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“New Observations on Scribal Activity in the Ancient Near East.”

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EMERGING PRACTICES IN TEXTUAL STUDIES

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Living in an age of microchips and monitors, one might think that the ancient eras that saw the heyday of the stylus share nothing in common with our baud-rate generation. Yet, as Edward Mendelson wrote in a report on Web sites created by Benedictine monks,

the relations between modern Web sites and medieval scriptoria, or writing rooms, is even closer than these monks may have guessed. The technology that connects millions of pages on the World Wide Web derives ultimately from techniques invented by the scribes and scholars who copied out the Bible more than a thousand years ago.1

Mendelson's report focused primarily on the similarity of biblical cross-referencing systems to Web links, but it also offered new ways of looking at the role of media within the matrix of ancient scribal culture:

The marginal references to the Bible and the hyperlinks of the World Wide Web may be the only two systems ever invented that give concrete expression to the idea that everything in the world hangs together—that every event, every fact, every datum is connected to every other. Where the two systems differ drastically is in what their connections mean.2

Mendelson's remark illustrates how cybermedia have forced us to rethink both modern and ancient text-related issues and suggests that these two types of issues may not be altogether dissimilar or, at least, unworthy of comparison. Indeed, I would suggest that our modern experiences as technophiles offer new insights into issues of text and context in scribal systems antedating even the Middle Ages.

In this essay, I would like to take a step in this direction by examining scribal activities in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Israel from the standpoint of the following cyberinduced issues: the cultural context of, and attitudes toward, script and various textual media; the
formative role of a script and the physical medium in shaping the cultural conception of language; the cultural significance of the compositional structure of various written media; and the cognitive function of images as text. My remarks will be exploratory and will remain cursory but will, I hope, suggest new avenues for research.

I begin with the general ancient Near Eastern cultural context of script and the textual medium, a context that cannot be understood without acknowledgment of the ancient widespread belief in the inherent power of words, both human and divine. As Georges Contenau has written,

"...the belief in the written and spoken power of words derives, ultimately, not from a courtly social matrix, where a king's word was law, but rather from religious associations attached to the very invention of writing. In the earliest texts from ancient Sumer (ca. 3300 B.C.E.), we find a pictographic cuneiform (or "wedge-writing") system employed to record the daily activities of religious authorities who were concerned foremost with the number of sacrificial animals and foodstuffs brought to the temple. The pictographic script gradually would become syllabically oriented over the next five hundred years, but would forever retain its connection to the images that the original signs represented. By 2500 B.C.E. this system had become rich in what we would call "literary" allusive sophistication and was employed by a variety of different language groups. Throughout the more than three-thousand-year history of Mesopotamia, both writing and reciting constituted sacred acts, and the highly protected technological privilege of a select few who were not just scholars but also magicians, physicians, and priests. Thus in second-millennium documents we hear that writing is the "cosmic bond of all things" and the secret of scribes and gods. In fact, the Mesopotamian gods also kept ledgers, or "tablets of life," on which they inscribed the destinies of individuals. Moreover, the Mesopotamian creation myth Enuma Elish, which was recited during a ritual enactment of the myth on the fourth day of the new year festival, begins with an act of speaking that brings all things into existence.

Writing appeared in Egypt around 3000 B.C.E., in the form of the hieroglyphic script, a writing system that worked on phonetic, syllabic, and logographic levels. Though genetically unrelated to the Mesopotamian system, hieroglyphic Egyptian similarly expanded, over time, its repertoire of signs while retaining and multiplying their visual associations. The pictographic nature of the script permitted scribes to write in multiple directions: right to left, left to right, even top to bottom, and sometimes alternately left to right and then right to left, in "boustrophedon" (literally, "as the ox plows") fashion. Also, as in the Mesopotamian system, hieroglyphs were the tools of an elite priesthood expert in medicine and magic. The scribes guarded and boasted of their technological secrets, with a zeal that rivals even Microsoft. Writing was, to use the Egyptian expression, "the words of the gods" (mdw-ntr), and the scribal art was to the Egyptians an occupation without equal. The ibis-headed god Thoth is credited with the invention of writing and is said to be "excellent of magic" and "Lord of hieroglyphs." He appears writing the hieroglyphic feather sign representing the word Ma'at, which stands for the cosmic force of equilibrium by which kings keep their thrones and justice prevails. The link between writing and Ma'at suggests that Egyptian scribes viewed the scribal art as integral to maintaining this cosmic equilibrium.

The spoken word was equally potent in Egypt. Exeoration and prophetic texts abound and bespeak a belief in the efficacy of spoken words. The oracular use of speech is evident in the term for the Egyptian temple's innermost sanctum or, literally, "the Mouth of the House" (r3-pr). The written and spoken word similarly play prominent roles in the Egyptian description of creation.

The Hebrew Bible displays a belief in the power of words similar to the belief evidenced in Egyptian and Mesopotamian records. This is not surprising, since Israel became a cultural conduit and receptacle for Egyptian and Mesopotamian influences, and since in Canaan (which eventually would become the land of Israel) writing first appeared in cuneiform script. Even as the Israelites rejected parts of the cosmopolitan culture they inherited, the belief in the power of words prevailed. Thus, while the biblical legal code states that the Israelites rejected all forms of magical praxis and divination, the very presence of laws prohibiting such practices, and references to speech and words found elsewhere in the Bible, imply a belief in the power of words on a par with..."
Mesopotamian and Egyptian dogmata. Also, God’s creation in Genesis takes place by fiat, and the Israelite holy of holies is called a "dwir", a word derived from the Hebrew root for "speaking." A belief in the power of words explains why the prophets often speak in the past tense about events they predict for the future. Once spoken, an event is as good as realized. The written word apparently was no less important, for as the God of Israel informs Moses in Exodus 32:33, “Whoever has sinned respecting me, him will I blot out from my text [sepher].” Job, too, cries out, “Oh that my words were written! Oh that my words were inscribed in a text [sepher]” (Job 19:23).

Despite their obvious differences, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Israelite cultures had in common a conception of words as vehicles of power, of creation by fiat, and of the oracular use of written and spoken words. This observation greatly affects how we understand the written words that these cultures have left us. What we label “literary” or “rhetorical” was to them a deployment of power—of divine and, in many cases, magical import—as demonstrated by the ubiquitous appearance of wordplay in these texts. Since words are deemed loci of power, puns and paronomasia must have more power because they magnify meaning through association. In the Mesopotamian and Egyptian scripts, wordplay often takes place purely on a visual level, suggesting that the visual dimension of the sign, like the spoken word, conveys power. Drawing on techonomargan, we might say that written puns provide multiple links. Other devices, such as chiasm, acrostics, and parallelism, might not be mere embellishments but rather manifestations of divinity and vehicles by which scribes harnessed the power of words.

The power of images extended beyond the script to iconography and the plastic arts. In Egypt, for example, sculptures also read as hieroglyphic signs, and drawings functioned as tools of magic. This is why Egyptian pharaohs wore sandals with soles that depicted the ritual annihilation of their enemies. By placing their feet beneath their feet, they could magically trample them daily. Since art was language in Egypt, drawings and sculptures also carried verbal dimensions. The name, being essentially a word, was also a locus of power that could be handled in written form only by experts familiar with the dangers of this power. This is why pharaohs possessed one secret name, and why cartouches were essentially hieroglyphs bound by the magical power of a knotted rope. We also see the belief in a tie between one’s name and one’s existence in usurping pharaohs’ blotting of their predecessors’ names from inscriptions.

The belief in the power of words, despite its importance, is seldom incorporated into studies on ancient writing and literacy, yet even a scribal error, an accidental slip of the stylus, could have devastating consequences. An accurate memory is everything, copying is sacred, and knowledge of the associative subtleties embedded in a text is tantamount to secret knowledge of the divine. The richer the allusive language, the more portents embedded in the text—or, in cyberlanguage, the more links embedded in a text, the more influential it is.

Our experiences with cybermedia, especially because we are biased users of particular platforms, also urge us to explore the various physical media to which ancient scribes committed their words and their cultural attitudes. For the Mesopotamians, the medium of choice was clay. Most of the writings that have survived, ranging from administrative and divinatory texts to poems and paeans, are in clay. There are a few documents in other materials, such as stone, but stone was not native to Mesopotamia (or to Egypt, for that matter), and so such materials were reserved for monumental inscriptions.

While clay as a writing medium might appear a mundane topic, documented religious beliefs about clay allow us to appreciate more fully the Mesopotamian scribes’ approach to their material. It is of import, for example, that the Mesopotamians saw clay as the medium with which the gods mixed blood to form the first living mortal. The placental afterbirth also was called “clay,” and the expression “baked brick” was an idiomatic term for “newborn,” similar to the vulgar English idiom “bun in the oven,” equating the womb with a heat source. Clay is also the material that the Mesopotamians used to build their homes. Thus it is the material of creation, both for gods and for humans. When a scribe impressed a stylus into moist clay, he was, in a sense, participating in creation. He was giving form to language.

Several other examples can be mentioned that reveal the intimate connections among architecture, creation, and language in Mesopotamian culture. Ea, the god of magic, is said to have “built” his words, and the gods did not “create” humans but rather “built” them (as we find also in the book of Genesis 2:22, in connection with Eve). We also find in Mesopotamia the use of clay cones inscribed with prayers and temple dedications. These cones were driven into temple walls and sometimes buried in the cornerstone of buildings, much like modern time-capsules. They were rarely intended for human eyes, and, once set into temple walls, would become the words that magically held the temple together and gave it longevity. If the medium is the message, then in ancient Mesopotamia the message was constructive; it was creation.
and verses comprising a particular ritual text may be not so much a function of space considerations as a consequence of cultural conceptions of certain numbers. For example, the Mesopotamian creation account was neatly composed on seven tablets, and seven was a well-known sacred number in Mesopotamia. I am reminded of the rabbinic observation that the first line in the biblical creation of Genesis begins with seven words, the number seven playing a prominent structural role in that composition. The Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh was redacted into twelve tablets that possibly correspond to the sexagesimal system of the Mesopotamians. It is of note that the scribe who redacted the epic came from a family of exorcists steeped in the magical sciences. I could cite other ancient Near Eastern texts, both biblical and extrabiblical, that illustrate such numerically allusive compositional structures.

In line with this observation is the use of numbers to represent words and names, a practice that appeared first in Mesopotamia and, later, in the rabbinic interpretive strategy known as Gematria. In Mesopotamia this practice was not literary whimsy; it was how divine secrets were derived from texts. Many gods' names also can be read as numbers; thus the number thirty may be read as Sin the moon god; Ishtar, as fifteen; Enlil, as fifty; and so on. The connection of deities to numbers is widespread and perhaps helps us to understand the numerical significance of later non-Mesopotamian divinities, such as the God of Israel, who, we are told in Deuteronomy 6:4, is One. It also may explain the preoccupation that later Jewish scribes, such as the Masoretes, had in the ninth century C.E. with counting all the words and verses in the Bible. In fact, the tradition of counting letters and words must be far more ancient than the Masoretes, for it is embedded in the very word šopher, "scribe"—literally "one who counts," or who "gives an account" as we might say.

Finally, our inquiry into ancient cyphersesque conceptions of media naturally leads us to an examination of images as text. Throughout the Near East we find a fascinating conceptual correspondence between pictures and writing, surpassing even the power of a Nike symbol. In Egypt, the word fti means not only "written words" or "letters" but also an "artistic image," "form," or "sign." To Egyptians, the sculpted image of a god was both an image and a living word. Thus the New Kingdom book of the dead depicts the weighing of the pharaoh's heart against the feather of truth (Ma'at) but would never show Pharaoh's heart tipping the scales. Had the scribe illustrated this, Pharaoh would not have entered into the afterlife, since the images enscripted Pharaoh's future.

Within the broader cultural conception of word as image and its association with creation, the Israelites appear somewhat anomalous, since...
the Bible’s ten commandments specifically prohibit the creation of
given images but demand the transmission of divine knowledge by
way of the written and spoken words. Moreover, although the Hebrew
word for an alphabetic letter (א) also means “sign, portent,” the Bible
nowhere connects the two semantic ranges or attaches religious import
way of the written and spoken words. Moreover, although the Hebrew
graven images but demand the transmission of divine knowledge by
word for an alphabetic letter

to particular letters outside the tetragrammaton, or sacred name of God,
Yahweh. I believe that this puzzle can be solved, at least in part, with
acknowledgment of the generative role that the sacred script (and, in
the case of the Israelites, a consonantal script) played in ancient Near
Eastern religions. Although the Hebrew script evolved from pictographic
signs,42 and the Old Canaanite script that preceded it had adopted the
directional flexibility of hieroglyphic Egyptian, by the time of the Israelites
it had lost its pictographic associations, and its direction had become
fixed. Thus its associative dimension was limited to such sound devices
as paronomasia; and, by contrast with the Egyptian and Mesopotamian
conceptions of writing as an act of creation, the book of Genesis reports
creation as solely an oral work, even though later Jewish tradition recalls
the role of the alphabet in the creative process.43 I cannot help wondering
if the nonpictographic script played a partial role in shaping the
ancient Israelite conception of creation.

Since I have written at length about ancient scribes, it is only appro-
perate that I conclude by quoting one of them. The citation comes to us
from the stylus of a nameless Egyptian master of script, and although
it was written at a time and in a place wholly foreign to us, it reminds
our tech-savvy world that the utility of technology depends upon the
quality of its use, and that its quality provides for its own legacy. Here
are the words of the sage:

As for the erudite scribes from the time of those who lived after the
gods, they could prophesy what was to come, their names have become
eternal, [and though] they are no more, they finished their lives, and
all their relatives have been forgotten. They did not make for them-
selves pyramids of metal, with coffins of iron. They were not able to
leave heirs in children, pronouncing their names, but they made heirs
of themselves in the writings and in [the scrolls of wisdom] which they
composed.44

NOTES


2. Ibid.

University of California, Berkeley, 1996); J. N. Lawson, "Mesopotamian Proverbs to the Stoic
Approaches to Inter-cultural Influences, Melantrich Symposium II (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text
Corpus Project, 2001), 68–91.

164.

5. For the development of writing and its relationship to "magic," see Jean Bottéro,
Mesopotamian Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992);
Jean Bottéro, "Symptômes, signes, écritures en Mésopotamie ancienne," in J. P. Vernat et al.,


8. See, e.g., the famous Egyptian texts known as "The Satire on the Trades" and "In Praise
of Learned Scribes," translated in James B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the

9. For the connections among writing, speech, and "magic," see Robert Kriech Ritner, The
Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, no. 54
(Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1993). The importance of writing also
is seen in the word ḭb, "knowledge," which contains the papyrus scroll determinative.

10. On the possible origin of the deity Thoth, see Carleton T. Hodges, "Thoth and Oral
Tradition," in Mary Ritchie Key and Henry M. Hoenigswald, eds., General and Americana
Egyptologists: In Remembrance of Stanley N. Newman (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1985), 407–16; for more about Thoth, see also Ritner, Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice, 35. On
Maʿat, see Jan Assmann, Maʿat: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Agypten (Munich-Verlag
C. H. Beck, 1990) and, more recently, Emily Teeter, The Presentation of Maʿat: Ritual and Legitimacy
in Ancient Egypt, Studies in Oriental Civilization, no. 57 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the
University of Chicago, 1997).

11. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, Ägyptisches Handwörterbuch (Hildesheim: Georg
Olms Verlag, 1995), 92.

12. Cf. the role of the scribal god Thoth in the Memphis Theology.

13. A. Leo Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1977), 236.

14. See, e.g., I. Rabanowitz, A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel's Perception of Literature and
the Resultant Hebrew Bible (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993).

15. Contra Francis Brown et al., eds., A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), who propose an Arabic cognate (dabara). For the connections

16. Cf. the role of the scribal god Thoth in the Memphis Theology.

17. A. Leo Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1977), 236.

Jewish Bible Quarterly 24:2 (1996), 82–89; Scott B. Noegel, "Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary
Significance: Part II," Jewish Bible Quarterly 24:3 (1996), 160–66; Scott B. Noegel "Atbash in

19. See, e.g., Carleton T. Hodges, "Ritual and Writing: An Inquiry into the Origin of Egyptian
Script," in M. Diano Krocke et al., eds., Linguistics and Anthropology: In Honor of C. F. Vogelin

SCRIBAL ACTIVITY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
Scott B. Noegel

Akkadian Poetic Texts; see, provisionally, Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "Fugal Features of Atra-Hasis: The Birth Theme," in M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, eds., Mesopotamian Poetic Language Sumerian and Akkadian: Cuneiform Monographs, no. 6 (Groningen: Syntax Publications, 1976), 127-39. We might add to this the so-called acrostics, which are found in the Bible and in Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature (see n. 20 above). For the use of numbers in biblical and rabbinic compositions see Robert Gordis, Poets, Prophets, and Sages: Essays in Biblical Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 95-103.


31. See, e.g., the remark about Ea, god of magic, in Enuma Elish XI: 175-76 mumma su 7iE amantu ibann[u] (lit.) "Who other than Ea can build word / ideas?"

32. Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, 234-35.

33. Papyrus was associated with the Delitan cosmology of the god Ptah, who created all life from a primordial papyrus thicket. Some Egyptian myths did involve clay, such as the myth of Khnum, a ram-headed god responsible for making humankind on a potter's wheel. Nevertheless, it is Ptah and papyrus that concern us here.

34. Cited in the Tanah Barai Meg 3:8 (76b), 1:29, 13, which refers to Moses' Song at the Sea in Exodus 15 as composed of alternating strophes of "one-half brick over a whole brick, and a whole brick over a half-brick."

35. Cf. Isaiah 34:4, "All the hosts of heaven shall dwindle away, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll [apex]."

36. E.g., ladet, "cut"; kiqep, "engrave"; and katab, "inscribe." The latter covers not only writing with ink but also inscribing; see, e.g., Exodus 31:18 and Isaiah 44:5.

37. Note also the semantic range of the Hebrew word bâqâ', which means "house" as well as "dynasty, family."

38. This does not rule out, of course, the possibility that the animals from which parchment was made possessed a sacred significance in the period before the Israelites began to use the material.


40. Note that 1:21 is written with the determinatives wswr and wmswr, "magical eye of Horus," and the papyrus scroll.

41. The discovery in October 1999 at Wadi el-Hol, Egypt, of an early alphabetic script related to the inscriptional hieratic of early Middle Kingdom Egypt may shed light on this issue. Several of the letterforms discovered there relate closely to those in the so-called proto-Sinaitic script, found several centuries later in the Sinai.

42. See, e.g., the explanation of the raised letter he- in 1:10, "with the he . . . he created them [the heavens and the earth]" (Midrash Rabbah 7:10).