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The main argument in Mroczek’s work is straightforward: in Judaism’s Second Temple era, there was no “Bible,” nor was there a concept of “book” really; so we need to rethink our approaches to early Jewish texts. The categories of “Bible” and “book” are not only anachronistic, but they are also inadequate as conceptual metaphors for understanding the literature. More appropriate terms should, therefore, inform our research into this era’s literary culture. Instead of “book,” she proposes, think digital text. Instead of literary “product,” think process. Instead of “rewritten Bible/scripture,” think, simply, *writing*. Mroczek advocates for these proposals by focusing on what she calls “native literary theories—what we can decode from the texts themselves about how their elite producers understood their own literary world” (5). A second and related line of argument deals with concepts of ancient authorship and attribution. Linking texts with particular figures was an “aesthetic and poetic” act (53), meant primarily to develop and celebrate those figures as characters. Attributing a text to David, for example, was not to lend that text authority per se (i.e., it was not exclusively a *bibliographical* move); it was, instead, to develop the story of the figure himself (i.e., it was a *biographical* move). Examining the links between texts and authorial figures in Jewish antiquity, Mroczek does not find texts in search of authors; she finds, rather, “characters in search of stories” (53). She develops these major arguments over the course of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion.

Chapter 1 focuses on the psalms—“a biblical tradition that is, nevertheless, poorly served by biblical categories” (21). In early Judaism, there was no “book of Psalms” as such. Surveying evidence from Qumran, Mroczek shows that: (a) a number of manuscripts containing psalms are not, in fact, collections of psalms; and (b) in manuscripts that definitely are psalm collections, the order of psalms varies widely, and the manuscripts also contain a variety of texts that are now non-canonical, including hymns, poetic contemplations, and even prose pieces. Examination of other texts that refer to psalms, or that possibly refer to David as composer of psalms, reveals the same. It appears, therefore, that there was nothing like a standard “book of Psalms” at Qumran, nothing even close really. Mroczek emphasizes, too, that David was credited with composing thousands of psalms, all prophetic in character and thus divine (see “David’s Compositions,” a text in 11QPs8), but no known collection encompasses this inspired writing. Thus, ancient Jewish readers, at least those in the Second Temple era, would have imagined authoritative writing as not bound by any singular collection or form. Surveying this evidence, Mroczek infers that early Jews had no conception of the Psalter. There were authoritative psalms, to be sure—David was said to
have composed thousands of them—but there was no set and unified written collection of such psalms.

The second chapter examines pseudepigraphy and its purposes. Josephus, for one, suggests that sometimes textual legitimacy was understood to be dependent upon authorial sources (cf. *Ag. Ap.* 1.37–1.42, which famously links historiographical authority to a succession of prophetic figures), and in a number of other cases attribution was indeed concerned with textual legitimation. But this was not always the case. Mroczek again turns to the psalms to build her argument. Her foundation is an Aristotelian theory of poetry—that is, poetic imagination is often driven by a kind of maternal love for a character, by a desire to create and nurture and develop that character’s story. With this theory in mind, Mroczek observes in the Davidic psalm traditions a concern with “expanding traditions about David” rather than a “sense of direct authorial attribution *to* David, or pseudonymous writing *as* David” (58). For example, she shows how psalm titles—a number of which were late additions to the texts—frequently fill in details of David’s life and enrich his character, expanding the purview of an already cherished and powerful figure of memory. “In this tradition of hagiographic expansion, the royal hero colonizes more textual territories” (67).

In chapter 3, Mroczek continues her discussion of authorship and related issues, this time focusing on Ben Sira. Scholars often single out Ben Sira as Judaism’s first “authored book.” Like the “book of Psalms,” however, the text of Ben Sira was not really a “book” in the first place; nor was the figure of Ben Sira really an “author.” He was a constructed personality that then became a “generative character” in later traditions (89). Mroczek arrives at these conclusions by demonstrating that: (a) extant Hebrew manuscript evidence does not present Ben Sira as writer of a “book” per se, but as one who contributed to an extensive and dynamic wisdom tradition that was thought to be ongoing and ever-expansive; (b) the prologue, which occurs only in the Greek text, has led scholars to historicize the figure of Ben Sira via the first-person passages in the text, but without the prologue these passages appear as generic and conventional literary accounts; and (c) there was no definitive version of the Ben Sira text in antiquity—these sorts of texts were thus understood as “projects, not as products” (106).

Chapters 4 and 5 shift the attention from individual textual traditions to interrelated collections of texts (i.e., from “books” to libraries and canons), and they also examine some issues in modern literary imagination. Chapter 4 in particular aims to dismantle the notions of “rewritten Bible” and “biblical interpretation.” To be sure, Mroczek emphasizes that ancient writers did, in fact, rework and adapt existing texts for the purpose of composition—thus we might speak of an active process of *rewriting* scripture. But there is no good reason to assume that, once this writing had taken place, ancient readers received the text as rewritten scripture. She demonstrates this by showing that early Jewish texts conceptualized their own authority without necessarily referring to “biblical” tradition, and texts that are now non-canonical (e.g., *Jubilees*) were often considered on par with texts that are now canonical. She also shows how modern publications of non-canonical texts, from the early eighteenth century to today, have deeply impacted our assumptions about such texts in their ancient settings. Our approaches to publishing these texts, how they are “curated for consumption” (136), have consistently reinforced artificial and anachronistic divisions in the literary imagination of the Second Temple era. As a possible corrective to these modern tendencies, Mroczek focuses on *Jubilees* and its “bookish heroes” (a phrase from her mentor, Hindy Najman; 143), in order to work toward a “native theory” of Second Temple bibliographic understanding. *Jubilees*, she argues, is a “metatext” that repeatedly
emphasizes and amplifies the import of divine communication, in multiple forms, in the ongoing process of written transmission (151). According to that text, “God has been talking to Israel—in writing—for ev—f—r—e—v—e—r” (155), and Enoch continues to write in heaven to this day; thus there were no absolute bibliographic boundaries in early Judaism, despite our modern representations of the literature.

This is not to say, however, that no literary boundaries were imagined at all in antiquity. Collections of “books” are indeed mentioned and even enumerated, for example, in Josephus and in 4 Ezra. Mroczek’s fifth chapter addresses these instances, and others, in which numbers of books are cited. What she finds is that numbers do not always correlate with contents. When Josephus, for example, mentions “only twenty-two books” that contain the history and traditions of the Jews, the number “serves as an icon for completeness and structure, but does not necessarily reflect and identify an already existing set of specific items” (163). Josephus goes on to identify the five books of Moses, thirteen books of the prophets, and four additional books of hymns and instructions, but he does not specify any further (see Ag. Ap. 1.37–1.42). Moreover, elsewhere in his work, the ancient historian cites vast quantities of divinely inspired writings, collections much larger than twenty-two books. For Josephus, it seems, the number twenty-two is a symbolic principle, not a set list of specific, inspired texts. Here, Mroczek also discusses the canon of the Ethiopian church, the contents of which are ambiguous and difficult to quantify. The Ethiopian church recognizes a set number of books (eighty-one) and its members speak of “the Bible,” but there is no agreement on precisely what books constitute this collection of eighty-one. Numbers of books, in this way of thinking, are qualitative instead of quantitative. Chapters 4 and 5, especially, offer a number of insights into how we might better understand ancient literary imaginations as well as the literary imaginations of contemporary communities (including those within the academy).

Of course, in Mroczek’s work, the basic gist of argumentation is not “new” per se—she acknowledges this point and pays due attention to her scholarly influences—but very few have made these arguments with the detail, conviction, and dedication revealed in this particular book. And very few have also offered ways forward beyond the initial critiques of anachronism and method. In this work, theory actually shapes practice, which in turn opens up new possibilities for knowledge. Instead of making de rigueur observations about anachronistic categories but then proceeding to read the literature the same old way, business as usual, Mroczek breaks new ground in her expositions of key texts, carving out space for genuinely new and better understandings of Second Temple literary culture and thus early Judaism. This is an important monograph, one that all scholars of antiquity should read. Moreover, because of its successful balancing of theoretical critiques and practical advances, the work will prove insightful for scholars of religious studies generally. Scholars have often wrestled in the debris of deconstructed categories, with combatants sometimes struggling to emerge from the debris itself. Mroczek’s work, however, is an exemplar of research that takes a critical stance as its starting point and yet manages to make a constructive contribution to the field.

Indeed, Mroczek makes a compelling case for the non-biblical and generally non-bibliographic nature of Second Temple literary imagination. I left this book with little doubt that ancient Jewish readers had no concept of “the Bible,” and that the term “book,” as we usually use it, can be a misleading concept for thinking about the textual traditions of ancient Judaism. However, I also left the book with questions about the broader applicability of some of its specific arguments, especially in relation to the notion of “book” and the
centrality of certain texts in antiquity. Mroczek implies that her observations about psalms and Ben Sira should apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other textual traditions. But what about the issue of genre, for example? Did collections of psalms or gatherings of wisdom poetry participate in early Jewish literary culture in the same way that a text like Genesis or Deuteronomy would? In other words, how might differences in generic function impact Mroczek’s theses when applied to a broader range of Second Temple textual traditions? Psalms, for instance, can function in a variety of generic contexts (as Mroczek demonstrates; 30–31), and their presence in various literary forms undermines the common notion of a “book of Psalms” in antiquity; but deconstructing the assumption that the Psalter was a stable collection for early Jews does not necessarily serve as evidence for deconstructing other sorts of textual traditions in that same context. The book of Psalms was not central among Second Temple literature—indeed, it did not even exist—but this does not mean that the same observation applies to, say, the book of Isaiah or even the books of Samuel or Chronicles. Mroczek does, on occasion, mention the undeniable stability and centrality of certain texts like Deuteronomy and Isaiah (e.g., 11, 47–48), but how are we now to understand these texts in light of her call to rethink our conceptual metaphors? May we still refer to these as “books” in the usual sense? Were their discourses stable enough to do so? These questions are not rhetorical, nor are they meant to be dismissive. After reading Mroczek’s challenging book, I am left with them. For this reason, I find her work important: it forces us to ask such questions, and to conduct fresh research along these lines, research that promises to continue to reshape our knowledge of early Judaism and its literary world.

**Author biography**

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