



AABNER

ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL
AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

*Varia and Publication
Ethics Issue*

EABS

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EDITORIAL: CONSIDERING PUBLICATION ETHICS FOR AABNER

***Izaak J. de Hulster, Valérie Nicolet,
Ronit Nikolsky, and Jason M. Silverman***

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Abstract

The inaugurating editors-in-chief of *AABNER* reflect on ethical practices when it comes to publishing, in dialogue with Dong Hyeon Jeong's reflection on diversity in academics and Leah Stanley's study of citational practices.

Les éditeurs-en-chef initiaux d'*AABNER* réfléchissent à des pratiques éthiques en matière d'édition, en dialogue avec la réflexion de Dong Hyeon Jeong sur la diversité dans le monde académique et l'étude de Leah Stanley à propos des habitudes de citation.





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Introduction

We inaugurated the first issue of *AABNER* two-and-a-half years ago in July of 2021. We indicated our reasons for starting the journal in the editorial of the first issue (de Hulster et al. 2021a, 3–12). In that editorial, we also indicated that we were planning to discuss our position vis-à-vis several problems that plague the academic world (2021a, 9), such as questionable or unethical citational practices, a lack of diversity, and a decline in communal integrity. In this issue, we include a section about ethical practices in publishing. These reflections, which seek to open dialogue and shape guidelines for good publishing practice rather than propose a universal editorial policy, have been nourished by ongoing discussions among us four as the inaugural editors-in-chief of *AABNER*. They have been further stimulated by a meeting held before the start of EABS 2022 in Toulouse. Dong Hyeon Jeong and Leah Stanley presented papers that are now part of this issue. Andrew Mein

and Jorunn Økland responded to these papers during the session. The conversation that these contributions initiated has led to our efforts to define what we believe stands at the heart of *AABNER*'s good publishing practice guidelines. We editors view this very much as the beginning of a discussion about ethical practices as a community together with the field editors and contributors to the journal. Many more themes remain to be addressed than we have been able to include in this present section. We welcome reactions and/or submissions in various forms (research or opinion articles, letters to the editors) from fellow scholars on these and other ethical issues.

Dong Hyeon Jeong in his contribution reminds us that biblical studies have “recently been checked for its lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Often, as Jeong also remarks, publishing houses and journals aim to breathe some diversity and inclusivity in their systems, “lest [they] be accused of racism, sexism, classism, and other-isms.” In these responses, fear of being singled out for bad practices acts as a motivator for policies that seem more inclusive on the surface. It is one thing to avoid the appearance of exclusivity, but it is another to find practical solutions for actual inclusivity. *AABNER* wants to develop guidelines that are not governed by virtue signaling but that actively improve the field. In its essence, *AABNER* aims to be diverse, to work toward equity and inclusion, and to play its part in changing the ethics of the field of ancient, Near Eastern, and biblical studies.

We, as inaugurating editors-in-chief, acknowledge that we can only play this role with humility, with genuine concern, and with diligent effort, and that we will fall short of our ideals. However, we also see the possibilities and opportunities provided by diamond open access and forum peer review to enable the execution of these ideas. Thus, we propose the following good practice guidelines to orient our publishing ethics.

Promotion of Distinctive Scholarship

We recognize the need, as Jeong writes, to disrupt the Eurocentric/US-centric standards of good scholarship. We are also aware of the tensions



in Eurocentric/US-centric scholarship between what is considered “objective” or “neutral” scholarship (often the universalized standards of Enlightenment European scholarship) and what are deemed marginalized, contextualized, approaches or non-traditional perspectives.¹

To disrupt Eurocentric/US-centric criteria of what is deemed good scholarship, *AABNER* will insist on publishing scholarship from a diverse set of authors using a diverse set of methodologies. To reach this goal, our forum-peer-review system aims to drive a wedge between the traditional peer-review system where older, more established scholars decide what is part of relevant scholarship in our field. *AABNER*’s form of peer review has a group of scholars under supervision of a field editor discuss an anonymized manuscript; the field editor summarizes the exchange and gets back to the author. It allows for innovative contributions to be published, because they use new methodologies, or map out new fields, or display interdisciplinarity.² It also helps scholars interact with each other, as they discuss scholarship and their criticisms of it in an unpretentious and constructive way.

The goal is to make louder and more visible the voices of scholars that enable new ways of looking at our texts or material, or present new material. We thus encourage scholars whose contributions have been rejected elsewhere because they were too daring, too different, or too innovative to submit their work to *AABNER* so it can undergo our forum-peer-review process. *AABNER* is built on the conviction that scholarly communities that interact with each other constructively are able to produce higher-quality work. We make this argument on both ethical and academic grounds.



¹ See one of the editor-in-chief’s contribution to this discussion: Nicolet 2021, esp. 282–285.

² Cf. our editorial principles of methodological innovation, topical novelty, and editorial discretion on the *AABNER* website: <https://aabner.org/ojs/index.php/beabs/navigationMenu/view/Principles>.

Reflection on Diversity

Diversity does not function the same for everyone. *AABNER* aims to be self-reflective on the kind of diversities it encourages and the boundaries it consciously or unconsciously (re-)establishes. Intersectionality provides a satisfying lens to reflect upon diversity. Taking into account multiple aspects of how humans are experiencing the world needs to impact scholarship at all levels: what are the ancient phenomena we study, what are the methodologies we champion, who are the authors we publish, and what are our blind spots?

As editors-in-chief, we all share a conviction that historical-critical methods have allowed scholars to detach themselves from religious authority. The tools of historical-critical methods provide scholars speaking from the margins of Eurocentric/US-centric scholarship with arguments to question the suppression of certain themes and characters in the field of biblical studies (Økland 2014, 222). Just as postmodernism showed the positionality of modernism, the post-postmodernism of the twenty-first century reaffirms the necessity of historically contextualizing the material. Historical approaches allow us to identify mental, material, social, and other facts and indications that can limit the multiplicity of interpretations. Post-postmodernism adds the need to be transparent about one's own positionality and one's criteria of evaluation, in order to limit bigotry and fundamentalist approaches and to promote self-critical reflection. This commitment to values often connected to the European Enlightenment is combined with the conviction that exclusive allegiance to Eurocentric/US-centric standards of scholarship leads to a depletion of the field and to its eventual irrelevance to our world.



Citational Practice

Citations are a foundational element of how scholarship provides transparency and evidential support; and they also play a big role in determining how we view the history of scholarship. Citational practice is one that structures the distribution of prestige and thus power within

the academy. While we are accustomed to considering citations as part of the ethics of intellectual honesty—by preventing plagiarism, for example—we are less practiced in considering the wider structural ramifications of whom we cite.

Two recent events in particular made us think about our citational practices and about the publication of stolen and/or unprovenanced artifacts, and both featured men in powerful academic positions at renowned institutions.³ We thought about the question of whether scholars who harm others and the profession ought to continue to be granted citations. Leah Stanley has offered us an evaluation of one particular publication's policy on this point, namely, that of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies (JIBS)*.

At the core of the question is the relationship between the scholar's person and the scholar's work; this is similar in kind to the moral question of the relationship between an artist and their art. In the past, this issue was largely related to moralistic concerns, but today it is mainly connected with ethical and political concerns. Does research retain its value when one knows that the researcher has done illegal or unethical acts, whether related to the scholarship or not? The difference for citation practices is that often one is speaking of contemporary scholars, often in positions of power, whose status is bolstered by other scholars who deem their work essential—thereby having their positions of power reinforced. How do we fit ourselves into these sort of power dynamics, and what kind of community do we want to foster? One conviction that animates us at *AABNER* is to contribute to communities that resist creating the positions of power that make such problematic actions possible.

One way to go about it is to refuse to cite unethical scholars. This is the position that *JIBS* takes in relation to sexual predators, for example. One quickly runs into legal and ethical problems, however. As Stanley notes, if one restricts such a policy to only scholars with convictions,

³ The recent conviction for child pornography, subsequent jail sentence, and release of Jan Joosten (Bland and Henley 2020) and Dirk Obbink's arrest for selling stolen papyri (Moynihan 2021).



most predators will remain cited, as the rate of conviction for such crimes is negligible.

A similar question concerns the burden of proof in relation to unethical behavior. Accusations of misconduct without proof in print open the writer and the venue to charges of libel. Reliance on so-called “whisper networks” not only raises questions concerning hearsay, but it also has the potential of inscribing new, even less transparent networks of power among those in the know concerning the actions of certain scholars and those outside the whisper networks.

A third question is about what kinds of crimes one considers as meriting a blanket ban: are only sexual crimes such as harassment, rape, and child pornography deserving of such treatment? What about fraud, tax evasion, and bullying? Does this treatment apply only to living scholars, or does it apply retroactively to previous scholars now dead? What do we do with scholars who had been members of the Nazi Party, for example? Several well-known and oft-cited New Testament scholars and Assyriologists were active members of this party.⁴ Others are known for having committed crimes, some of whom were never convicted. It is also clear that we cannot thoroughly vet the background of every person we ever cite. However, we can point out instances where problematic behavior is reflected in problematic scholarship, and we can point out cases where scholarship facilitates unethical behavior.⁵

However, even the most thorough scholar by necessity finds it impossible to cite everything ever written on a given topic; selections must be made. This opens an opportunity for a more positive approach to the issue of citation than focusing on whom not to cite: expanding the range of whom one could cite while supporting diversity. Given a choice of scholars to cite on a specific topic or opinion, one could choose to cite a scholar from a more marginal position in order to exemplify an innovative or hitherto little-known approach. *AABNER* is committed to including contributions displaying a wide array of methodologies



⁴ Heschel 2008; Gerdmar 2009; Schaller 2021.

⁵ For example, the way antisemitic presuppositions impacted New Testament scholarship (see above, note 4), or the way Michel Foucault’s philosophical positions allowed for his alleged sexual abuse of young boys (Dearden 2020).

and perspectives, which will not only result in the use and quotation of more diverse scholarship, but it will also address the problem of power hierarchies. Given knowledge that a particular scholar was convicted of a crime or is known to be ethically problematic, are there other scholars one could cite instead of or in addition to said scholar? We believe that focusing on positive action opens up space for encouraging diversity while avoiding the pitfalls of a strict, editorially defined rule concerning citations.

Setting Ethical Limits

Alongside positive solutions, *AABNER* recognizes the need to reject some practices, not only on ethical grounds, but also on the grounds that they promote scholarship that is detrimental to the field—practices that it does not want to endorse and see continued. Therefore, as stated in the ethics section of our website, we have two policies regarding material culture. First, the journal will not publish unprovenanced materials for the first time as stipulated in the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and the UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Protection, at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage (United Nations 1970, 1972). This is in line with both ASOR's and SBL's current citational policies, only without the cuneiform exception. Previously published unprovenanced materials, if cited, must be flagged as such. While a strict ethical view might argue this is tantamount to having our cake and eating it too, the latter are already within the scholarly discourse and can thus not just be ignored. Flagging such issues has the benefit of raising awareness around a common problem for the fields of ancient studies. Second, *AABNER* also has a policy of not publishing new materials from illegal excavations as outlined in the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (United Nations 1954).

Another ethical limit we have established is our method of forum review (see de Hulster et al. 2021b). By having reviewers and their



comments open to other reviewers and passing on a consensus view to the authors, the scope for unhelpful comments is minimized. We see our job and the job of the forum editors as encouraging rigorous but constructive reviews that improve an author's work.

Conclusion: Quality, Respect, and Community

Our review process is based on academic principles (and knowing that they have a history, we are open to weighing them as well); it also includes criteria for diversity that are based on ethical standards. Without being moral judges and ruling by laws, we take positions guided by our ethical principles and academic standards. These positions include our hermeneutical restrictions against an “everything goes” attitude and our ethical standards that in the larger context serve peace at a macro level (e.g., against politically illegal excavations) as well as at a micro level (e.g., protecting the well-being of children). Despite our firm foundation, we continue to learn by doing. We are open to other voices, as this is a matter of respect, and we see our role as editors-in-chief as one that is performed in service to the community. Thus, we always want to encourage each other, the *AABNER* community, and the wider academic world to do better with a view to improving the guild as well as society as a whole around the globe.



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