Transforming Literature into Scripture: Texts as Cult Objects at Nineveh and Qumran

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What is This?
contribue à en faire un ouvrage de référence complet, qui s’attache à explorer toutes les facettes connues de la figure de Lug. En effet, en faisant le pari de suivre l’évolution chronologique du dieu à travers les grandes étapes de sa vie (ascendance et naissance ; les arts ; le duel des générations ; une lumière organisatrice ; un roi qui ne dit pas son nom ; la mort de Lugus), l’auteur s’attache à un fil conducteur qui lui permet de s’éloigner de son sujet pour mieux y revenir. Ces quelques digressions, notamment lorsqu’il est question des divinités scandinaves (Odin), romaines (Apollon) et indiennes (Indra), contribuent à replacer le dieu Lug dans un contexte indo-européen qui soutient et enrichit l’analyse.

Dans *Le dieu celtique Lugus*, l’auteur livre une analyse comparative qui montre bien comment, grâce à des récits de naissance significatifs, des caractéristiques tripartites évidentes et des associations avec certains animaux précis, le dieu Lug a pu exprimer l’idée de la « totalité » pour les populations celtes. Cette totalité spatio-temporelle et socio-historique apparaît comme « la seule voie possible pour accomplir l’acte cosmogonique ». Les tableaux récapitulatifs (comparatifs, généalogiques, linguistiques) proposés à la fin de l’ouvrage contribuent à soutenir les conclusions de Gaël Hily et à faire de cette somme imposante de matériel une source d’une grande utilité.

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**Transforming Literature into Scripture: Texts as Cult Objects at Nineveh and Qumran**

*Book Reviews / Comptes rendus*

Russell Hobson


The historical formation of the literature that now constitutes the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament has long been a talking point for biblical scholars. Although there is no consensus regarding the precise details, many would argue that the literature has its roots in an extended period of many centuries—from the Levantine Iron Age to the late Hellenistic era—but that the Hebrew “canon,” as it were, only came into being sometime in the Roman era, perhaps as late as the second century CE. This apparent literary history, and the subsequent transmission of the literature from antiquity to the present day, has led many scholars to view the Hebrew Bible as “a unique development in the ancient Near Eastern textual corpus,” i.e. “No other ancient Near Eastern text appears to have undergone quite the same recensional activity” (p. 3).

In this volume, which is a substantially revised Ph.D dissertation (University of Sydney, 2009), Hobson makes an important contribution to the discussion. Following the text-critical work of Armin Lange, Emanuel Tov, and others, Hobson sets out to explore the process of the literature’s “stabilization,” which likely began in the Second Temple period and is evinced especially in the Dead Sea biblical scrolls found near Qumran. A key question frames his exploration: “[I]s it still correct to assert that the textual
stabilization of the Hebrew scriptural texts was a singular phenomenon in the ancient Near East?” (p. 4). In approaching this question, and in seeking to further our knowledge of the stabilization of the Hebrew scriptures, Hobson offers a detailed comparative analysis of manuscript collections from various sites in Mesopotamia (especially Neo-Assyrian Niniveh), and collections from the Judean desert. The cuneiform manuscripts from the first millennium BCE, he states, “are unsurpassed by any other literary tradition we know from antiquity in terms of their cultural and temporal proximity to the textual milieu in which the Hebrew scriptural texts were produced” (p. 4). The bulk of the volume, therefore, consists of text-critical case studies of manuscript traditions: namely, first-millennium Akkadian manuscripts of Enûma Anu Enlil (tablet 63), Mul.Apin, the Laws of Hammurabi, the Epic of Gilgamesh (tablet 11), and the Mis Pi ritual; and Hebrew manuscripts of Pentateuchal texts from the Dead Sea region.

Hobson formulates his comparative, text-critical approach in chapter 2. After offering a survey of approaches to text criticism of ancient Near Eastern literature (pp. 8–19), he presents a sophisticated and detailed discussion of his own method. Hobson uses a threefold classification for variants: Textual Variants (including Orthographic and Linguistic), Stylistic Variants, and Hermeneutic Variants (pp. 19–24). Textual and stylistic variants have little to no effect on meaning in a transmitted text, whereas hermeneutic variants, as the name implies, change meaning in a text. Hobson also keenly deals with the problem of quantifying his textual analysis for reliable statistical comparison across traditions. This is a tricky issue because his analysis covers texts written in different languages (Hebrew, Akkadian, some Sumerian) that employ different script types (alphabetic, syllabic, logographic). To alleviate this issue, he focuses on what he calls “semogenic units,” with a preference for emphasizing variants in morphological content over and above semantic content (pp. 24–28). This, he convincingly argues, gives him a statistically valid approach to cataloguing and comparing manuscript variants in diverse traditions. For example, in Hebrew, the word †כדבעל contains three semogenic units: an initial preposition, a plural noun, and a pronominal suffix. One may compare an occurrence of this word in a given manuscript to a parallel occurrence in another manuscript, noting any and all variants in the semogenic components of the word. In an analysis that ultimately compares text traditions in differing ancient Near Eastern locales and time-frames, this approach legitimately levels the playing field, so to speak, between the various languages and their scripts.

Chapter 3 contains a brief discussion of the Neo-Assyrian period, what we know about its scribal activity and collections, and a justification for his selection of particular Mesopotamian texts. He selected texts that were seemingly authoritative (i.e., they existed in multiple copies and their content was mostly stable in transmission), and that represent a broad variety of genres, including omens, phenomenological observations, law, epic, and ritual. Chapters 4–9 then present the six case studies noted above, with introductions to the texts and manuscripts, tables and discussions of the variants, and brief summaries of the key data. Chapter 9, in particular, in addition to its case study of Pentateuchal manuscripts, contains a helpful discussion of scribal activity in Judea, and the various collections of scrolls found in the Judean desert (especially near Qumran and at Masada). In these chapters Hobson has compiled a wealth of data for text-critical research (one can access complete data for each text online at www.aneapps.com).
In the concluding chapter, Hobson offers interpretations of the evidence, specifically with regards to trends within genres. Hobson is cautious and calculated in his conclusions, recognizing that this study can offer only a preliminary sketch of potential implications (pp. 132–133). Notably, in the Mesopotamian texts, he finds the highest level of constancy in ritual and legal material (Mīs Pi, Hammurabi’s laws). This makes sense, he suggests, given that these texts likely represent “doctrinal” modes of religiosity (cf. Harvey Whitehouse), and it perhaps provides a framework for understanding the beginnings of textual ritualization in Persian Yehud: these are elite scribal traditions centered in temple communities and founded upon memorization and transmission of highly technical material that scribes attributed to the divine (pp. 142–146). However, in the Pentateuchal manuscripts, which encapsulate a number of genres side by side, one finds that ritual and legal material contains more variation than narrative material (especially narrative in Genesis, which is the most stable tradition)—the opposite of what one finds in the Mesopotamian texts. It appears that—while the Pentateuch in toto is a ritualized collection of texts that is similar to the ritual and legal texts of Mesopotamia—the genres constituting the Pentateuchal collection maintained different levels of ritualized transmission; the level of textual ritualization depended more upon the encoding of socio-cultural meaning in a text than on a text’s genre. For example, narrative in Gilgamesh was not ritualized in the same fashion as narrative in Genesis, because of the socio-cultural functions of the texts in their respective locales (p. 155).

On the whole, Hobson presents us with a volume that makes an important contribution to text-critical and socio-cultural research into the scribal traditions of the ancient Near East. His discussions of the texts are packed with insightful data and readers will find his surveys of text-critical methodologies in chapters 1 and 2 up-to-date and lucidly informative. Moreover, his conclusions are intriguing, especially his thoughts on trends of variation in the Pentateuchal manuscripts in Judea (pp. 146–153, 155–157).

That said, this particular reviewer finds one overarching problem in the volume that is worth mentioning, and it relates to the nature of comparing Nineveh and Qumran and the inclusion of the Mesopotamian material in general. The cultural connections and similarities between Mesopotamia and the Levant in the first millennium BCE are well established, and perhaps permit positing a similar process of textual ritualization amongst temple priests in Mesopotamia and Persian-period Judea (cf. p. 141). However, as J. Z. Smith brought to our attention in the essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” (Imagining Religion [University of Chicago Press, 1982], 19–35), comparison should emphasize difference as much as (or more than) similarity. Studies of the Hebrew Bible—which often compare its literature with that of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and elsewhere—too often fail to recognize or take seriously major differences in socio-cultural milieux. To wit, what were the primary socio-cultural differences between the scribal communities in Mesopotamia/Nineveh and in post-monarchic Judea/Jerusalem? They were legion, and these differing socio-cultural milieux undoubtedly impacted developing understandings of their respective literatures as ritually sacred. But Hobson’s analysis and conclusions seldom offer thoughts along these lines. He hints at some of the issues when he focuses on different levels of ritualization in different genres of texts across the ancient Near East (e.g., pp. 153–155), but these observations suffer from an underdeveloped socio-cultural foundation for the comparative analysis. To be sure, this reviewer is not suggesting that one
should not undertake this sort of comparative study, nor does this reviewer mean to flatly reject Hobson’s thought-provoking conclusions about scribal trends in the ancient Near East; the point is that comparative analysis requires in-depth socio-cultural contextualizing in order to reap the full benefits of its labors. This point is especially relevant for Hobson’s study, which uses text-critical analysis to extrapolate thoughts on apparently comparable socio-cultural milieux. The socio-cultural parallels between Mesopotamian and Judean literati (including sameness and difference) remain unelucidated in Hobson’s conclusions, thus lessening the impact of his comparative discussion of ritualized texts in these specific locales. At the very least, however, Hobson’s thesis invites and encourages further research in this vein, which is what, ultimately, makes this work a stimulating and worthwhile contribution. Thus, this review closes with a criticism of comparison not to undermine this worthwhile volume, but to encourage ongoing research in the avenue of exploration that it has opened up.

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Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations
Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi and Kocku von Stuckrad (eds)

Fifty years ago Kabbalah scholars were few. However, interest grew following the groundbreaking work of Gershom Scholem and today it is a popular area of study. The essays in Kabbalah and Modernity all manage to demonstrate this increasing attraction to Kabbalah, and the diversity of the field. Various topics such as the reappraisal of Kabbalah scholarship, the relation between Kabbalah and esotericism, Kabbalah in past and contemporary times, and the interaction between Kabbalah and politics, attest to the vitality and diversity of Kabbalah studies.

In Part I, Andreas B. Kilcher provides an analysis of the philology of Kabbalah turned into philology as Kabbalah in the works of three authors: Knorr von Rosenroth, J. G. Hamann and Gershom Scholem. Giulio Busi shows the importance of drawings in Kabbalah, despite their minimalization by first-rank scholars like Gershom Scholem or Moshe Idel. Eric Jacobson’s research is focused on the problem of evil and the future of Kabbalah.

Parts II and III contain essays that are informative and pleasurable to read: Kocku von Stuckrad’s captivating journey through the history of shekhinah, ending in a subtle analysis of Madonna’s works and behavior, stands out in this regard.

Many ideas founded in the book deserve attention and beg future debate, namely Marco Pasi’s wondering if a “post-Christian” tag may be more appropriate than the term “Western,” Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s analysis of G. Sholem’s creative misinterpretations of Kabbalah, Sara MølHdrup Thejl’s argument that the interpretation of the controversial Danish writer Erwin Neutzsky-Wulff is Kabbalistic regardless of how revolutionary it is, and Jonatan Meir’s conclusion that the conventional image of Kabbalah needs corrections.