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Book Reviews

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This most recent work of Dr. López-Ruiz of the Ohio State University investigates the intellectual diffusion of Near Eastern cosmogonic motifs into Greek thought. On an even greater scale, it represents the dismantling of the divide between Indo-European and Semitic scholarship, and aims to mitigate the proclivity of scholars to treat these geographical areas as separate and self-contained regions. While remaining hospitable to general and academic audiences alike, the author, well acquainted with the culture and literatures of both civilizations, is able to adroitly advance existing scholarship—skillfully building upon the foundation laid by previous scholars, most notably the distinguished historian of Ancient Religion, Walter Burkert. Demonstrating impressive knowledge of both Classical and Near Eastern scholarship, languages and myth, López-Ruiz engages the reader in a discussion of three main themes: (1) Thematic parallels between Greek and Near Eastern Cosmogonies, (2) the temporal and geographic origins of these correlations, and (3) the nature and area of their transmission. She chooses to focus on the literary material from the Archaic Age, and thus the thrust of the book is, quite naturally, aimed at an examination of Hesiodic and Orphic cosmogonic literature.

The author begins with a study of Hesiod’s Theogony, the earliest known Greek account of the origin of the world and of the gods. After explaining several important thematic similarities between the proem of the Theogony and Northwest Semitic literature, López-Ruiz launches into a detailed and technical investigation of a peculiar Hesiodic phrase. Examining, in an unprecedented
degree, *Theogony* (35), she compares the “tree and the stone” motif with a wide variety of literatures from the Levant, including the Hebrew Bible, Ugaritic texts, the Koran, the Gospel of Thomas, and Orphic epigraphical sources. Consistent with her views of Greek-Levant intellectual transmission, she argues that the “tree and the stone” parallels do not spring from literary dependence, but rather they exemplify one of the “common threads and features that made the fabric of these Mediterranean literatures and mythologies” (73). The origins of these “common threads and features” are also explained in her book. Clearly, this is one of the works most valuable contributions, and further information is offered in a helpful supplement in the back matter.

Having demonstrated the limitations and artificiality of the scholastic division between the Levant and Greece, López-Ruiz constructs a more concrete and nuanced theory of exchange between the two. Rather than contenting herself with further corroborating the generic link between the Greek and Near Eastern worlds—which, as she says, brings no greater conclusions than the “fact of the comparison itself” (18)—she attempts to link individual cosmogonic motifs with a specific place and time of transmission. This more precise method is a fruitful one, leading the author to the conclusion that the majority of Near Eastern-Hesiodic parallels can be further distinguished as coming from a “Greco-Levantine tradition, with a strong Northwest Semitic component (Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician)” (128). The preceding examination of elements shared between Levantine and Hesiodic succession myths is fascinating. Having pointed out the known similarities in the extant literature, in this section, López-Ruiz carefully and realistically works her way back to their intellectual source.

In the segment covering the Orphic material, the newly discovered Derveni Papyrus—imaged by the Ancient Textual Imaging Group here at Brigham Young University—played a major role. Greatly augmenting the Orphic corpus, the author indicates that this document presents “numerous analogies with the Hesiodic cosmogony, while also attesting important divergences in the use of Near Eastern motifs” (131). The information found in the Orphic cosmogonic material, most importantly in the Derveni Papyrus, provides further reinforcement to López-Ruiz’s theory of Greek cultural exchange with Northwest Semitic societies.

As previously indicated, the scope of the work is mainly focused on literary tradition, and therefore the author’s arguments are naturally drawn from the available literary sources. However, considering the importance of material culture in demonstrating cross-cultural relations, archaeological evidence is, of necessity, taken into some consideration. In many places López-Ruiz
shares significant archaeological insights, having a great corroborative effect. In order to further support her argument, however, Dr. López-Ruiz could have cited scholarship on the long-recognized link between the sixth/fifth century Aegean “striding Zeus” motif, and the “smiting god” figurines, found throughout the Near East—prominently in Northwest Semitic regions.¹ This, as well as other archeological evidence, may well have served to solidify the authors proposed theories of “long-lasting cultural contact” between the two regions (99). Such sustained contact between regions would indeed affect all areas of culture, and noticeable overlap would be expected in modern archeological research.

Though overall impressed by the breadth of texts used in this study, I was hoping to read more concerning the pre-Socratic usage of the cosmogonic genre. Excepting a few general comments, there was little said concerning the tradition of natural philosophers, many of whom produced their work in the structure of cosmogony, and published it during the time period which this book investigates. Because these texts seem to fit within the appropriate parameters, a more complete investigation of pre-Socratic texts would have been of great value in precisely detailing the transmission of cosmogonic motifs. I was pleased, however, that evidence of pre-Socratic participation within Orphic and Pythagorean circles (discussed throughout the work) was not exploited. For it has been noted that these ties had little influence on pre-Socratic philosophical theories. An analysis of this subject, however, could have been included without exceeding the scope of the study.

On the whole, this work is of great value for the study of Near Eastern influences on Greek intellectual culture. The author maintains that these two peoples must not be viewed as entirely distinct nor as self-contained societies. With sensitivity to the excesses in the arguments of previous scholars, she manages to expound upon culturally ‘orientalizing’ influences while respecting the peculiarity, uniqueness and creative character of Greek civilization. Dr. López-Ruiz represents well the kind of scholar necessary to effect a lasting influence in her field, and implements the sort of methodology requisite for producing a more precise link between the Near Eastern and Greek worlds.

JUSTIN BARNEY
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY


Ben Witherington is professor of New Testament at Ashbury Theological Seminary. In *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament*, Witherington addresses the methods of composition and persuasion illustrated in the New Testament texts. Witherington’s work relies on the premise that the vast majority of documents in antiquity were not in fact intended for “silent reading,” and that only a few were intended to be read by individuals (2). Rather, the documents were “simply necessary surrogates for oral communication” (2). Thus, it behooves the serious historian to approach the study of New Testament texts from a rhetorical-critical standpoint given that “they were composed with their aural and oral potential in mind” (2).

Addressed to an uninformed but educated audience, the book is intended as a guide for the rhetorical study of the New Testament and is divided according to the genre of the New Testament texts (i.e., “Gospels of Persuasion,” “Early Christian Homilies,” “Paul the Rhetor and Writer,” “The Elementary Rhetoric of the Pastorals,” and “The Rhetoric of the General Epistles”). Witherington’s style is straightforward and coherent. He first illustrates the problematic nature of interpreting specific texts independent of rhetorical analysis. Then, he briefly treats the contemporary scholarly approaches to the issue. Finally, he demonstrates the advantages and insights that can be gained from rhetorical analysis. Witherington concludes each chapter with a short “Questions for Reflection” section intended to solidify the material just presented. Moreover, the final chapter of the book is titled “The Difference Rhetoric makes to NT Interpretation,” making explicit Witherington’s thrust throughout the book—namely to show how rhetorical analysis is necessary to correctly evaluate the meaning of the New Testament texts.

After the introductory chapters in which the author provides background for the rhetorical/literary culture of the Greco-Roman world (1–2), Witherington begins his analysis of the “Gospels of Persuasion—Mark and Luke” (ch. 3). Springboarding from the thoroughly Hellenized literary culture in which both authors wrote, and drawing upon several examples from both gospels, he concludes the following. First, Luke demonstrates the ability to shape not only brief narratives and parables in rhetorical ways but both volumes (Luke and Acts) are formed in a macro-rhetorical structure. Second, Mark’s gospel is actually an ancient biography and Mark is able to draw upon
his knowledge of rudimentary rhetorical exercises to form χρεῖα, edit parables, and make rhetorical comparisons, or συνκρισις (24). In chapter four Witherington tackles the rhetorical speech summaries in Acts (see Acts 2:14–42; 4:8–12; 6:8–8:3; 13:13–52; 15:13–21; 17:22–31; and 20:17–38). He concludes that the predominantly forensic and deliberative rhetoric therein work to portray Peter and Paul as able rhetoricians. This reflects Luke’s good rhetorical strategy both “to represent the truth about Paul’s life and ministry” and “to convince a high status Gentile that Christianity was intellectually respectable, and could even persuade the high and mighty” (93).

Chapter 5 focuses more on Paul and the literary context in which he wrote and spoke. Witherington concludes that Paul drew upon his vast knowledge of the Jewish and Greco-Roman rhetoric of the time in accordance with the literary and oratory culture of his audience. Moreover, the author also addresses the role of secretaries in early letter writing and specifically Paul’s letters. Finally, Witherington demonstrates how the much-debated meaning of Romans 7:7–25 can be better understood if viewed in light of the rhetorical device referred to as “impersonation.” Paul utilized this tool to rhetorically impersonate Adam and was not referring to his own personal experiences as many have argued (132).

Chapter 6 discusses the fairly elementary rhetoric in the pastorals. Witherington shows that rather than “examples of miscellanies, random collection of traditions with no order or organization, and having no real literary finesse,” the pastorals employ comparisons, paradigms, and enthymemes to effectively “preach to the choir” as it were, and to address issues which arose in the transition to the post-apostolic era (174–75).

Chapter 7 treats the rhetoric of the general epistles (Peter, John, and Hebrews). After discussing the peculiarities of Asiatic rhetoric and the futility of studying the pastoral documents through the lens of epistolary analysis, Witherington demonstrates the following. First Peter is a work of deliberative rhetoric, “presented as an authoritative word from Peter, presumably to his various converts (183). Also, 2 John and 3 John are deliberative discourses while 1 John is epideictic in character. Moreover, 1 John was prompted by a schism and was intended to be circulated in the Johannine churches. Finally,

2. χρεῖα are “short, pithy character-revealing and character-forming anecdotes from the life of the subject of the biography that we regularly find in Plutarch, Tacitas, and yes, in Mark’s Gospel as well.” See Witherington, New Testament Rhetoric, 24.

3. Impersonation involves the “the assumption of a role; sometimes the role would be marked off from its surrounding discourse by a change in tone, inflection, accent, or form of delivery, or an introductory formula signaling a change in voice” Witherington, New Testament Rhetoric, 132.
Witherington argues that the letter to the Hebrews was an epideictic text and a homily, and that “epistolary features are added because this sermon had to be sent to an audience rather than delivered orally to them by an author (195). Finally, the rhetoric therein suggests that author of Hebrews was most likely Apollos of Alexandria.

The present reviewer holds the last chapter of Witherington’s book to be the most concise and helpful. Titled “The Difference Rhetoric Makes to NT Interpretation,” the chapter addresses ten common mistakes which can lead to misinterpreting a text and provides examples of each (214–35). The mistakes are worth noting here: (1) Failure to recognize a *proposito* (thesis statement) or peroration leads to misunderstanding of the character and themes of a document. (2) Failure to identify the species of rhetoric in a discourse leads to false conclusions. (3) Failure to recognize “impersonation” as a rhetorical device. (4) Failure to recognize the way a rhetorical comparison works. (5) Failure to see the difference between modern and ancient persuasion. (6) Failure to recognize enthymemes (and their implied missing premise) leads to misunderstanding NT arguments. (7) Overlooking the way personifications work in a rhetorical discourse. (8) Mistaking amplification either for redundancy or for saying more than one thing. (9) Mistaking Asiatic rhetoric for mere verbal excess. (10) Failure to recognize the importance of micro-rhetoric or recognizing a *gradatio*.

The thesis of Witherington’s book is both accurate and apt. Understanding rhetorical conventions is essential to understanding the New Testament for “form shapes the very substance and meaning of the discourse (216). Witherington concisely elucidates the Greco-Roman literary context in which the NT authors wrote and explains rhetorical practices as laid out by Aristotle and Quintilian. Moreover, this work serves the New Testament student as a stepping stone to the more complex and pioneering rhetorical-critical studies of scholars like Margaret Mitchell, Francis Young, and Averil Cameron. All in all, Witherington’s book is a competent defense of the necessity of New Testament rhetorical-critical analysis, offering new and plausible interpretations of knotty and enigmatic New Testament passages.

DANIEL BECERRA
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Blenkinsopp’s book bravely addresses what is arguably the most studied text in the Hebrew Bible as an overture towards developing a biblical theology of creation. He argues that the story of creation (how a sphere was opened for human existence and development) cannot be separated from the first humans, the flood, or postdiluvian development, but is rather to be found throughout the entirety of Genesis 1–11, maintaining that the text is preoccupied with one central question: how evil infiltrated a creation which God declared to be “very good” (Gen 1:39).

The book is organized into eight chapters followed by a lengthy epilogue. The first chapter addresses Blenkinsopp’s overall project and argues for isolating Genesis 1–11 as a distinct literary unit, structured around five *toledot* formulas (“these are the generations”). The next six chapters each address a specific pericope (creation, Eden, Cain and Abel, Enoch, the flood, and Noah’s descendents), followed by a brief eighth chapter that introduces the transition from myth to a historical age beginning with Abraham. The following epilogue then briefly traces Hebrew creation theology and its reception in early Christianity through the Gospels and the writings of Paul.

Supplementing his overall project, Blenkinsopp never forgets that this volume is also intended as a commentary. Like any good other commentator, Blenkinsopp remains extremely cognizant of the Mesopotamian literary tradition behind Genesis 1–11. This awareness begins on page 2 and continues throughout the book. When discussing Noah’s ark, in addition to wrestling with the obscure vocabulary, the author notes the likelihood that the ark was intended to be a kind of sanctuary based on its parallels in the ancient epic *Gilgamesh*. Just as Gilgamesh’s vessel resembled a seven-story ziggurat, Noah’s craft has dimensions that parallel Moses’ wilderness tabernacle and Solomon’s temple (138). Similarly, Noah’s use of birds to observe the subsiding flood waters also has strong parallels in *Gilgamesh*. The hero Utnapishtim makes use of a dove, a swallow, and a raven. Although the Bible omits use of the swallow, the exploration of the birds is still told in a triadic literary pattern (141). Although it is generally well known that many ancient cultures had a deluge tradition, Blenkinsopp expands his ancient near eastern comparisons to include the parallels between the Tree of Life in Eden and Adapa’s near brush with immortality in *Adapa and the Food of Life* (74–75), as well as the possibility that the image of “sin . . . crouching at [Cain’s] door” may refer to ancient
Mesopotamia’s *rābiṣum*, threshold demons who guarded entrances to buildings and ambushed their victims (94).

Equally pervasive is Blenkinsopp’s nuanced approach to source criticism. Beginning on page 6, he credits the priestly writer with the main narrative line of Genesis 1–11, frequently appended by the less liturgical comments of the Yahwist. Although he usually assigns certain elements of the text to one author or the other according to general modern consensus, he acknowledges other possibilities and does his best to steer away from deconstruction. The author gives just enough information for the reader to be familiar with the discussion, but also gives voice to the other side of the debate. For example, as early as page 7 he admits, “That Genesis 1–11 results from the combination of these two sources [P and J] is still the ruling assumption in academic commentary, but like all such assumptions it leaves space for a hermeneutic of suspicion.” Fifty pages later, after associating J with the Garden of Eden narrative, he also acknowledges that this conclusion “looks rather less assured on closer inspection” (55) and reminds us that “repetitions need not imply a combination of sources” (56).

For all of his obvious familiarity with the current academic debate on various topics, Blenkinsopp largely keeps his references to contemporary scholarship to the footnotes and reserves room in the text itself for lengthy discussions of ancient commentary. When treating Genesis 5, Blenkinsopp liberally sprinkles references to later Enochian tradition throughout. Here he obviously has an eye toward the development of the Watcher myth that will occur in conversation with Genesis 6, but he also mentions specific traditions about Enoch himself. Some authors questioned why it is mentioned that Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah, but not before. The solution for many commentators, including ben Sira and Philo, was a period of personal wickedness before becoming a father and repenting (115). For others, Enoch’s rebellious stage was cultivated under the influence of the wicked angels who fraternized with human women during his father’s lifetime (119). He notes the association that grew between Enoch and Elijah due to their miraculous disappearances, a theme that developed in later texts including Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*, 1–3 *Enoch*, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and *Genesis Rabbah* (119–20). Blenkinsopp also keeps an eye on Wisdom traditions, especially since they address the question of an invisible creation in addition to the visible creation described in Genesis 1–2 (46–52).

The final conventional feature of Blenkinsopp’s approach regards historical criticism. References to the date and circumstances of Genesis’ composition are sparing, but the author clearly favors a Neo-Babylonian context (24).
He finds echoes of Solomon’s accession to the throne in the Cain and Abel pericope, identifying such parallels as a sexual act with tragic consequences (Nakedness and shame in Eden, David’s adultery with Bathsheba), fratricide (Cain/Abel, Absalom/Amnon, Solomon/Adonijah), and “wisdom” resulting in death (the serpent, wise woman of Tekoa) (58–60). Blenkinsopp also identifies numerous parallels between Genesis 1–11 and Deutero-Isaiah in both theme and vocabulary and draws further evidence from the contemporary events mentioned in Isaiah 40–48 (178–80).

As I read this book, I found myself frequently checking to make sure that I hadn’t accidentally picked up a volume in a commentary series. Blenkinsopp’s writing style is extremely concise and efficient. He is more interested in commenting on the text than emphasizing the poetic and/or emotional content of Genesis 1–11. He includes lexical notes, Mesopotamian and Greek parallels, ancient commentary, literary-critical observations, and ambiguities surrounding interpretation. This approach necessarily causes the book to feel choppy and can obscure the thesis in some ways, but it can also be extremely valuable as long as the reader doesn’t lose sight of Blenkinsopp’s larger project.

Overall, the book has little value in terms of learning new facts about ancient context or later interpretive traditions. Blenkinsopp didn’t break any new ground that hasn’t been thoroughly explored elsewhere, but he has produced a concise and handy reference to these topics and the academic research surrounding them. In all, I find this book to be useful to those interested in a user-friendly approach to the interpretive issues surrounding Genesis 1–11. Whether one is a scholar well versed in the Hebrew Bible or a layman who merely dabbles, Blenkinsopp’s book is worth personally owning and makes a versatile addition to any bookshelf.

KIMBERLY BERKEY
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY


R. Mark Shipp’s Of Dead Kings and Dirges: Myth and Meaning in Isaiah 14:4b–21 is an ultimately valuable read and contains a fascinating exegesis of Isaiah 14:4b–21. While this exegesis is, at times, clouded by scattered data, the brilliance of Shipp’s ideas yet shines through.
Shipp’s essential argument is that Isaiah 14:4b–21 is a complex dirge form—a mashal, proverb, or taunt that is also a parody of a royal dirge. Shipp posits that it uses the mythological motifs of the Mesopotamian tradition to further taunt the living king (perhaps Sargon II). The use of myth connects the dirge to the world of Isaiah’s day. Shipp says of the pericope, “its intent is to point away from the ritual and myth to political, social, and religious realities. It is an indictment and condemnation of an arrogant king who tyrannized the world and whose actions and hubris suggested divine pretensions” (165). He proceeds to support this thesis in six chapters: one surveys the interpretation of myth and the Isaiah passage; one discusses the literary genre of the Isaiah passage; one investigates the phrase Helel ben Shachar; one reviews ascent, descent, and other mythological motifs in Isaiah 14, one presents an exegesis of Isaiah 14:4b–21, and the final chapter is a two-page conclusion.

First, Shipp conducts a literature review of commentaries and interpretations of the Bible with myth in view. He outlines several approaches, evaluates these approaches and concludes with his own definition of “myth” to outline his approach. He argues that to deny or minimize myth in Isaiah is a faulty approach because of the abundance of cosmological imagery in Isaiah and throughout the Hebrew Bible. Rightly, he defines myth, recognizing that this definition is an essential springboard from which to begin his analysis. He associates his approach most closely with the myth and ritual approach, and defines myth as “a story about the inbreaking of Eternity into history with implications for the future” (31). Generally, this section is well done, though he fails to explain how his definition fits into the context of the approaches he has cited. Most importantly, he does not explain how he reached his definition. He simply explains several approaches and then states his own.

Next, Shipp examines the literary genre of the Isaiah passage. He briefly reviews the historical interpretations of its Gattung and then proceeds to discuss his own analysis of the genre, moving from general features to specific ones. He begins with discussing the term mashal, which is used in Isaiah 14:4 to describe the poem itself, and proceeds to examine the mashal as a parody or “taunt song.” He uses two texts to support this interpretation: an Assyrian parody of a memorial stele (K 1351) and Ezekiel 32:18–32, also a parody of a dirge (“what makes this passage a parody is that its form is that of the dirge, with the commandment to ‘wail’ over him, yet the content does not reflect the intent of the form” [46]). He then establishes the form of the dirge in biblical and extra-biblical texts and points out consistent elements: the command to go down, the lament, the rousing of underworld dwellers, the greeting of the rephaim or dead kings, the sacrifice for/by a king (what, he argues, relates
this genre to ritual), and the proclamation of a new king (65). What I think is missing from this section is a final synthesis: Shipp fails to then emphasize that each of these elements exist in Isaiah 14. He does not do this until the final section, some 100 pages later.

The third chapter is an examination of Helel ben Shachar (“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!” Isa 14:12). This section seems more of a response to previous literature than a supportive aspect of Shipp’s main argument. Through the examination of several texts, Shipp concludes that Helel ben Shachar refers to a star connected with Ishtar constellations, and by extension, connected to Enlil. This conclusion is a bit of a stretch, especially considering that he only provides one text which shows that, though Helel ben Shachar seems to be clearly connected to Ishtar, Ishtar is in close constellational proximity with Enlil. Shipp also doesn’t explain how this particular finding assists in supporting his book’s overall thesis. Instead, it seems to be a topic of interest that happens to be in Isaiah 14:4–21 but apparently has little to do with the dirge, ritual, or mythical aspects of the passage—at least, no connections that are thoroughly explained. If this were done, or even if this lengthy examination were presented as a byproduct of Shipp’s unique approach, then I think its inclusion would be justified. However, its placement is distracting and presentation is puzzling. Shipp does not make this examination relevant to his overall argument and does not connect it with the preceding or following chapters.

The fourth chapter examines the mythological elements attested in Isaiah 14: ascent, descent, the cedar forest of Lebanon, and the dead kings in Sheol. Shipp does an excellent job of establishing each of these elements as mythological ideas with specific connotations throughout the Near East. When kings die, they are always described as ascending or descending, and oftentimes doing both. Shipp points out that ascent and descent should not be interpreted as respectively positive or negative evaluations of the dead king. He cites the myth of Re, who ascends every morning and descends every evening as the sun. He argues that there is often a cycle of ascent through the sky and descent through the underworld. He also shows that cedars are often associated with death and myth. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, the domain of the gods was in the cedar forest and the hubris of entering these woods as a mortal was deadly. Finally, he clearly shows the dead kings in Sheol, or rephaim, as underworld aristocrats through an examination of several biblical and extrabiblical texts.

The fifth chapter is clearly the most important one in the book. Its purpose is clear and its support is immediate and evident. In it, Shipp conducts an
exegesis of Isaiah 14:4b–21 with each of the previous chapters in mind (chapter 3 is mentioned only very briefly, however). He provides a translation, an outline of the text, and a brief analysis of each segment of the passage. Here, Shipp references many of his previous arguments. He finally draws on his earlier discussions to explain how the mythological imagery in Isaiah 14:4b–21 relates to kingship, especially dirges for dead kings, and “was borrowed and significantly transformed by the mashal in order to mock the tyrant and expel him to the lowest possible pit in Sheol, where he would enjoy neither position, nor authority, nor even royal regalia or comfort” (166). In Isaiah, the king is described as attempting to ascend (like the myth of Etana), commenting on his presumption and arrogance, and contrasting with his descent to the lowest part of the underworld where the rephaim only stare instead of welcoming him. Instead of lamenting for the king, the people and trees rejoice. The king is described as not being buried and instead of a new king being appointed, the kings’ sons are sacrificed. Shipp systematically addresses the layout and mythological elements of a dirge and how each is parodied in Isaiah 14:4b–21. He is, in this point, successful and persuasive.

Shipp’s contribution to our understanding of this text seems to be in viewing the passage as an interaction between myth, mashal, and dirge. While the passage has been examined as a mashal and as a dirge and some of the mythological motifs within it have been recognized, no analysis of the text has recognized each of these components and their coalescence within the text. Shipp’s analysis helps to clarify this complicated text’s meaning. For example, viewing the text as the parody of a dirge makes the mythological elements within it more clear: the rejoicing of the cedars of Lebanon becomes significant historically (several Assyrian kings record hewing cedars or receiving cedars in tribute), politically (cedars are representative of the leaders of nations), and mythologically (by transforming an image commonly used in lament and praise of a dead king to rejoice over and mock a living king) (142–49). This proves to be an extremely valuable and compelling approach.

While I found this book an ultimately valuable read, both the disorder of the overall argument and the presentation of specific data made it a difficult one. In every section, Shipp introduced texts, cited them, and then moved on—often without any synthesis of the data whatsoever. I would have found this extremely helpful. Without commentary on his evidence, his specific arguments were sometimes almost incoherent (see, e.g., 49–50, 70, 78, 84–85, 93, 114, etc.).

Also, Shipp doesn’t adequately address the issue of transmission or propinquity. What is the significance of the Mesopotamian evidence without an
established, or at the very least assumed, framework for their interaction? He remains largely silent on this point, with a sentence on page 97 the only real reference: “The Legend of Etana itself may provide some startling parallels to the text of Isa 14 and mythopoeic imagery from which Isaiah or one of his disciples could have drawn, parallels which have gone largely unnoticed.” It is unclear what he means by Isaiah or his disciples “drawing on parallels” and how he proposes this would have occurred. In order to accept his argument, this point must somehow be addressed.

While the bulk of it lacked a certain care for the reader, the bookends of the piece—the introduction and exegesis—were excellent and insightful. I would recommend the first, fifth, and sixth chapters as great reading for anyone interested in this passage or myth in the Bible.

ANGELA WAGNER
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Amidst a sea of spilt ink, stemming from scholars of drastically disparate opinions over the validity of the category “Gnosticism,” author David Brakke has sought to make method out of the madness by taking a middle positioned approach in his The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity. Up until now, this “middle of the road” approach has been the road less traveled. On the one hand, he neither concludes that the Gnostics were an unwieldy conglomerate of groups that were typologized by believing in a lower creator God, salvation by gnosis, or anthropological dualism (42), and on the other hand, he does not conclude that the category of the “Gnostic school of thought” should be dismantled entirely. Rather, the group that has traditionally been labeled as “Sethian Gnosticism” is in fact the only sectarian group that can be properly labeled “Gnostic”—thus the superfluous qualifier “Sethian” should be abandoned. Brakke comes to this conclusion through a careful criticism of the evidence as given by Irenaeus and Porphyry. Because these sources identify the texts of The Secret Book According to John, Zostrianos, The Foreigner, the Book of Zoroaster, and the Gospel of Judas as belonging to the Gnostics, Brakke has used the former and latter types of evidences to reconstruct a universal Gnostic myth, rather than a typology. It is a “sacred story,” which includes details “of
origins, fall, . . . salvation” and a “shared ritual”(44). The shared Gnostic myth and its accompanying ritual become both the dovetail and the touchstone for identifying and linking other Gnostic texts together. For Brakke, it is the myth that matters—the texts always trump the typologies.

The original ideas which later evolved into Brakke’s The Gnostics resulted from an article which he wrote for the Cambridge History of Christianity called “Self Differentiation among Christian Groups: The Gnostics and Their Opponents.” He acknowledges that many of the ideas presented in his book have been highly influenced by Bentley Layton, as well as the approaches used by Mark Edwards, and Alastair Logan (x–xi).

Brakke initially begins his study by providing the reader with a useful survey of how scholars have approached the diversity of early Christianities in the past. In particular, he illustrates how they have dealt with the category of Gnosticism, and how this understanding has evolved to the present state of scholarship (ch.1). It is pointed out that when scholars put many diverse groups under the same category of “Gnosticism,” and even argue for it being a separate religion, they both pass on Irenaeus’ categorization, and surpass his generalizations (4). Scholars should differentiate between modern constructs such as typologies and categories, and the ancient communities themselves (5). Brakke’s book handles this differentiation well. The book gets past rigid categorizations and shows the continual process of transformation and creation within early Christianities, while at the same time not leaving a picture of Christianity as a nebulous “soup of hybridity” (15). In this process Brakke cites statements from Irenaeus and Tertullian to show that the Valentinians and the Gnostics were two separate groups.

In chapter three Brakke begins explaining the Gnostic myth based on an evaluation of the relevant evidence which was mentioned previously. It is not meant to be an exhaustive study which grapples with all the issues scholars are currently seeking to understand, but rather seeks to illustrate what the general Gnostic myth entailed. Brakke describes the Gnostic myth as having less to do with “dualism, alienation, esotericism,” and more to do with the knowledge that Christ imparts which delivers the soul from the clutches of “evil forces” (53). His description of the myth which describes the origins of man, the aeons, the world, and the return of the soul follows the basic outline which has been previously attributed to the so called “Sethians” (ch. 3). In conjunction with the Gnostic myth, Brakke believes that these texts were accompanied by rituals of baptism and ascent. While these rituals cannot be proven, nor identified with any certainty, the texts do seem to indicate that these rituals were actually performed and had some generally identifiable features. Some of the rituals
which may have been used include the following: receiving the name of Seth upon the water of baptism, hymnic responses, stripping, washing, enrobing, anointing, enthroning, and being caught up into “the luminous places of that person’s kinship” (74–75). There is also some debate over the meaning of the famous five Gnostic seals. Based on evidence from the First Thought, Brakke posits that the five seals might correspond to an anointing of the five senses of the “eyes, ears, hands, mouth, and nose” (75). Though the details of these rituals cannot be proven with certainty, Brakke demonstrates that the rituals of baptism and ascent were probably practiced by the Gnostics in conjunction with their sacred myth. Following this description of the Gnostic myth and rituals, Brakke gives a general overview of the history of early Christianities. In particular he describes the roles played by Justin Martyr, Valentinus, and Marcion. He states his conclusions pithily in the following manner, “there was no single ‘Church’ that could accept or reject anything, nor was there a multi-form heresy called ‘Gnosticism’ to be accepted or rejected” (113)

The final chapter (5) of The Gnostics brings the previous statement to fruition. In it Brakke compares and contrasts the beliefs and strategies of self-differentiation used by Irenaeus, Valentinus, and Clement of Alexandria. The several groups represented by these leaders used competitive modes of self-differentiation such as various appeals to “teaching authority,” “embryonic canons,” “allegorical methods of interpreting scripture”, rules “of faith”/truth, “heresiology”/marginalizing opponents, and the “withdrawal of communion” as a means to “invent and reinvent Christianity” (132). Brakke is careful to show that each person, and by implication the groups they represented, had many similarities as well as dissimilarities. Even opponents such as Irenaeus and the “Gnostics” had much more in common than each would care to admit. Though these groups all considered themselves Christian, there was no universal church. Furthermore, Brakke argues that for the same reasons that a wide ranging modern category such as “Gnosticism” is flawed, so also the term “proto-orthodoxy” lacks nuance, and does not recognize the great dissimilarities that existed between the so-called “proto-orthodox” proponents such as Irenaeus and Clement (133).

The Gnostics should prove to be a useful tool to both experts and students in the field of Christianity. Because of the complexity and paucity of the available evidence, Brakke should be commended for his keen attention to detail, and his ability to create a perspicuous presentation of the Gnostics. The book is careful in its use of terminology, and demonstrates some of the problems which can be created when scholars broadly employ categorical terms such as “Gnosticism”, “Sethianism” and “proto-orthodoxy.” Indeed, the book’s great
strengths may also be its weakness. The student is left to contemplate that history is so much more nuanced and less understood than our broad categories lead us to believe, yet the lacunae of history require historians to use categories. With the increased knowledge that comes from more narrowly and accurately defined categories (such as “Gnosticism”), other areas which were previously subsumed under these categories are now exposed and need further discussion. In this process, the old questions are answered but the new remain unanswered—producing a bewildering combination of joy and frustration. Credit is due for such a thought provoking and careful historical reconstruction of the “Gnostics.”

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