

Wojciech Pikor

"L'eau, enjeux politiques et théologiques, de Sumer à la Bible",
Stéphanie Anthonioz, Leiden 2009 :
[recenzja]

The Biblical Annals 1/1, 185-193

2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Stéphanie Anthonioz, *L'eau, enjeux politiques et théologiques, de Sumer à la Bible* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 131; Leiden: Brill, 2009). Pp. 683. € 167.00 / US\$ 247.00. ISBN 978-90-04-17898-4

WOJCIECH PIKOR

Institute of Biblical Studies CUL
address: Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland, e-mail: pikorwo@wp.pl

It is universally acknowledged that there is no life without water. This truth was also known in the ancient times, especially among the peoples living in the Near East. Their existence was directly determined by the hydrological conditions, but water was something more than a mere natural phenomenon. Water was connected with the divine world of myths, it was used in cult and it influenced the politics. Water as a political and theological reality in the ancient Near East is the subject of the study conducted by Stéphanie Anthonioz in her doctoral dissertation: *L'eau, enjeux politiques et théologiques, de Sumer à la Bible*, written under the guidance of prof. F. Briquel-Chatonnet and prof. F. Malbran-Labat and defended in 2008 at the Sorbonne and in the Catholic Institute of Paris.

Anthonioz's monograph consists of eleven chapters, the order of which is explained in the introductory chapter (p. 1-34). The spectrum of analyzed texts is wide, comprising Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic and biblical writings (sporadically also Aramaic and Phoenician ones). The texts are subjected to a historical and exegetical analysis to trace in them the phenomena of tradition, transmission, evolution and literary borrowing. The study is limited to three motifs: the crossing of water, the flood and the water of abundance. In light of these the author intends to examine how the relationship between water and economic and social-political organization of ancient states could influence the political and theological concept of water in mythological texts, royal inscriptions and in the Bible.

The body of the dissertation is divided into three parts: the crossing of water (p. 35-222), the flood (p. 223-395) and the abundance of water (p. 397-602). Consisting of three chapters, each part follows the same pattern examining texts from the mythological, royal and biblical corpora. The final, eleventh chapter offers conclusions (p. 604-611), followed by three indexes:

divine names (p. 673-674), proper names (p. 675-677) and the names of the authors mentioned in the book (p. 678-683).

The first part of the monograph begins with chapter two (p. 37-109) and takes up the theme of the crossing of water, which involves the question of geographical, political and theological borders of the empire. The starting point of chapter two is the concept of “canal-border”. For the first time this expression appears in the *Ur-Nammu Inscription* (p. 41) and then it evolves in the Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. In the Akkadian epoch the notion of borders is referred to the title “king of four rivers” (that is of the Persian Gulf, Tiger, Euphrates and Mediterranean Sea), which serves to hyperbolically highlight the cosmic hegemony of the deified Sargonid dynasty (p. 52-53). In the Assyrian period the crossing of water assumes a political and religious dimension. In the political perspective royal inscriptions relate this motif to conquest and military victory, which on the religious level correspond to the divinisation of the king (p. 56). The motif of the washing of weapons in the sea is inscribed in the theological concept of the crossing. Examining the possible origin of this pattern, the author links it to the Assyrian inscriptions of Shalmaneser III, whom the inscriptions consider to be a vicar of god Assur on the earth. The Assyrian king fights in Assur’s name and by washing weapons he renews Assur’s victory over chaos (p. 70). In the Assyrian inscriptions from the 9th century, the crossing becomes a motif of conquest. A century later, the Assyrian inscriptions do not mention the crossing, but the motif returns later in the Babylonian inscriptions, not in the context of conquest, however, for this meaning reappears only in the Persian inscriptions (p. 103-109).

The theological meaning of the crossing of water in the Assyrian inscriptions from the 9th century is discussed at the beginning of the third chapter, which analyses the presence of the motif in mythological texts (p. 111-156). The mythological context is already present in the royal ideology, which ties the crossing of borders by the king to the borders of Assur’s domination. Assur is not *deus persona*, but represents a deification of geographical features such as his city and empire (p. 112). Since Assur has no limits, the king as his vicar is obliged to widen the frontier of Assur’s land till it reaches the cosmic borders in order to defend the cosmos against chaos (p. 124). The theologisation of the motif of crossing is confirmed by texts linked to Sargon: the *Sargon Legend*, the *Sargon Geography* and the stela of Sargon from Cyprus (p. 128-129). In contrast to the abundant presence of the discussed motif in the royal inscriptions, its appearance in the myths is limited but significant. In the *Enūma Elish* myth the creative action of Marduk is described as his constant crossing of Tiamat. In this way the re-creation

and re-unification of the cosmos is completed in front of the continuous danger of being defeated by chaos (p. 144). Thus, the Babylonian theology models Marduk in the image of Assyrian kings. The *Gilgamesh Epic* uses the motif of crossing to criticise the royal ideology of the Sargonid period and to redefine royalty (p. 152-154). The function of royalty is mediation in which the crossing is understood not as the performing of the acts of gods, but as resituating and preserving the divine gift of civilisation and royalty after the flood (p. 155).

Chapter four, which concludes the first part of the monograph (p. 157-222), presents the biblical motif of crossing, which indicates the two decisive moments in the history of Israel: the exit from Egypt (the crossing the Red Sea in Exod 14) and the entrance to Canaan (the crossing of the Jordan River in Josh 3–4). The latter event is examined through the analysis of the deuteronomistic texts from Josh 6; 10; 13–14, in which water is absent in the motif of crossing (p. 176). In contrast to the Assyrian royal inscriptions the Bible democratises the discussed motif (not the king, but the people crosses, p. 162) and re-theologises it (p. 191-192). Instead of discussing the dependence of the Bible on the Assyrian rhetoric, it is better to talk about the Assyrian influences in biblical narrations, all the time, however, respecting the originality and the history of these two corpora. The Assyrian borrowing in the Bible are not full as suggested by Anthonioz's use of the neologism: "dés-emprunt". The crucial difference between the two corpora is the lack of royalty in biblical narratives, which could be explained not only by the criticism of the Assyrian monarchy conquering in the name of Assur (p. 217), but also by the fact that Yahweh, the god of Israel, has no need of royal mediation, because He himself, as the only king of Israel, is ahead of his people on the way to the promised land (p. 219).

The second part of the monograph contains the analysis of the motif of the flood. Chapter five presents the flood in mythological texts (p. 225-293), where the author discusses first the historicity of the flood's tradition. The tradition's final shape is found in the *Atrahasis Myth*, but its origin goes back to the period of Ur III (p. 292). To counter the dominant interpretation of the flood as a result of either the human rebellion against gods or the overpopulation of the earth, Anthonioz makes a reference to the *Royal Chronicle of Lagash* and the *Erra Myth* both of which offer a negative view on the decrease of the human population. Relying on the *Sumerian King List*, the author proposes a royal interpretation of narrative of the flood. The myth of the flood, inserted into the *Sumerian King List* during the reign of Šulgi (p. 253), functioned as a metaphor for the downfall of the Ur III empire and as a legitimisation of the new Amorite dynasty (p. 259). In this context, the

author handles the concept of ancient history (p. 262-268). The character of the Mesopotamian history permits to talk about the theology of history, the inherent element of which is royalty. The king's role is to mediate between gods and the earth in order to guarantee the divine gift of civilisation. The flood sanctions the beginning of history and indicates the royal secret, which, in the light of the *Atrahasis Myth* and the *Gilgamesh Epic*, consists in the king's double crossing of the waters of life and of death (p. 286). The crossing is performed with the help of a ship, the symbol of a sanctuary joining not only heavens and earth, but also the divine and the human worlds, and historical and mythological times (p. 287-289).

The analysis of royal mediation in the motif of flood is made in chapter six (p. 295-346) which once again examines royal inscriptions. The inscriptions prove the ambiguous character of water: its revitalizing force is a blessing, whereas its destructive power is a curse. In the Assyrian inscriptions the flood constitutes a royal epithet. To call the king "the flood of his god" means that the king is a perfect representative of the god on earth. For this reason the flood is a weapon not only of gods, but also of kings (p. 304-312). At this point it is essential to notice the difference between the Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions: in the former the flood serves to conquer and cross borders, but in the latter it renews both the borders and the empire (p. 312). In the Assyrian inscriptions flood is the core of the theology of royal mediation. In his military campaigns, the king actualizes the myth of gods' combat. Becoming a flood, the king saves civilisation, ensures durability and eternity of the kingdom (p. 327, 347), builds cosmic balance which is always regenerated by "mythical" combat (p. 328, 342, 344).

Having delineated the ancient Near East background, in chapter seven the author passes on to the analysis of the biblical narratives of the flood. The particularity of the biblical flood is first verified by the search for the possibility of existence of the West Semitic tradition of the flood (p. 347-356) and by the examination of the convergences and divergences between extra-biblical and biblical texts dealing with the flood (p. 361-367). Next, Anthonioz offers the exegesis of the biblical flood's narrative (p. 367-380) and finally the analysis of the temporal and ethical dimension of the biblical flood (p. 381-395). On the basis of the conducted inquiry the author defines the relation between the extra-biblical and biblical texts as a borrowing of the rather indeterminate borrowings ("dés-emprunt"), and underlines the peculiarity and originality of the biblical narrative. In the Bible the flood is a flood of water, not of wind as is the case in the Mesopotamian texts (p. 361). The biblical flood is not glorified, but definitely defeated. Therefore, there is no need of royal mediation and of the re-actualisation of this

event in cult (p. 367, 387). This fact is connected with a different understanding of history, which is established in the biblical narrative with the act of creation (p. 386). The *Genesis* features the ethical dimension of the flood, related to the problem of evil on Earth (p. 389). The biblical flood receives also a legislative value, because it is tied to a new law which has to guard the sanctity of life (p. 389).

The last part of the book concerns the motif of the abundance of water. First, in chapter eight the motif is studied in relation to mythological texts (p. 399-469). Following the idea of Jean Bottéro, the author argues the impossibility of conceptualisation of the Sumerian thought of creation because of the divine polyvalence and the plurality of narratives (p. 408). The traditional distinction between the two models of creation: cosmic (water falls down from heaven as a sperm of Enlil), and chthonic (water gushes from earth as the ejaculation of Enki), is not sufficient to express the diversity of concepts of creation presented in the myths of origin. Anthonioz puts the concepts together on p. 416-423, paying special attention to the model of creation “in the image and in the likeness” exposed in *Ninurta Myth* and *Disputation between the Bird and the Fish*. The crucial element in the myth of origin is the gushing of water and, in consequence, the “water of abundance” (p. 430-434) which remains related to the birth of civilisation (p. 434). The author recalls, first of all, the *Enki and the World Order* myth to demonstrate the role of water in the organisation of royalty, economy and cult. Once again, she returns to the motif of flood (p. 453-456). The theological dimension of myth is discussed in the context of liturgy functioning as the interpretation key for myths (p. 458). In this way, the myth reveals its metaphorical meaning (p. 462, 464) as an explanation of the present, a restoration of the origin, and a guarantee of the continuation of civilisation. In the narrative metaphor there is a constant circulation of myth, history and rite in every possible direction (p. 465).

Chapter nine presents the royal mediation of the water of abundance (p. 471-535). The construction of canals is considered a heroic deed of the king which constitutes a commemorative title on the royal inscriptions, similar to the building of a temple, a royal palace or city walls (p. 476). The canals supply temples with water and in this way they define the king's relation with his god(s). The motif of the abundance of water is explored not only in the royal inscriptions of Sumer, Middle Euphrates and Assyria, but also in some inscriptions coming from Syro-Palestine (p. 478-498). The discussed motif is evolving. Present in the Sumerian texts, in the Assyrian inscriptions it is substituted with the motif of a garden, which introduces the king more as a creator than a mediator (p. 489-490). The motif of royal mediation in the case of abundance is visibly absent in the West Semitic

inscriptions. The royal mediation of abundance receives specific meaning in Babylon (p. 498-519). In the Babylonian royal inscriptions there are a few conventional expressions (for example “the canal of abundance”, “the year of abundance”) which underline the king’s role as a channel of abundance between god and the people. The fundament of this mediation is mythical time because everything was given in the beginning and everything is renewed in mediation (p. 519).

Chapter ten, which concludes the last part, addresses the motif of the abundance of water in Gen 1–2 (p. 537-604). The two narratives – Gen 1,1–2,4a and 2,4b-25 – are first reciprocally examined in the context of their structure and theological message. Then, they are analysed as parts of the *Pentateuch* in order to delineate their relation with law and history. In contrast to the mythological narratives of the ancient Near East, biblical texts present law as prior to and foundational for the narrative about the divine gift. Law indicates that God entered history and man did not enter the myth (p. 562). In consequence, royalty lost its meditative function because the blessing for earth and water depends on the obedience to law (p. 563). As regards history, the narrative in Gen 1–2 is neither historical nor historiographic – it constitutes the beginning of the “other” history, which is open to the waiting for divine intervention (p. 566). In the examination of the relationship between creation, flood and crossing, the author follows Jean-Luis Ska, introducing the concept of “constellation” (p. 568-570) as a variation on creation and the creative action of God. Comparing Gen 1–2 and the *Enūma Elish* myth Anthonioz points to the theological originality and particularity of the biblical narratives. The narratives seem to be a “summa theologica” of the ancient Near East texts subjected to the process of theologisation (p. 586). The two mutually indispensable elements of this process are separation and proliferation as a creative act (p. 591). As a result, the abundance corresponding to the proliferation is more a command than a blessing (p. 593). At the end of the chapter the author presents her conclusions concerning her vision of the biblical narratives as a *summa theologica*. She criticises the concepts of demythologisation, mythopoiesis and antiquarianism, all used to explain the dependence of the Bible on myths. In particular, the author presents arguments against the model of antiquarianism proposed by John Van Seters who regards Gen 1–11 as a preface to the deuteronomic history, the result of a collection of ancient traditions theologised and historicised from the Hebrew perspective. Anthonioz prefers to talk about the “constellation” concept, which in the context of the motif of abundance discloses the phenomenon of tradition and transmission, and about the dysfunction of myth, which in the biblical narratives is exposed to the long

process of cultural, religious, political and theological sedimentation. This process, completed in the exile, brings about a radical novelty which needs a “revelation” (p. 604).

Stéphanie Anthonioz’s monograph is the first so extensive and detailed study of the concept of water in political and religious perspective in the ancient Near East texts. The subject of Anthonioz’s survey is not limited only to the mythological narratives, but includes also the royal inscriptions from different parts of Mesopotamia and Levant. Such choice of texts made it possible for the author to examine the reciprocal relationship between political and religious aspects of the motif of water in the royal ideology. The significance of the reviewed book resides in the abundant source material, which is not used as an argument or illustration for a certain thesis, but is submitted to the critical literary, historical and theological analysis. A valuable contribution of the monograph resides in the myth’s hermeneutics proposed by the author, who interprets myth in view of its connection to history and cult. Verifying the possible evolution, transmission and reception of the three aquatic themes – the crossing of water, the flood and the abundance of water – in the extra-biblical and biblical literature, Anthonioz respects the originality and history of the investigated sources. Instead of contrasting them, she searches for their reciprocal influences. Her neologism “dés-emprunt” underlines the sources’ theological independence.

The analysed aquatic motifs lie in the heart of the royal ideology of Assyria and Babylon. Seen from this Near Eastern background the biblical theology is radically new. The crossing of water, performed by means of the flood, constitutes the experience of divine blessing in the abundance of water, the guarantee of which is the obedience to law. The meaningful part of the monograph are the discussions about the understanding of myth, the specificity of the ancient concept of history and the relation between the extra-biblical and biblical texts. The proposal to acknowledge the *Genesis* narrative as a *summa theologica* of the ancient Near East texts is also very important for the future comparative study in this area. In the place of the stereotypical mechanism of demythologisation as the explanation of the relation between these two literary corpora Anthonioz introduces the concept of “constellation” which takes into consideration the historical, cultural and religious particularity of the texts.

The reviewed monograph is a study conducted with exemplary competence, patience and attention to the smallest details. The reading of this dissertation is a real pleasure on account of its literary quality and the logic of the scientific debate. The critical notes, which are expressed in the fol-

lowing part of the review, represent, in the majority, a kind of proposal for the future treatment of the aquatic motif in the ancient Near East literature.

First, it is necessary to make some observations regarding the formal side of the study. On p. 203-204 there is a quotation of Isa 10,5-14. The author indicates the numeration of biblical verses, but does not mention the chapter of the Book of Isaiah, from which this text is taken. On p. 205 she recalls some expressions from Isa 10:5-14, but mistakenly indicates the book's first chapter as the source of the quoted phrases. It could be also useful for the readers to have access to some maps in those parts of the monograph which contain the presentation of the hydrological system of Mesopotamia (p. 39) or the discussion of the new geography of Sargon (p. 88).

Concerning the content of the monograph, it is essential to add the manuscript 4Q534 to the list of the Qumranic texts dealing with the motif of flood, brought on p. 350. In the first column 4Q534 talks about the birth of Noah and in the second column, following the opinion of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, enumerates materials regarding the flood. What seems questionable is also the connection between the name of Noah (built on the root *nwh*) and both the mythological heroes reposing after their victory and the weapons laid down after the fight (p. 364-365). In footnote 66 (p. 365), Anthonioz mentions that the biblical narrative in Gen 5:29 suggests another etymology of the Noah's name, one where the discussed name is connected to the root *nhm* ("repent" in *Niphal*, "console" in *Piel*). This is wordplay. In Gen 6:6.7 God regrets his creation, but in Gen 8:21 he is comforted by Noah's offering. The problem is thus methodological: should one respect the suggestion expressed by the biblical text or ignore it to follow a disputable link between Noah's name and the Mesopotamian flood? Another problem results from the treatment of the same topic scattered in different parts of the monograph. As examples, one could evoke the question of myth, history or royal secret. In the last case, the discussion seems to lead to various conclusions: on p. 286-289 the royal secret consists in keeping the cult, whereas on p. 338-340 it corresponds to the king's wisdom revealed in his construction of civilisation.

The ability of Stéphanie Anthonioz to summarize each part of the dissertation is worth highlighting. But, at the end of the whole work, when she comes to summarize her concept of the "summa theologica", the origin of the biblical narratives of creation is related to the period of the Babylonian exile (p. 601-602). According to Anthonioz, the allusion to exile should be metaphorically based on the mentioning of the lack of water gushing forth from earth. Such a thesis, however, has to be proved. What needs further evidence is not only the motivation of the metaphor recognised by the author, but first of all the temporal correlation between the exile and the editing

of the analysed biblical narratives. Anthonioz handles the question of the redaction of Gen 1–2 on p. 548–550, but her interest is limited to the order and not to the time of the narratives' composition.

Accepting Anthonioz's concept of the exile as the time of the self-redefinition of the exilic community, it is necessary to pose a question about the selection of biblical texts. On p. 33 the author explains her choice referring to the clear presence of the three discussed motifs (crossing, flood, abundance) in the first six books of the Bible. At the same time, Anthonioz regrets that her study cannot cover the whole Old Testament. The limitation of the biblical source material is obvious in respect of the research comparative aim. But the mentioning of the exile as the time of creation of the aquatic "summa theologica" in Gen 1–2 produces a reductive view of the exilic and, in consequence, of the biblical theology. The important contribution to the exilic concept of water is to be found in the anonymous prophecy in Isa 40–55. This so-called Deutero-Isaiah contains all three motifs studied by Stéphanie Anthonioz and widens the perspective upon water through the process of de-sacralization, historical setting and metaphor, thus revealing the water's soteriological value. Therefore, the title of the monograph: *L'eau, enjeux politiques et théologiques, de Sumer à la Bible*, needs not so much a correction, but rather further study to deepen the biblical meaning of water. The desire for such a study seems implied by the author (p. 33), so one could only wish her its fulfilment.