

## **Pandemics in Extra - Biblical Texts and the Old Testament**

### **An Examination of Ancient texts related to the Old Testament and Lessons from the current COVID-19 Pandemic.**

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#### ***Abstract***

*This paper discusses the presentations, manifestations and interventions in public Health Pandemics/Plagues in the literature of the Ancient Near East (ANE) and the Old Testament (OT)<sup>1</sup> with the underlying principle of cause and effect in the Ancient and the Biblical world. Using the comparative method, the paper examines the narratives, prayers, leadership requirements and legal writings of the Ancient world alongside the texts of the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch and Historical literature.*

*The focus texts of this study are those of the ANE compiled by James Pritchard (1974) in his book, Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament. There are also other scholars of Ancient Near East<sup>2</sup> who have given insights into life in the ANE. The researcher also carried out an overview and review of articles and books on ANE on Public health Pandemics, writings on health, sickness, and disease in the Ancient world.*

*The Cosmologies of the ANE, their socio-political and religious practices reveal how they interpreted factors bearing on infractions, or divine visitations that led to Pestilence, and plagues. This examination of these texts included Old Testament scholars and their writings with archeological interests and research on pestilences, pandemics and sickness and ANE/Israel's cosmology. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the current conversation on COVID-19 pandemic and offer insights on why pandemics occur how to offer navigate the present pandemic.*

***Keywords: Pandemics, Epidemics, ANE, Plague, War, Egypt, Hittite, Pestilences, Public Health Yahweh, Cosmology***

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as OT

<sup>2</sup> Such as John H. Walton, 2018, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House) and G. Herbert Livingston, 1995, *The Pentateuch in its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House)

## Introduction

The texts of the Ancient Near East<sup>3</sup> and the Old Testament reveal a lot about their world views and attitudes to pandemics. The writer set out to examine the presentations and manifestations of public Health Pandemics/Plagues in the literature of the Ancient Near East (ANE)<sup>4</sup> and the Old Testament (OT)<sup>5</sup>. The writer also had in mind the reality of the underlying principle of cause and effect in the Ancient and the Biblical world. Looking at the narratives, treaties, tales and cultic requirements and legal writings of the Ancient world, there are a number of insights into pandemics revealed through a survey of the Old Testament texts from Pentateuch, Historical literature and prophetic literature. The interest in this study was done with a view to engaging with the conversations on the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The focus text of study is the one compiled by James Pritchard (1974). This approach was compared to other scholars who have focused on or compiled studies and research into the Ancient Near East. The paper also reviewed the writings on ANE view on Pandemics, Public health, sicknesses, and also pestilences. Other related aspects of interest were ANE cosmologies and socio-political and religious practices and how they related to or factors bearing on infractions, or divine visitations that lead to Pestilence, or plague. This examination also included Old Testament scholars and their writings and research on pestilences, pandemics and sickness and ANE/ Israel's cosmology.

## The Use of Parallels In Studying ANE And The OT World

There is no consensus with regard to the approaches and methods adopted in the studies in ANE but it has been a long tradition in biblical studies to use the 'Parallel method'<sup>6</sup> i.e., between OT and ANE. John Walton (2018)<sup>7</sup> among other scholars such as Hebert Livingstone (1995)<sup>8</sup> have argued that there are similarities and parallels in narratives and traditions of the ANE, with those of the Old Testament texts and traditions. There have been

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<sup>3</sup> Mesopotamia, Egypt, Phoenicia and others

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as ANE

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter referred to as OT

<sup>6</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II, Friedrich Delitzsch and Franz Delitzsch, COMPARATIVE, CONTEXTUAL APPROACH (W. W. HALLO 1920) or even CULTURAL APPROACH, in Walton H. J. (2018:3- 9)

<sup>7</sup> See his discussion in *Ancient Near Eastern thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2018), pp5 - 18

<sup>8</sup> G. Herbert Livingstone, *The Pentateuch in its cultural Environment*, (Grand Rapids, Baker House, 1995), 139 - 183

questions over origins of these narratives and traditions, whether they were originally Israelite, or from their neighbors in the ancient world.

The geo-political positioning of Israel in the ANE, has been seen as placing her in a position enabling her to borrow from her neighbors or her neighbors borrowing from her. This has given rise to the principle of paralleling or the comparative approach<sup>9</sup>.

However, there are scholars<sup>10</sup> who dispute and do not favor comparative or parallel approach i.e., finding parallels between Israel and her neighbors. They have argued for and see the priority and superiority of Israel i.e., over the latter. That Israel's neighbors borrowed from her and not vice versa. They therefore have argued for the superiority and monotheism found in Israel's religion as showing her uniqueness. However, without the benefit of consensus, a majority still believe there is much that can be learned from Israel's neighbors cf. E Frahm, H.W.F. Saggs etc.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has led to and raised many theological questions about the role and place of God with questions such as; is God in this pandemic, is He angry? is He punishing humanity for infractions that they are not aware of? The present paper is not an attempt to answer this question or other questions of why COVID-19 happened, but to engage in this ongoing conversation in terms of what can the ANE texts contribute to this conversation, so that we reflect academically and on biblical interventions and resources for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that this study will stimulate further discussions and research in biblical responses for the Christian church and perhaps help cope with the current pandemic.

### **The Semantic Range Of Terms Related To Pandemics**

There are a number of terms that have been used with regard to COVID-19 pandemic which are also used in this study. The main term Pandemic<sup>11</sup> is an Adjective a disease that is prevalent over the whole world, and widespread or prevalent. As a Noun it indicates an outbreak of an epidemic occurring worldwide. The term Epidemic<sup>12</sup> suggests a widespread disease in a community in a particular time and place or region. It also indicates a temporary

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<sup>9</sup> H. Ringgren '*Israel's place among the Religions of the Ancient Near East*,' In *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* VT Sup 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1972)

<sup>10</sup> J. Greer, J. Hilber and J. Walton Eds, *Biblical Polemics in Comparative contexts* in *Behind the scenes of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic)

<sup>11</sup> A.P. Cowie Ed. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, (Oxford, OUP, 1992)pp. 893

<sup>12</sup> A. P. Cowie, Ed. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, (Oxford, OUP, 1992)pp. 404

prevalence of a disease. A pandemic is an escalation of an epidemic. It is noted that on March 11<sup>th</sup> WHO<sup>13</sup> changed the designation of Covid-19 from Epidemic into a Pandemic.

Pandemics in the ANE and in the Biblical contexts can be classified as ‘Epidemics’ but since, as Macalister (2003) points out, that ‘...they occurred in Palestine and Egypt...’ the meaning can be escalated to an international definition as pandemic. Also, as per the world view of their time, in both Old Testament World and the ANE, they had a limited world outlook, hence they saw things occurring in two of three countries as being ‘whole world’ hence a Pandemic, like Noah’s flood was seen as occurring in the ‘whole world.’

The Terminologies used in the Old Testament are; ‘Plague’, ‘pestilence’, ‘illnesses or ‘curses.’ These, according to Macalister (2003) are the terms used in the Hebrew Texts. Others are *hpgm*<sup>14</sup> (*Maggepha*)<sup>15</sup> indicating pestilence. It is also an outburst of disease seen as originating with a divine visitation. Diseases were regarded as a divine visitation such as leprosy (cf. Lev. 13, 14, Dt. 24:8). They were seen as a punishment from YHWH<sup>16</sup>. Other terminologies used are *hgn*<sup>17</sup> (*Negah*), *hKm*<sup>18</sup> (*Makkah*).

According to Macalister (2003) these were common in Palestine and Egypt and 60% of those attacked died in three days (cf. Macalister 2003). The Philistines who lived close to Israel used similar terms [*gn* (*Negah*). In the Prophetic, poetic and eschatological literature was seen as punitive.

The term *rbD*<sup>19</sup> (*Deber*) is also used. The Greek translation of the Hebrew bible as known as LXX uses the term *Dike*, and also the term *Loimosak*, and also *Kentron*. These terms indicated death and destruction. They were usually sudden and severe. Fatal epidemics were as a result of divine visitation since they also affected animals. Macalister (2003) argues that it is a disease. Also note that terms such as *@vr*<sup>20</sup> (*Roseph*) and flame translated as burning fever. Adam’s (1982) writing on Human Diseases and Deaths in ANE, says that plagues caused severe hardships in all social levels. Among the public health plagues in the ANE

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization

<sup>14</sup> William L. Holladay, A concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, WB Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 182 – plague or torment produced by God = Pestilence, creating death.

<sup>15</sup> Used 120xs

<sup>16</sup> This is the abbreviating form note the use of consonants.

<sup>17</sup> In hiphil for contact, plague, of affliction, blow or assault, mark or skin disease (Lev. 13.2) (Holladay, 1991: 227)

<sup>18</sup> Blow stroke (Dt. 25:3), Plague. Misery (Dt. 28:61) (1991:194)

<sup>19</sup> Bubonic plague see Holladay (1991:68)

<sup>20</sup> Flames of a bow (war) pestilence (Cf. Dt. 32:24) Holladay (1991:347)

were Bubonic plague which occurred among the Philistines in Bethshemesh in the 2nd Millennium BCE.

This is reflected in (I Sa. 5:6 – 12:6) and is also referred to in Josephus's antiquity V1 13.<sup>21</sup>

A. Goetze (1987) describes some of these ANE pandemics such as typhus. That they spread throughout the land of Hatti and that they were brought by Syrian captives at the end of second millennium BCE. There was also leprosy which seemed to have been quite widespread hence it was considered as a pandemic at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

### **Old Testament Texts On The Plagues/Pestilences**

A close examination of the Old Testament reveals several examples of pandemics/plagues<sup>23</sup>. The examples indicated here are mostly limited to the Pentateuch and historical literature. However, the underlying principle is that they originated in the divine connections between the community of Israel and Yahweh their God. It is believed that plagues came as a result of human infractions of interpersonal social rules, and also the human-divine infractions. These were limited to public health related plagues in Ancient Near East - Old Testament.

Marty Martin E (2004)<sup>24</sup>, Feldman Louis (2002)<sup>25</sup>, Van Seters (1995)<sup>26</sup>, Steiglitz Robert R (1987)<sup>27</sup>, Van Seters (1986)<sup>28</sup> have done studies on the most common example that is often cited in the Old Testament as the ten plagues of Egypt (cf. Ex. 7 – 11). This is of interest due to the current COVID-19 pandemic that has brought the world to a standstill. There are also other pandemics of nature such as acts of God, floods, drought, war, famine, locusts, astral plagues, and darkness found in the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 10.21- 29). These pandemics are portrayed as public health as the current COVID-19.

The following is a table of examples of Public health Plagues/pandemics. The examples and references are limited to Pentateuch, and Historical literature. Studies in Prophetic and

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<sup>21</sup> D. B. Adams, *Human Diseases and deaths in the ANE* (1982) Die Welt Des Orients BD 13(1982) 5 – 14, 7, 9.

<sup>22</sup> A. Goetze, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (1969) 394 - 6)

<sup>23</sup> Other terms used are pestilences, sickness, plague

<sup>24</sup> *Year of the Locust*, in *Christian Century* 6/15/2004, 12 issue 12, pg. 47

<sup>25</sup> *The Plague of the Firstborn Egyptians in Rabbinic Tradition* – Philo and Pseudo Philo and Josephus Revue Biblique 109(3)July 2002, p 403 - 421

<sup>26</sup> *A contest of Magicians*, in *Pomegranates and golden bell: Studies in Biblical Jewish and Near eastern ritual and law and literature in honor of Jacob Milgrom*, (Winona Lake Indianapolis, Eisenbrauns 1995) p. 569 - 580

<sup>27</sup> *Ancient Records and the Exodus Plagues*, *Biblical Archeology Review* 13(6)nov – dec, 1987, p. 47 - 49

<sup>28</sup> *The Plagues of Egypt: Ancient traditions or Literary invention*, *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98(1) 1986 p. 31 -39.

wisdom Literature and the Psalms call for a larger and bigger study than is the intention of their present discussion.

**Table Of Public Health Pandemics (Pentateuch – I Chronicles)**

<b>Text</b>	<b>MANIFESTATION/AGENT</b>	<b>AGENT</b>	<b>EFFECT</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
Gen 12.17	Pharoah's house afflicted with plagues	Disease	Took Abrahams wife	YAHWEH
Ex. 9.8-12, 8.16 – 19,	Egyptians afflicted with boils Gnats affected men and animals	Moses/ Soil	Refusal to let Israel go	YAHWEH
Ex. 11.1 - 10	Plague of firstborn	Moses/Angel of Death	Hardness of heart	YAHWEH
EX. 21:6 - 11	Snake bites in the wilderness	Snakes/Moses	Rebellion	YAHWEH
Ex. 30. 12	Stipulation against census taking	Moses	Disobedience not taking ransom	YAHWEH
Ex. 32.1 -	The Golden calf – Idolatry	Aaron/The Lord/Moses	Disobedience	YAHWEH
Nu. 11:33 - 34	Plagued for craving meat in the wilderness	meat	Disobedience	YAHWEH
Nu. 14.10 – 16	Miriam leprosy	Moses	Jealousy for God's chosen	YAHWEH
Nu. 13.16 – 14:11 - 12	The spies die who contest report on Canaan	Moses	Falsehood	YAHWEH
Nu. 25.1ff, 9,	Sexual plague	Moses	Sexual immorality and Moabite women	YAHWEH
Dt.28:20 - 68	Curse formula including pestilences and Plague	Moses	Devastation of people and land	YAHWEH
Dt. 32.24	Snakes, Venom, Pestilences etc	Moses	Curses for disobedience	YAHWEH
I Sa. 5:6	Bubonic plague/ Tumors	?	Avenge capture of Ark	YAHWEH
I Sa. 6:5	Plague of Rats	?		YAHWEH
2 Sa. 24:15 cf. I Ch. 21:12	David's census for which he was later censured	Plague	Conducting a census	YAHWEH

### **Prescriptions From The Codes Of The Pentatuech And ANE Treaties**

The codes of the Old Testament, namely the Levitical and Priestly codes, also deal with the effect of Pandemics such as skin diseases, discharge and also mildew (cf. Lev. 13.1 – 59, 15). These are seen as examples of public health issues and how they were dealt with by the community through prescriptions from the OT codes. It is noteworthy that the bottom line in all these prescriptions in the laws, were statutes that were geared towards Public and social order.

Breach of these social prescriptions affected the whole community, i.e., and they believed that God punished the community by inflicting them with disease, or war and any act of nature.

The following examples from the book of Deuteronomy, borrow<sup>29</sup> from the ANE mode of punishment for infraction of the statutes from the treaty formula;

<sup>21</sup> The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess.

<sup>22</sup> The LORD will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish.

<sup>27</sup> The LORD will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed.

<sup>35</sup> The LORD will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.<sup>30</sup>

These and many others are examples the perspective of Divine punishment.

Prichard (1974) has examples from the ANE Treaties which will be discussed later in this paper. These treaties have sections on Curses and blessings which were as a result of infractions of social and divine statutes. The treaties call upon the earth the wrath of gods for infractions of the terms and conditions contained in the treaties<sup>31</sup>. Among the examples he cites, are for example, the Treaty between **THE HITTITES AND EGYPT** (cf. Pritchard, 1974:201).

The same pattern is found in the treaty between **MURSILIS AND DUPPI –TESSUB OF AMURRU** (1974:203). All these have very instructive sections on the purpose of invocation

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<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 27: 15 – 26 which is in liturgical form calling curses upon anyone who breaks the instructions and statutes. Note the blessing section in chapter 28:1 – 15,

<sup>30</sup> Excerpt from the book of Deuteronomy 28:20 – 68.

<sup>31</sup> See Pritchard on page 205 - 208

of plagues and other calamities for those breaking the treaties which had gods as witnesses and their human counterparts, the kings.

### **ANE Cosmology And Theogony**

Walton (2018)<sup>32</sup> on the cosmology of the ANE, argues that their world was colored by belief in gods and their power over the universe. The ancient world ranged from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Phoenicia and also Canaan.

Their gods dominated and regulated the processes of nature and permeated the daily life of the people. There seems to be the underlying principle to maintain an ontological balance and connection between the gods and the life of the people in general.

To ensure this ontological balance, there are rituals and rites prescribed to propitiate the gods and to appease them. It appears that if these rites and rituals were not performed then the gods would not be happy and there would be consequences. The consequences for infractions would be acts of nature such as drought, war, disease and other calamities.

Thus to avert any consequences there were detailed prescriptions of sacrifices and rites to be performed to propitiate the gods so that they would not get angry. It is worth noting that an individual infraction affected the whole community and not only that individual.

### **Texts And Readings From Anet (Pritchard, 1974)**

The following excerpts examine or give examples of pandemics and their effect on individuals or community at large. Pritchard (1974) has an example of a contest between the Egyptian god **Re** and **Isis** (she wants to know his unknown name so she assumes form of snake and bites him). In this excerpt, the god Re describes his state of health akin to effect of a ravaging disease of a pandemic. He says;

I am colder than water, I am hotter than fire. My entire body is sweating while I am shivering. My eye is not steadfast and I cannot see. The heavens are beating upon my face as at the time of summer (Pritchard 1974:13)

### **TALE OF SINUHE (Popular classics of Egyptian literature on patriotism)<sup>33</sup>**

Sinuhe was an official in the Egyptian middle kingdom in voluntary exile when Pharaoh

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<sup>32</sup> See his discussion in *Ancient Near eastern Thought ad the Old Testament*(Grand Rapids, Baker House 2018) pages 47 - 97

<sup>33</sup> Pritchard 1974:19



**Amen-em-het** dies in 360 BC, he sets out to return home. The story is about his experiences in the various countries he passes through. In this excerpt he mentions *Sethemet* the goddess of disease and pestilence.

‘Fear or whom pervaded foreign countries like the (fear) of Sethemet in a year of Pestilence.’

In this excerpt the mention of a god of pestilence in an indication of the presence and prevalence of the same in their social context.

### **The Tradition of The Seven Lean Years<sup>34</sup>**

This is the story of Nubians in Elephantine Madir<sup>35</sup>. It was located on the Nile. It captures the social situation in the land and the problems they face. It captures a pandemic situation of lack and disease. It is akin to the story of Joseph and Pharaoh’s dream, the seven years of plenty and seven years of famine (cf. Genesis 41:1 – 57).

I was in distress on a great throne and those who were in the palace were in hearts affliction from a very great evil, since the Nile had not come in my time for a space of seven years. Grain was scarce, fruits were dried up and everything which they eat was short. Everyman robbed his companion they moved without going ahead, the infant was wailing, the youth was waiting, the heart of the old men was in sorrow. Their legs were bent and crouching on the ground. Their arms were folded. The courtiers were in need. The temples were shut up, the sacrifices held nothing but air everything found was empty.

The narrative concludes with the overseer having a divine visitation on the advice of a priest who asked him to seek intervention of a god. So he meets the god Khnum. Khnum visits and he propitiates him and makes a decree of promise, offers him land and produce and all these are tithed to Khnum’s temple to avert a negative public health that would result in a negative divine visitation.<sup>36</sup>

### **Instructions To Temple Officials**

This text captures the stature and expectations on cultic officials, which if not adhered to would invite the wrath of the gods. They were expected to ensure the king’s purity for the health and safety of the land.

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<sup>34</sup> Pritchard 1974:31 – 32, and Egyptian narrative of the impact of low level of waters of the Nile, which brings misery and hunger. The setting is the Elephantine territory and their god called Khnum.

<sup>35</sup> Some kind of territory, or county or province – located on the Nile.

<sup>36</sup> Pritchard 1974:31 – 32)

If then anyone arouses the anger of a god, does the god take revenge on him alone. Does he not take revenge on his wife, his children, his descendants, his kin, slaves, slave girls, cattle sheep. Be very reverent indeed to the word of god.<sup>37</sup>

### **Treaties And Their Infractions<sup>38</sup>**

This is an excerpt from an **Egyptian Treaty** the section on Curses and Blessings. In this section, translated by Wilson from the writing carved on the walls of the temple of the god Amon, the interesting part is the expectation of fidelity to the terms of the treaty, breach of which invites the wrath the gods of pestilential proportions. It says,

....If the words inscribed are not honored Duppi – Tessub, .... gods destroy his person, wife, son grandson wife his land and all that he owns.....

....If you do not fulfill the words, there will be no seed, bring misery, and poverty, overthrow of throne and exterminate your name....

It continues on the section on curses and blessings for this treaty

As for him shall not keep them, a thousand gods of the land of Hatti and of the land of Egypt, shall destroy his house, his land, and his servants (1974:201)

An excerpt from a **Hittite Treaty** (Tr. Albert Goetze)

Rea-mashesha mai Amarna shall send his foot soldiers (and) his charioteers and they shall destroy all those with whom he is angry...

....and if Rea-mashesha ma [i Amarna the king of] the land of Egypt is angry with servants belonging to him (and if) they have committed sin again(st him and I send) to Hattusilis, the king of Hatti land, my brother...shall send his foot soldiers (and) his charioteers and they shall destroy all those with whom he is angry.

In this section one can see the terms and conditions that captured the relationship between the Lord and his vassal from both the Egyptian and also the Hittite treaties. The excerpts capture the consequences of non-compliance with the terms and conditions of the treaty. The main consequence indicated is war as a punishment of the gods whose agent is the Egyptian pharaoh.

### **Analysis And Insights For COVID-19 Pandemic**

#### **World View**

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<sup>37</sup> Pritchard 1974:207

<sup>38</sup> Pritchard (1974:205)

It can be noted from the above that in the ANE cosmology and universe, there are stipulations and expectation of maintenance of ontological balance which attracts divine visitation when broken. In their creation narrative humans are created to serve the gods

In the Old Testament world, the nexus that connects the OT community, and their world is Yahweh. He is the one who effects the results of infractions. He is also portrayed as using an agent who effects on his behalf. The agent is also a servant of Yahweh.

The comparison with the treaties is the case of the breaking of the covenant, the requirements of the cultus and its apparatus.

The ANE has a strong connotation of cause and effect originating with the gods and breaking of the social statutes, the norms and the treaties. The way out of the quandary in the ANE and OT was to propitiate the gods or goddesses. In the case of Yahweh in the OT it is the use of the cultic apparatus to propitiate the Divinity. That their concept of cause and effect ended with the divine and propitiating the divine through acts of worship sacrifice and general acts of faithfulness with the cult and also harmony with nature and neighbor.

### **Summary and Remarks**

From these texts one notes the strong and prominent theological world view mostly theocentric view or perspectives and the role and place of the gods and their impact on their society. It is also noteworthy that in the ANE humans served the gods hence focus was on them i.e., the gods and not the plight or position of the humans. Most of texts have to do with the exploits of the gods - some benevolent and others malevolent.

The existence of professional and informed cultic officials who serve the king and gods also help in the maintenance of purity and ontological balance. This also ensures social cohesion, stability and also security. Also note that the Egyptian king (Pharaoh) was also a god and semi divine as he was the nexus between the divine and human realm.

Also worth noting is the exercise of strong and consistent leadership by both Pharaoh and other kings, the story of Hammurabi and others tells of their efforts to serve and be accountable to the gods and the people especially their emphasis on justice. Hence they engage in arbitration to ensure a just and equitable society. It can also be noted that they ruled at the pleasure and support of the gods.

Services to the gods in this context was not entirely Patriarchal, but existence of priestess and priests is demonstrated and is seen to ensure gender balance just as there were gods and goddesses. There has been speculation as to whether the priestesses were brides to the gods and Pharaoh in the ancient world.

The emphasis on what incurs the wrath of the gods thereby bringing on a divine visitation is worth noting in these texts. Note the focus on harmonious existence and relations with gods, neighbors and nature. Thus in ancient Egypt, rites and rituals ensured the Nile always brought good tidings (silt) and ensured its preservation.

The same would apply to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon which were hallowed ground (shrines) dedicated to the worship of the gods. There is also the emphasis on ritual cleanliness (Good hygiene) for the general population, the priesthood and the leadership. This was intended at preserving and maintaining the pleasure of the gods to bless and prosper both the country and the general population.

In case of a pestilence it is noted that there was distancing as opposed to a lockdown, i.e., restricted movement from ground zero. According to other OT writings this ensured survival of individuals who are unaffected and thus continuity of society (cf. the story of Lot and his family in Sodom and Gomorrah)<sup>39</sup>. The presence or onset of an epidemic or pandemic brought about soul searching on causes, whether individual or communal, and prescribed forms of interventions and restitution for the infractions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the various texts of the Ancient near East with regard to pandemics. The researcher has based his study on James Pritchard's book on Ancient Near. Having examined the texts and the cosmology of the Ancient Near East the researcher hopes that lessons from the ANE world can inform the current discussions and conversations on the COVID-19 pandemic from a textual and also theological perspective.

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<sup>39</sup> Genesis 19:24 - 30

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