Kriton*. After graduating from college, I entered Asbury Theological Seminary in the US, and my knowledge of classical Greek helped me in studying Koine Greek (NT & LXX). I studied Hebrew and Aramaic as well as the Ionian Greek of Herodotus independently. At Asbury Dr. Dennis F. Kinlaw, a pupil of Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon, ignited my interest in the study of the Old Testament in the Ancient Near Eastern context. I chose the topic of my graduation thesis—"creation and chaos" in Gen 1:2—influenced by his class,

and it has remained my life-long pursuit.¹

Would you tell us about your spiritual and church background? In what ways do you see this aspect of your life intersecting with your vocation as a biblical scholar?

The Lord has guided my life according to his plan and purpose. When I was seven years old, I lost most of the eyesight in my right eye in an accident. As both my mother and I were attending church, even then I wondered why God allowed this injury to happen, but the Lord kept reminding me of his promise, that is, "My grace is sufficient to you." I used my only good eye to pursue my scholarly work, and throughout my academic life the Lord has taught me to trust on him. When I was in graduate school at Brandeis, I even thought of changing my specialty from OT to NT so that I could be less involved in language learning. But the Lord helped me through the difficult task of learning various languages with difficult writing systems and scripts such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic, Arabic as well as Hebrew, despite my weak eye.

What big questions have defined your career? How has your approach to biblical studies helped address these?

Since I studied the social science (economics) for my bachelor's degree, at first, I wanted to study Christian social ethics to help churches in Japan. But while I was studying in the seminary, I realized that it was more necessary that I study biblical theology and base it on a sound exegesis of the Bible in its cultural context. Along the way, I noted that ancient Israelite prophets faced socio-religious problems in the context of ancient Canaan. The focus of my scholarly research began to change from the problem of the modern church to that of the ancient Israelites. So, I chose the Ancient Near East, the world of the Bible, as my specialized field.

What do you see as the difference between contextual and comparative approaches with regard to assessing similarities and differences between the Bible and the ANE? What is the place of these methodologies for proper biblical interpretation? What pitfalls should be avoided?

From my mentor Cyrus H. Gordon, under whom I finished my PhD thesis "The Ugaritic Drama of the Good Gods: A Philological Study" (Brandeis University, 1973), as well as from my research at Harvard University and Tyndale House in Cambridge, UK, and from my teaching at University of Tsukuba, I have learned during the past half century that

¹ Professor Tsumura's most complete treatment of this topic is *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

the OT should be studied *contextually*, *comparatively*, and *contrastively*. When we look at the Bible in its ANE context, due to the similar cosmologies of the various peoples, it is easy to see too many similarities in their worldview. Due to the similar linguistic and cultural expressions of the Bible and other ANE cultures, we modern people easily take these similarities as conceptual similarities. However, we should carefully distinguish between worldview and cosmologies because the linguistic similarities of cosmologies are not necessarily identical with the conceptual similarities, which are deeply influenced by and connected to their worldview.

Also, I learned through study for my dissertation that one should read religious texts philologically before one can say anything about an ancient religion itself. Therefore, my approach to the ANE is mainly linguistic and philological. Through my teaching at the University of Tsukuba as well as through discussions with my wife Susan, who is a linguist, I have learned linguistic theory. So, I think that one of my major responsibilities as a biblical scholar is as an intermediary translator between biblical scholars and linguists.

In a recent article, you voice concern that “many scholars . . . [put] too much emphasis on the contrast between a modern scientific worldview and ancient cosmologies.”² What are the results of this situation as you see it? That is to say, how would you summarize for a theologically minded reader in particular what is lost in focusing too much on these differences?

If we emphasize too much the contrast between the modern scientific worldview and ancient cosmologies, one may miss the differences existing even among ancient worldviews, including differences between the Bible and the rest of the ANE. For a comparative study, unless one compares similar items and identifies their differences, the study is meaningless. So, it is our duty to find similarities between ancient cultures and, then as the result of comparison, to find also differences between them (contrastively). Just because there are similarities among ancient cultures and cosmologies, one must also observe the distinctive features among them. Theologically speaking, the human problems of modern people are not so different from those of ancient people, while their views of the natural world are very different.

² “Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East and Its Implications for Genesis 1–2,” in *Since the Beginning: Interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 through the Ages*, ed. Kyle R. Greenwood (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 236.

What has been your vision for training pastors and missionaries at Japan Bible Seminary? What are some of the biggest challenges to making disciples in your context?

My vision for equipping pastors and missionaries has been to train them to read the Bible, especially the OT, in its cultural context, in particular in the Canaanite context. I have taught the OT at Japan Bible Seminary for forty-five years asking two questions of my students:

1. What is the uniqueness of the biblical message in the context of the ancient pagan religion of Canaan?
2. What is the uniqueness of the biblical message in the context of the modern pagan religion of Japan?

These two questions go side by side. The more we learn the basic features of the Canaanite polytheistic religion, the more we notice how similar the Canaanite religion is to the Japanese polytheistic religious traditions. Japanese Christians are called to be messengers of Christ, just as the prophets of Yahweh were the messengers of Yahweh to Israelites who were actually practicing Canaanite polytheism under the guise of Yahweh worship.

While for the Western Christians the similarities between the Bible and the ANE might be a surprise and pose problems difficult to accept, for the Asian polytheists the differences in the midst of the similarities are a surprise and eye-opening experience. From the study of the prophets of the Lord such as Hosea and Amos who confronted the distorted Yahwism of northern Israel, the Christians in Japan can learn how to deal with the polytheistic religious traditions.

The biggest challenges to making disciples in our present context is to have Christians grow in the grace of Christ so that they may live according to what they believe in the midst of the *polytheistic* “secularism” of modern Japan, where polytheism in the forms of solar worship, ancestor worship, and nature worship is a day-to-day challenge. (All three of these religions are still actively practiced daily in the three imperial shrines of the Palace under the guidance of the head priest, the *tenno*, the Japanese emperor.) Christians, a small minority (less than 1 percent of population), are called to give witness to Christ and his salvation and live realistically and firmly according to the word of God.

We appreciate you taking the time to dialogue about these important issues and sharing your story. Thank you, Professor Tsumura.