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Abstract

The papers in this special issue speak to the numerous ways in which thinking about the Hebrew Bible within its ancient Near Eastern cultural and intellectual environment can provide new insights and further the understanding of ritual in the biblical world. Papers herein look outward to Israel's neighbors both near and far in their examination of ritual and cult in this life and the next. The authors cull from a variety of approaches, from philological (comparative literatures), iconographic (visual exegesis), and archaeological (material culture), to explore biblical texts as cultural products and "textual artifacts" of ancient Israel.

Les articles de ce numéro spécial déploient les nombreuses façons dont l'étude de la Bible hébraïque au sein de l'environnement intellectuel et culturel du Proche-Orient Ancien permet de proposer de nouvelles connaissances et de mieux comprendre les rituels dans le monde biblique. Les contributions réunies ici s'ouvrent aux voisins proches et plus éloignés d'Israël et examinent rituels et cultes dans cette vie et la suivante. Les auteurs et autrices utilisent une variété d'approches, philologique (littératures comparées), iconographique (exégèse visuelle) et archéologique (culture matérielle), pour explorer les textes bibliques comme des produits culturels et des « artefacts textuels » de l'Israël ancien.

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Introduction

The articles in this special issue speak to the numerous ways in which thinking about the biblical text[1] within its ancient Near Eastern cultural and intellectual environment can provide new insights and further the understanding of the biblical world. The articles herein look outward to Israel's neighbors both near and far in their examination of ritual in this life and the next.

What is ritual? Seeing as this is a special issue dedicated to ritual in the biblical text, it seems apt to define the term. This task, however, is not simple.[2] Ritual is a word that is difficult to define, one that is

[1] Biblical text here refers to the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

[2] Bell 1992; Grimes 2013.

often determined via context. A working definition may be as follows: "a complex performance of symbolic acts, characterized by its formality, order, and sequence, which tends to take place in specific situations, and has as one of its central goals the regulation of the social order" (Gorman 1990, 19). Ritual is not merely a conceptual and theoretical system of beliefs, but a means of enacting belief where societies can actualize worlds of meaning through performance. Ritual is embodied and experienced, as it constructs meaning that both shapes and is shaped by the participant (Palmer 2022).

As seen in this definition, and as used by the articles in this volume, the term ritual is related to what we might call religious ritual. In discussing the theory of religious ritual, the cultural anthropologist Pascal Boyer stated that "one of the main points of the argument [regarding religious ritual] is that there is no unified set of phenomena that could be the object of such a theory" (1984, 185). While the term religion can also be problematized,[3] it is used here to refer to the attempts undertaken by an individual or group to interact with gods, ancestors, or other non-visible entities (Stowers 2012, 8–9). Religious rituals, then, are set apart from mundane rituals that are devoid of any such intent.

Religious rituals of varying kinds were undertaken on a daily basis within the ancient world, whether in the home, out in public, or in between the two realms. Prayers, offerings, sacrifices, intermediary devices both holy and mundane, and the individuals who perform the rituals are all a part of this current issue. The actions recorded in text and material culture that may seem far off and distant to the modern reader had meaning for the ancient reader. Contextualizing the rituals, therefore, matters. To read texts or interpret artifacts outside of their context results in faulty understandings. As Ronald Grimes warns us: "Be cautious in what you assume about the obviousness and purview of the term 'ritual,' and read ritual writings in terms of their historical contexts and the genre of writings in which they appear" (2013, 192).

How, then, do the authors herein go about contextualizing their articles? They cull from a variety of approaches, including philological (comparative literatures), iconographic (visual exegesis), and archeo-

[3] Smith 1982; Braun and McCutcheon 2007; Stowers 2008.

logical (material culture), to explore biblical texts as cultural products and textual artifacts of ancient Israel. In doing so, they all read comparatively. The articles are evenly divided in their approach—some take as their starting point rituals preserved in the form of textual artifacts (Erickson, McDowell, Hays), whereas others read the material remains that concretize practices referred to obliquely in the biblical text (Smoak, Suriano, Ilan and Greer). In commenting on not just the method of reading comparatively, but the necessity of doing so, Christopher Hays describes the interaction of the biblical texts with their ancient Near Eastern context "exceedingly respiratory" (2014, 4). He notes that although the texts "have spoken to many periods and peoples, they spoke first within specific historical contexts; and in crafting their messages, they worked with the cultural materials that their surroundings provided" (2011, 2). The outcome of a comparative approach is rich.[4] Read on their own, each of the articles illuminates the biblical world. When read together, however, they work in harmony with one another. What follows here are some initial observations on common threads that appear throughout this special issue.

The first common thread is the phenomenon of polysemy and puns as related to ritual. Nancy Erickson's article investigates the role-play priests engage in when dressing for ritual. Using the *wpt r* ("Opening of the Mouth") ceremony in Egypt and the Levitical priests as examples, she demonstrates how the donning of ritual clothing transforms an ordinary person (the priest) into an extraordinary individual (the deity). Levitical priests wear an elaborate costume. Egyptian *sm* priests don similarly transformative garb, putting on the skin of a leopard (*ba*), which also invokes the *ba* ("spirit"/ "soul") of the leopard, in turn imbuing the *sm* priest with the animal's strength. As Erickson states, "it is while wearing the *ba* that the *sm* demonstrates *ba*." Puns, or double entendres, abound within the ritual literature she engages. Catherine McDowell's examination of the Mesopotamian *mīs pî pīt pî* ("Opening of the Mouth") ritual and Genesis 1–2 also finds language laden with multiple meanings. She demonstrates how the creation of humans in Genesis as *beṣelem Elohim* reacts against the known cultural context

[4] Stowers 2012; Garroway 2018.

wherein bodies for gods created from clay, wood, or metal needed to be "activated." Humans in the Eden story are not idols but the living image of God that are "activated" by his living breath.

Both McDowell and Erickson discuss the role of dress in becoming like God. Erickson suggests that priests role-play as gods when dressed appropriately, while McDowell describes the first humans in the garden as ones who tend the garden and worship the deity (i.e., priests) as nude. If, as Erickson suggests, priests dress as deities to role-play as deities and enter into the holy space, why then are the first humans naked? Reading these articles together provides a picture wherein Adam and Eve had no role to play, no barriers to cross, to enter the space of Yahweh, so therefore they did not need material clothing. It is only when barriers arise, when humans trespass, that Yahweh provides them with clothing.

Moving from the description of ancient priests to the individual participant in the ritual, Ilan and Greer offer a picture of pilgrimage to Tel Dan. The sensory affordances a worshipper encounters when entering a cult site in order to engage in a ritual are carefully laid out in their article. From the intentional construction of the architecture, to ancient "city planning," to the sights and sounds that would have surrounded the pilgrim, the article invites the modern reader to think about and breathe in the experience of pilgrimage. In this way, the reader moves back and forth between the present time and ancient context, drawing upon the familiar (synagogue, church, or other religious service) to inform their understanding of the text. The movement back and forth between two worlds both in the textual description of pilgrimage and the archeological reconstruction offers another type of polysemy.

Hays's examination of mortuary art and Psalmic literature again centers on the idea that ritual has multiple meanings. Hays describes the texts as binocular, with one eye looking to this life and the other to life after death. Returning to the notion of polysemy, Hays focuses on how Psalm 15 plays with the royal ideology of the living king and the king's relationship to the deity in the afterlife. The notion of an afterlife and to whom it was afforded is a question raised by Matthew Suriano as well. Where Hays finds hints of a possible afterlife for royalty, Suriano leaves the question unanswered. His study approaches the question of the afterlife by asking whether the biblical understandings

of corpse impurity might have any practical applications or relationship to the archeological practice of feeding the dead. Open ceramic items, cups, bowls, plates, jugs, jars, and the like are commonly found in Iron Age burials. Yet, there is a paucity of evidence to suggest that food or beverage was actually placed in the dishes and cups, suggesting that food exposed to the corpse would be contaminated. Two covered food vessels found in Judahite burials at Beit Shemesh perhaps serve as the exception that proves the rule. Who was fed, what victuals were provided, and what purpose empty ceramic grave goods served: all these questions remain enigmatic.

Jeremy Smoak's article returns us to the sensory nature of ritual, presenting the amulets discovered in Ketef Hinnom as crafted objects made to be touched and used. Inscribed with lines from the Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6, the amulets are polysemic. The multivalent nature of the objects' materiality point both to the humans who manipulate (read, wear, touch, shine) the amulet and the divine who is represented by the words and material used in the amulet. The properties of silver required it to be refined so that one could extract the purest form of metal. Likewise, the biblical text describe Yahweh's power to refine individuals and purify their hearts. Smoak hints at multivalence of purpose for the ritual objects in both this life and beyond, inviting us to consider the audience of ritual. From the miniscule amulets to the expansive landscape of Tel Dan, performance of ritual is at its heart communicative in nature, seeking to build a bridge between the human and divine realms.

An important link between the articles by Hays, Suriano, and Smoak is that they all interpret items associated with elite burials. In the case of Hays's article, the royal ideology is explicit. Similarly, in the Ketef Hinnom burials, we find some of the most elite burials in Jerusalem, which are generally attributed to the upper echelons of Iron Age society. With Suriano's study, this link is less obvious; however, families that could afford bench tombs or hewn cave tombs in the manner of family burials were well-off. Most of the Iron Age population consisted of commoners, and their burials were simple graves now lost to time. They are what David Ilan (2017) calls "the invisible dead." The fact that these three articles interact with aspects of the biblical text is instructive, for

they align with the concerns of the biblical authors, who as scribes were themselves part of the upper tier of society.[5]

These are just a few of the connections that can be seen running through the different articles. We hope that these preliminary thoughts will whet the reader's appetite to read on and draw their own connections and conclusions regarding ritual in the biblical world.

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[5] Davies and Römer 2013; Milstein 2016.

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