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Richard J. Clifford, ed. Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel

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As is well known, the study of the paleography of hieroglyphic signs is still in its infancy, while there are already good studies available for hieratic paleography. At the moment, sign collections for individual monuments are starting to appear but do not yet add up to a coherent documentation. In this situation, a comprehensive study of a well-defined corpus is especially welcome.

The author of the book under review takes as his basis the private stelae of the Nineteenth Dynasty. A general overview of the techniques used is welcome, especially since Moje gives much thought to the process of creation of a model and its application to the actual inscribed object. Also touched upon is the question of elaborate archaism in the graphic forms. The author supposes that stelae could be prepared in advance for clients who would choose them and have their name added. The sources are discussed according to the material of the inscribed object, which is certainly a useful criterion since the support and the technique of engraving or painting has a substantial influence on the actual form of the signs.

Form, layout of pictorial elements, type of depiction, and function, as well as original context are used here for classificatory categories. This is followed by a short discussion of the formulae employed in the texts. This results in a classification of the objects studied, followed by a detailed catalog of the objects ordered according to their date. An equally detailed discussion of the different signs points out the variability of forms, owing to development over time as well as local divergences. Moje identifies different workshops and potential contacts between them. Statistical analysis detects times of higher or lower production of stelae. The dominance of the material from Deir el-Medineh, compared to other findspots, is quite evident; most of the lower Egyptian material comes from Qantir.

Summing up his results, Moje notes that frequently occurring signs are much more standardized while rare ones display greater variation. In addition, placement within a group of signs can influence their form. Objects from the provinces and the residence show clear differences of quality. Deviant forms and mistakes are due to difficulties in reading the hieratic which was used for the inscribed object, which is certainly a useful criterion for notating the sound (than a real difference in phonetic realization in different parts of the country. It has to be asked to what degree other stelae feature words that would justify using the sign in question (after all, a c still pronounced as such is only attested in a few words). If they do not, the geographic distinction is more likely to reflect varying preferences for notating the sound t than a real difference in phonetic realization in different parts of the country.

This is certainly a work much more likely to be consulted for specific points than read continuously. Its usefulness for Egyptology is obvious, and it remains to be hoped that more corpora of hieroglyphic inscriptions will receive similar paleographical treatment.

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This volume originated in a symposium at the 2004 Society of Biblical Literature national meeting. After a brief editorial introduction to the various anthologies related to Mesopotamian and biblical wisdom literature, the book contains seven essays in four parts.

Part one, "The Context of Wisdom in Mesopotamia," contains thematically related essays by Paul-Allan Beaulieu and Karel van der Toorn. Beaulieu's essay concisely describes the social and intellectual setting of Mesopotamian wisdom literature as it developed historically. According to Beaulieu, the king was the focal point of wisdom and the closely related ante-
Beauilleu's ideas mesh well with van der Toorn's main contention: in late-second-millennium texts "experience as the soil of wisdom gave way to revelation as its ultimate source" (p. 21). Wisdom became a secret of the gods. He demonstrates this first through a comparison of the OB and SB versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the latter of which shows an emphasis on antediluvian wisdom and its revelation as a secret of the gods. Brief appeals to the secret scholarly corpora as antediluvian wisdom (e.g., exorcism, astrology, and divination) and to the comparisons of kings with Adapa in historical inscriptions support this idea. In the last few pages van der Toorn rightly asserts that wisdom became a secret due to the prominence of writing, the standardization of important cuneiform works, and the exclusivism of the scribal profession. But the traditional divinatory notion that the gods wrote their secret will on the livers of animals must also have played a significant role in adapting secrecy to scribal activity and products.

Part two, "Studies in Babylonian Wisdom Texts," presents two essays from Victor Avigdor Hurowitz. The first is brief, identifying two previously unnoticed allusions in the Dialogue of Pessimism (Il. 62–69 and 70–78) to the Hymn to Shamash (Il. 118–21 and 122–27, respectively). The second discusses The Instruction of Šāpê-Amēlî, a relatively new wisdom text from the Akkadian periphery, and offers some biblical comparisons. The text contains a dialogue (like the Book of Job) between a dying father and his son. The father's words are "a sort of ethical will" (p. 40), containing about sixteen instructions about how to live a successful life (like the Book of Proverbs). But the son rejects the father's counsel, believing that "in the end there is no importance to the things that will befall a man, even if he heeds the pragmatic counsel promising success" (p. 43). The criticism of the father's wisdom by the son makes this text unique among Akkadian wisdom literature and most comparable to biblical Qohelet. Hurowitz concludes the essay with his own translation that both highlights the text's structure and adds more biblical parallels.

Essays from Edward L. Greenstein and Raymond C. van Leeuwen comprise part three, "Comparisons of Mesopotamian and Biblical Texts and Motifs." Informed by various explicit theoretical definitions, Greenstein looks for humor—not just satirical but also comedic—in the biblical Book of Qohelet and the Mesopotamian Dialogue of Pessimism with interesting results. For example, a mechanical, predictable reaction to changing circumstances, according to one definition, is humorous. Thus, when the master and servant in the Dialogue both act exactly the same for each proposed activity, whether they are commending or denigrating it, Greenstein sees humor. For the same reason, the fool in Qohelet is a comical figure. According to another definition, the "sudden discovery of incongruence" (p. 60), expressed quickly and perceived immediately, also marks humor. Greenstein notes the servant's advice to train a god like a puppy as an example of this in the Dialogue (Il. 60). The same definition identifies the rapid reversals or contradictions in the Book of Qohelet as humorous (see, e.g., Qoh. 2:3 and 4:6). Despite identifying a common element of humor in both the Dialogue and Qohelet, Greenstein does not use these similarities to flatten out their significant differences.

Van Leeuwen offers a very insightful study of Prov. 3:19–20 and 24:3–4 in light of the ancient Near Eastern metaphor of house building and house provisioning. The first third of the essay provides ancient Near Eastern background material, informed by an explicit theoretical understanding of myth and metaphor. Van Leeuwen persuasively demonstrates the interrelationship across various text genres of divine cosmic creation, mundane palace/temple/house building/provisioning, and the utility of wisdom in these endeavors. He uses this cluster of ideas as the key to understanding the divine activity of house building/provisioning in Prov. 3:19–20 and the human activity of the same in the related Prov. 24:3–4. Van Leeuwen also shows the close relationship these two texts have with the building of the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–3) and the temple (1 Kgs. 7:13–14). Scholars interested in metaphor, intertextuality, and the situatedness of biblical (wisdom) literature in its ancient cultural milieu will find much to think about in this essay.

Finally, an essay from James L. Crenshaw constitutes part four, "Biblical Wisdom Literature." Crenshaw offers a catena of annotated biblical passages thematically related to human life: its beginnings (Job 10:8–12, Ps. 138:13–18, and Qoh. 11:5), its end (Job 14, Qoh. 12, Sirach 34:7, 41:1–4, Wisdom 3:3–4, and 8:19–20), and life's necessities (Sirach 29:21, 39:25–27, Qoh. 9:7–9, and Prov. 27:26–27).

Although the essays here are quite varied, especially in range—from bird's-eye overview to detailed treatment of particular texts—the volume offers several important studies for understanding biblical and Mesopotamian wisdom literature.