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Peter Dubovsky, Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18–19

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and the possible Mesopotamian influence on other oneirocritic literatures of the ancient Near East. In the concluding chapter, he fleshes out some of the implications of his study such as the formative role of cuneiform script in the construction of Mesopotamian divinatory conceptions and his preference for the term “enigmatic” to the more traditional “symbolic.” Noegel argues that the oft-cited typology that distinguishes message dreams from symbolic ones is less helpful because the ancient approach to dreams was informed by “a logocentric ideology that permitted the perception of images as script, and viscera and stars as texts” (p. 275). The book concludes with sixty-five pages of bibliography. There are, however, no indexes of any kind, which would have enhanced the utility of this book as a reference.

The author’s attempt to go beyond cataloging various wordplay phenomena and to establish Mesopotamian mantic influence on other literary traditions by employing the hermeneutics of punning as its definitive evidence is certainly commendable. But when it comes to discussion of some of the textual data, this book leaves something to be desired in that the hermeneutics of punning is sometimes not as obvious as he would have us believe. This may be owing to the confusion in two areas that the author’s analysis of punning in oneirocritic literary texts shows. First, in discussing enigmatic dreams embedded in literary texts, Noegel tends to discuss all the puns in a given literary unit that may be taken to adumbrate the plot of a story; yet some of these do not connect dream content to the text interpretation, unlike in Mesopotamian dream omena where the protasis clearly—judging from the selective examples Noegel provides—leads to the apodosis by way of punning. This is most prominent in the biblical examples. The punning between וָאוֹדֵא and וָאוֹדֵא in Gen. 40:13, for instance, does not connect the cupbearer’s dream (vv. 9–11) and Joseph’s dream interpretation (vv. 12–13). Second, in order to demonstrate the hermeneutics of punning, Noegel frequently depends on metaphorical meanings or leitmotifs in dream reports. For example, he appeals to metaphoric meanings of נָפָס and נָפָס (e.g. “people” and “restored” respectively) in order to explain Joseph’s favorable interpretation of the cupbearer’s dream (p. 129). But neither word works as a pun in the strict sense with any word in the dream interpretation. This is in a sense prefigured in the definition of punning that he gives at the beginning of the book (p. 1, n. 2), a definition that encompasses any allusive use of language, such as metaphor, leitmotif through a key word, alliteration, and so forth. This seems to be an attempt to stretch “punning” into more than what it is. Abrams, for instance, defines “pun” as a “play on words that are either identical in sound (‘homonynms’) or similar in sound, but are sharply diverse in meaning.” Furthermore, the metaphorical sense of a given word can still remain ambivalent or multivalent. All this seems to show that wordplay, as it is defined so broadly, does not determine one interpretation, contrary to Noegel’s argument to that effect (p. 40), although it may narrow the parameters of interpretation.

The reservations discussed above notwithstanding, Noegel’s book is highly recommended to anyone who is interested in the role of wordplay in the interpretation of dreams, both for the author’s insightful observations and for his up-to-date discussion of ancient Near Eastern dreams and dream reports.

1 M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York, 1971), 139.

Reviewed by Alan Lenzi, University of the Pacific.

In this well-argued study, Peter Dubovský provides an intriguing new reading of 2 Kings 18–19, the account of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.E., in light of Neo-Assyrian intelligence services. Although Dubovský characterizes his work as a contribution to biblical scholarship, the lion’s share of the book (pp. 32–238) reconstructs the structure and operations of the Neo-Assyrian intelligence network, and will thus also appeal to Assyriologists.

Dubovský divides his book into six chapters. The introduction, chapter 1 (pp. 1–9), provides a brief overview of previous scholarship, a statement of purpose, and brief notes on sources and definitions. The author’s stated purpose is “to contextualize the
bibilical sources [of 2 Kings 18–19] in the sense of investigating to what degree they reflect the reality of Neo-Assyrian intelligence services” (p. 5). Informed by a wide range of theoretical intelligence literature (including works in Russian and Czech), Dubovský defines “intelligence” in a threefold manner: information, activity (that is, collection and analysis), and organization (the network). He is quick to note, however, that agents are not merely collectors and analyzers; they also implement various operations, especially “deception, counterintelligence, psychological warfare, and covert action” (p. 8).

In chapter 2 (pp. 10–31), Dubovský analyzes the biblical narrative to draw out its perceptions of Neo-Assyrian psychological warfare and the kinds of intelligence the Assyrians would have needed to conduct such operations effectively. The goal is to understand how the Bible presents the Assyrians from the point of view of intelligence activities. One minor flaw in an otherwise interesting read is the brief use of 2 Chronicles 29–32 (p. 29) to fill out the Deuteronomist’s presentation of Assyrian political intelligence.

Dubovský reconstructs the Neo-Assyrian imperial intelligence network and associated practices in the next two chapters. In chapter 3 (pp. 32–160), working from case studies organized by geographical area (Urartu, Elam, Babylonia, and the Arabian Desert, plus a section on espionage behind enemy lines), Dubovský offers a host of situations that illustrate the diversity and comprehensiveness of Neo-Assyrian intelligence interests and the various means by which they obtained information. Generally, the intelligence services operated in the provinces, buffer zones, and along borders, but would also attempt to learn matters inside competing imperial powers. Intelligence priorities included: monitoring the enemy (which embraced, for example, the movement of troops, desertsions, border conflicts, military activities of other kingdoms, and the whereabouts and even health of foreign kings); reporting on economic interests (which encompassed issues such as smuggling, black markets, trade routes, timber transport, and finding and maintaining appropriate contacts to assist in field operations); and noting a variety of topics as diverse as agriculture, topography, ethnography (for example, cataloging Arabian tribes), and religious acts (for example, important ritual enactments).

Chapter 4 (pp. 161–88) offers two extended case studies, based on letters and annals, that examine Assyrian implementation of psychological warfare tactics during campaigns conducted by Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II. Dubovský has presented here a solid reconstruction of Neo-Assyrian intelligence services. In many of the cases, he details the means of collecting intelligence (interception of letters, capture of a spy, or bribing a local official) and illustrates the flow of information through the network, from the field on up. He also demonstrates how the Assyrians built redundancy mechanisms into their system to ensure accuracy of information and the fidelity of agents. Most of Dubovský’s supporting evidence is reconstructed from epistolary texts in various states of preservation from the Neo-Assyrian archives. His reconstructions are reasonable and supported by thorough argumentation, but he also frequently (and understandably) admits that the evidence permits other interpretations. Disagreements over some details are inevitable.

In the light of his findings, Dubovský returns to Palestine and the biblical material in chapter 5 (pp. 189–260). After assessing textual and archaeological evidence to demonstrate the presence of Neo-Assyrian intelligence agents in the area, Dubovský assesses the historical accuracy of the biblical perceptions of Assyrian intelligence and offers a redaction-critical reading of the biblical narrative. He concludes that the biblical narrative presents an accurate picture of Neo-Assyrian intelligence, though this does not automatically affirm, he is careful to note, the historicity of the narrative or its composition during the Neo-Assyrian period. In his reading of the final redaction, Dubovský contends that the biblical editors were savvy to the ploys of the Assyrian intelligence service, especially its claims of omniscience, and they countered it in three ways: practically, by exalting Hezekiah’s leadership skills; literarily, by undermining the accuracy of Assyrian assertions (and thus their supposed omniscience) through creative textual redaction; and theologically, by depicting the Assyrians as blasphemer and Yahweh as the one who truly understood and controlled the situation. A brief summary of the author’s findings (chap. 6; pp. 261–63) and several charts in the appendix conclude the volume.

Overall, Dubovský has offered a fresh perspective on 2 Kings 18–19 while also offering an important historical reconstruction for those interested in the Neo-Assyrian empire. The book is highly recommended. But I have a few quibbles. First, the book should have included a series of maps to help the reader follow the
geographical details of the case studies in chapters 3 and 4. Second, the book only includes a modern author index but would be significantly easier to use if it had included a subject index, as well as an ancient text index. Finally, although there are a number of small typos throughout the text, a significant portion of text (with footnotes as well) is repeated on pages 14–15, and the headings of tables 24 and 25 (p. 220) should be exchanged. These minor issues, however, in no way detract from the substance of Peter Dubovský’s fine work.


Reviewed by Jared L. Miller, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.

With this concise volume, Alice Mouton, one of the most productive of the younger generation of Hittitologists, examines a series of Hittite ritual texts from the south-eastern Anatolian cultural milieu relating to pregnancy and birth from the point of view of the concept of the rite of passage, thereby offering numerous improvements to our understanding of these compositions and their interpretation.² The book begins with an introduction, in which the relevant terms are discussed and defined and the textual corpus is set out. In the first of the volume’s two major sections, Mouton describes the primary characteristics of the rituals, concentrating on their actors,³ the paraphernalia utilized, their offerings and sacrifices, the rites involved, and their spatial and temporal parameters. She then turns to the question of why these compositions should be considered rites of passage, breaking them into rites of passage pertaining to the mother on the one hand and to the newborn on the other. The second main section presents transcriptions, translations, and very brief commentary on the texts themselves. The volume ends with a short summarizing and concluding chapter, a bibliography and a concise topical index.

The transcriptions are impeccable, as one expects from Mouton. After failing to find any significant errors in the entire transcription of the most extensively preserved of the texts, Papanikri’s Ritual (KBo 5.1), I abandoned any further efforts on this front.⁴ Mouton also went to the trouble of collating the texts and fragments in museums when possible, against photos when not, and it can only be hoped that this level of dedication to philological basics will be understood as exemplary in the field. A few notes and thoughts are nevertheless in order.

The list of duplicates to KUB 9.22 (p. 83) can likely be reduced, as H² (ABoT 17 = AnAr 6962) very probably belongs to the same tablet as H¹ (KBo 50.1 = 464/w), since they show the same hand, clay characteristics, etc. H² (Bo 4876) shows the NS, but a different hand than H¹(+)H₂, H₃ and H₄.⁵ In KBo


³ Naturally, Mouton distinguishes between human and divine “actors” (p. 27), but then states, “Il faut cependant garder à l’esprit que cette séparation et purement formelle et ne reflète en rien la réalité des rituels de naissance : ceux-ci témoignent, au contraire, d’une véritable interaction entre mortels et êtres surnaturels.” Veritable interaction between mortals and the supernatural? I can only assume that the intent of this passage is something like “certainly, the participants genuinely believed they were interacting with their deities and behaved accordingly, whether such interaction was taking place entirely within their own minds or not.”

⁴ A number of the conventions Mouton employed, however, could be updated to reflect more current views and/or practice, e.g.: ḫeskur instead of 𤀹m; H/h instead of H/h; e-vocal in the 玢-morpheme, e.g. ši-ke-e-zzi in iv 6 instead of ši-ki-e-zzi; transliteration of Akkadograms with their Akkadian phonetic values, e.g. tu-ö-bi-ti-tu, in KBo 5.1 ii 26 instead of tu-ö-bi-ti-tum or ka-an-nu-num in ii 34 instead of ka-an-nu-num; ta-bal in ii 52 instead of ta-bal (in this case another word entirely); cf. correctly ka-bal in ii 17 and ši-tur in iv 43. Regarding the volume’s format, it would have been of significant advantage for the reader if transliteration and translation had been placed on the verso and recto, respectively. Gaffes such as the orphaned -zi at KBo 5.1 iii 59 should also be avoided.

⁵ Thanks to Francesco Fuscagni, Akademie der Wissenschaften, Mainz, for allowing me to see a photo of this fragment.