

Prof. Scott B. Noegel  
Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization  
University of Washington

**Book review:**

**Bar, Shaul. *A Letter That Has Not Been Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible.*  
Transl. Lenn J. Schramm. Monographs of the Hebrew Union College, 25.  
Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2001.**

**First Published in:**

*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2002), 120-123.

order and have no further relevance or cross-references within the text. The original field numbers are retained for artifact identification, maps, and all text discussion. Thus the numbering concordance (p. xviii) comes in very handy.

In volume 2, the authors have not included the brief introduction to the site and the history of its excavations found in volume 1, but have repeated only the technical information necessary for full comprehension of the grave catalogue entries. Unfortunately, they have also chosen not to repeat the full bibliography, but list only those publications that have appeared since 1993. To this list should now be added K. Kroeper, "Corpus of Potmarks and Inscriptions from the Pre/Early Dynastic Cemetery at Minshat Abu Omar (Northeastern Delta, Egypt)," in *Recent Research Into the Stone Age of Northeastern Africa*, ed. Lech Krzyzaniak, Karla Kroeper, and Michal Kobusiewicz (Poznan, 2000), 187-218. This article discusses the potmarks recovered from several of the graves covered in this volume.

The main body of the volume describes ninety graves from the mid-southern section of the cemetery. The data is presented in a lucid fashion with a minimum of interpretation. This and its accompanying volumes are meant to be, and certainly will be, a resource from which future researchers can collect and arrange the information for their own specific purposes. However, some choices have been made that perhaps make this resource less useful than it might have been. Each grave description includes a line drawing of the grave, obviously derived from a photograph, the main purpose of which is to show the position of the grave goods. The human remains are poorly drawn and do not provide graphic correspondence to the extremely brief description of the body positioning given in the text, nor do they give a full indication of the level of skeletal preservation upon which sex and age determinations were made. The high-quality photographs are often far more informative, but these too are concerned mainly to show the position of the grave goods.

Although they do discuss the problem briefly in the text description, the authors have also chosen to remove from these drawings graphic indication of disturbance by the later graves of Graeco-Roman date as well as, and most interestingly, by later Predynastic and Early Dynastic interments. Some information may be gleaned from plates 3, 14, 19, 43, 49ab, 51, but the fold-out plans published on the front and back covers of the 1985 publication give the best graphic account of the degree of later disturbance and destruction. These plans also show how difficult it must have been to excavate this cemetery and how hard won the information the excavators have been able to collect. Nevertheless, the notation on disturbance in the text is insufficient to determine its degree and location, and without this information it is difficult to assess the integrity of the grave assemblage, whether the graves have been plundered, or whether the excavated condition and position of the body is the result of manipulation after burial. It is hoped that

a more extensive discussion of the taphonomy of the graves will be forthcoming in the final volume.

A drawing and/or photograph of almost every object is provided, accompanied by a verbal description. For the pottery in particular, the authors have employed verbal descriptions of the forms based on geometric solids and specific examples of rim and lip shapes. They make reference neither to other published typologies or traditional corpora, nor to their own site-based corpus, initially presented in 1985. The point and success of this choice remains to be determined when the Conclusions volume is published. Yet one cannot fail to notice how relatively limited the chronological group MAO I (late Predynastic Naqada IIc-d) assemblage appears to be, and cannot but think that even a rudimentary typology would have saved ink and facilitated tabulation and comparison of the grave contents.

A table at the back of this volume (pp. 176-77) provides a breakdown of the contents of each grave but curiously not its relative date. Here at a glance one can see which graves have discoloration caused by organic linings, burials on the right or left side, direction of head, sex, age, number of grave goods, number of ceramics with special mention of imports and potmarks, number of stone vessels, stone objects, palettes, metal, jewelry, and minerals. It serves as a very useful index to the volume; however note the following errors: publication numbers 118 and 120, 130 and 131 have been transposed; for publication number 190 read 192; for 191 read 193, for 192 read 190, and for 193 read 191. The especially interesting graves can be found quickly from this table, and include the five that contained imported Canaanite pottery, the eight graves with copper objects, including two harpoons, and grave 145 (224) with its ripple flake knife and perform macehead.

Minshat Abu Omar is a cemetery of extreme importance, the full measure of which we look forward to assessing as future volumes of this fine series appear.

RENÉE FRIEDMAN

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

---

*A Letter that Has Not been Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible.* By SHAUL BAR; translated by LENN J. SCHRAMM. Monographs of the Hebrew Union College, vol. 25. Cincinnati: HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS, 2001. Pp. xii + 257. \$39.95.

The subject of Near Eastern dreams has received scholarly attention for some time,<sup>1</sup> but recent years have seen a resur-

---

<sup>1</sup> See, most famously, A. Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of the*

gent interest in the topic. In part, this is due to the appearance of previously unpublished texts,<sup>2</sup> a desire to update available resources on the subject,<sup>3</sup> and the current prevailing academic preference for comparative interdisciplinary work that is now helping to move the study of ancient dreams beyond its hitherto nearly entirely descriptive mode.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, some scholars (I include myself here) have attempted to investigate the

ancient Near Eastern dream materials from a variety of different methodological perspectives,<sup>5</sup> but not all approaches have met with success.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the study of ancient dream materials continues to provide insights into the ancient world. It is within this context that I place the book under review, and it is within this context that this book unfortunately falls considerably short.

*Assyrian Dream Book* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956). Prior to Oppenheim, most research in this area focused on the Bible and Talmud. See, e.g., S. Wolffsohn, *Die Oneirologie im Talmud, oder der Traum in der Bibel als Ursache und Wirkung nach der Auffassung des Talmuds* (Breslau: F. W. Jungfer, 1874); A. Löwinger, *Der Traum in der jüdischen Literatur* (Leipzig: M. W. Kaufmann, 1908); Alexander Kristianpoller, *Monumenta Talmudica: Traum und Traumdeutung* (Vienna: Benjamin Harz, 1923); Alfred Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination among the Hebrews and Other Semites* (London: Hodder, 1938); Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich, *Der Traum im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> S. A. L. Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Marie Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives in the Biblical World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), published originally as "Songe," in *Supplément au dictionnaire de la Bible XII* (1996). See also Husser, *Le songe et la parole: Étude sur le rêve et sa fonction dans l'ancien Israël* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994); André Caquot, "Les songes et leur interprétation selon Canaan et Israël," in *Les songes et leur interprétation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959), 101–24; Robert Karl Gnuse, *Dreams and Dream Reports in the Writings of Josephus: A Traditio-Historical Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Scott B. Noegel, "Dreams and Dream Interpreters in Mesopotamia and in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)," in *Dreams and Dreaming: A Reader in Religion, Anthropology, History, and Psychology*, ed. Gayatri Patnaik (Hampshire: Palgrave-St. Martin's Press, 2001), 45–71.

<sup>4</sup> Representative examples include Frederick Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and its Near Eastern Environment: A Socio-Historical Investigation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Joel Sweek, "Dreams of Power from Sumer to Judah: An Essay on the Divinatory Economy of the Ancient Near East" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996); Kelly Bulkeley, "The 'Evil' Dream of Gilgamesh: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Dreams in Mythological Texts," in *The Dream and the Text: Essays on Literature and Language*, ed. Carol Schreier Rupprecht (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993), 159–77; Kasia Szpakowska, "The Perception of Dreams and Nightmares in Ancient Egypt: Old Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 2000).

Bar opens his book by asserting the utility of Oppenheim's now well-known dream typology that divides dreams essentially into two groups: "message dreams," in which a god or important figure appears in a dream and delivers an auditory message to the dreamer (often to legitimate, support, or ease the political, national, or military concerns of the dreamer); and "symbolic dreams," in which dreamers witness enigmatic visual images that require an interpreter. Oppenheim also suggested that we classify separately as "mantic" or "prophetic" those dreams that involve prognostication, though Bar applies the designation "prophetic dreams" to Oppenheim's "message dream" category. Taking this slightly revised typology as a point of departure, Bar then devotes his first two chapters to the Bible's message and symbolic dreams. Here one can find discussions on the etymology of the Hebrew word for dream (חלום), the formal literary features of theophanies and dreams, and the various reactions to theophoric dreams.

Bar's second and third chapters examine the symbolic dreams of Joseph (Genesis 37–50), pharaoh's butler and baker (Gen 40:5–16), pharaoh himself (Genesis 41), and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2, 4). Also included is a brief discussion of literary reactions to the Bible's symbolic dreams, the etymology of the Hebrew verbs used for oneirocriticism (פטר, פשר), and the various titles that designate Near Eastern oneirocritics. Bar compares the latter titles to those found in the book of Daniel, and concludes with a look at the Bible's literary portrayals of symbolic dreams of the light of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Talmudic dream books.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., the works of Cryer, Jeffers, Sweek, Bulkeley, and myself cited in the preceding notes.

<sup>6</sup> Various psychoanalytic approaches have been notoriously unsuccessful. See R. K. Gnuse, *The Dream Theophany of Samuel: Its Structure in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Dreams and Its Theological Significance* (Lanham, Md., 1984), 57–59; Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives*, 96–99; and the still valid reservations of Oppenheim, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 185. John C. Lamoreaux, "Dream Interpretation in the Early Medieval Near East" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1999), has also shown how such an approach has little utility when applied to the study of ancient cultural views on dreaming. Literary approaches also have not met with success. See also Sweek, "Dreams of Power," and Scott B. Noegel, *Nocturnal Secret Ciphers: The Punning Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (forthcoming).

Chapters four and five examine the perceptions of dreams in prophetic and wisdom literature (including the Bible's descriptions of dreams as false prophecies and ephemeral experiences, and as conduits of divine communication). Also considered is the relationship between dreams and visions as exemplified in Genesis 15; 46:1–5; Num 12:6–8; 22–24; and 1 Samuel 3, and a brief examination of the etymology of the Hebrew word for "vision" (חִזְיוֹן).

Bar's concluding chapter focuses on the intent of the dream stories found in Gen 28:10–22 (Jacob), Genesis 37–50 (Joseph), 1 Kgs 3:3–15 (Solomon), and Daniel 2, 4 (Daniel). According to Bar, each of these pericopes possessed an ideological function. Jacob's dream served to sanctify the site of Bethel in the light of its Canaanite associations, the dreams of Joseph and Daniel demonstrated Yahweh's control of Israelite destiny, and Solomon's dream served to legitimate his rule. A brief bibliography then follows.

In all respects this book is a survey. There is little in it that is new or insightful. In addition, there are a number of methodological problems that beset this work, not the least of which is the author's uncritical acceptance of the aforementioned typology, a typology that has been severely challenged in recent years. A number of scholars have observed, for example, how this typology makes no distinction between literary and historical texts, and that not every dream account fits neatly into one of the two (or three) categories.

Though his focus is on the Bible's dream materials, Bar does include comparative data from Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Talmudic, and midrashic sources. I greatly value the integration of rich comparative work, but Bar's use of these sources contributes little to what was already known from earlier works on dreams. His analyses are brief and he rarely provides a discussion of the significance of common features, or of the implications that shared taxonomies might have for the history of Israelite or later rabbinic views on dreams.

Moreover, Bar treats the comparative texts with little regard to the specific cultural matrices in which they were written. He cites midrashic or Talmudic texts as a means of accentuating our understanding of biblical dreams, but his discussions appear to assume that identical social settings produced both corpora. Thus, though Bar concludes that the Talmud and the Bible's prophetic corpora register an ambivalence toward dreams as reliable media of divine communication (p. 220), he does not explain why the ancient Israelites or the rabbis of late antiquity preserved this ambivalence or why it should have existed in the first place. Indeed, if such an ambivalence existed in ancient Israelite prophetic circles, what does this tell us about the social environment of Israelite prophetic schools, or about the biblical texts that register only positive attitudes toward dreams? Such questions are beyond the aim of the book, which is content to move descriptively from one topic to the next.

The reader too might be content to move through the catalogue of dream texts, were it not for the book's general lack of methodological rigor and apparent ignorance of a number of relevant scholarly works. Encapsulating these problems is one of the author's conclusions:

... dream interpretation was considered to be a magical art in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In the world of Scriptures, however, only Joseph and Daniel are mentioned as dream interpreters, and there is not a single biblical narrative in which a man of God interprets the dream of a commoner. (p. 107)

Bar's use of the expression "world of Scripture" blurs a critical distinction between Israelite culture (and presumably late antique rabbinic culture) and the biblical canon, an often polemical, and in no way completely uniform, witness to Israelite culture(s). I note also the author's willingness to adopt uncritically the Bible's use of the term "magic" in reference to the mantic arts of Israel's neighbors. As historians of religion have shown, "magic" is an ideologically conditioned label with little relevance for, or in, religious systems in which performative mantic practices play fundamental roles (as in Mesopotamia and Egypt). In addition, even if one maintained the Frazerian dichotomy between magic and religion, it is difficult to reconcile it with the biblical reference to Daniel as "the chief magician" (Dan 4:6). Moreover, Bar does not inform readers what precisely is "magical" about Mesopotamian and Egyptian oneiromancy. Yet, to support his assertion of the uniqueness of biblical oneiromancy, he underscores the Bible's lack of reference to oneiromancy practiced for commoners. Given the Bible's polemical casting of the superiority of Yahweh's servants over Babylon's and Egypt's wisest, it is hardly surprising that we find no such reference (though one could argue that the accurate interpretation of Joseph's dreams suggested by his older brothers [Gen 37:8] constitutes one such case).

Thus, while Bar makes little effort to place biblical, Talmudic, and midrashic conceptions of dreams in their respective ancient and late antique cultural milieus, he draws a rather sharp divide between Israelite oneiromancy and its Near Eastern counterparts. To establish the uniqueness of biblical dream interpreters, he remarks that "the biblical milieu does not include professional oneirocritics or refer to a literature of dream interpretation." What Bar does not note, however, is that the terms that designate oneiromantics in Mesopotamia and Egypt do not specify a distinct professional group either. In Egypt, dream divination fell to the priests, who were acquainted with a number of mantic and divinatory arts, and in Mesopotamia, the same titles that appear for oneiromantics also occur in reference to the haruspex, augur, and practitioners of a variety of other divinatory disciplines. Moreover, while we do not

possess an Israelite manual of dreams, we do have the biblical texts themselves, and they evidence a lively oneiromantic native tradition.

In short, this is a descriptive, and by no means exhaustive, treatment of the subject of biblical dreams. The questions the book proposes to address, and the answers it provides for them, are readily available elsewhere in more detailed and accomplished works.

SCOTT B. NOEGEL

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

---

*Ritual in Narrative: The Dynamics of Feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat.* By DAVID P. WRIGHT. Winona Lake, Ind.: EISENBRAUNS, 2001. Pp. xii + 242. \$37.50.

Ritual interpretations of Ugaritic narrative poems once had a prominent place in the critical literature. It was claimed by some that *Baal* and *Aqhat* in particular were recited as the verbal accompaniment of rituals or enacted as ritual dramas in a cultic context. Wright's book is not in this now largely discarded tradition. Rather, recognizing the pervasiveness of rituals among the actions performed by the characters in the story of *Aqhat*, the author raises the question why these rituals appear there. What is their function in the story? What is their role in the plot and in the characterization of the actors? Wright's aims are thus primarily literary and address a feature of the text that has not been directly or adequately addressed before. Further, recognizing the difficulty of interpreting the actual ritual texts from Ugarit (for which see Pardee 2000; Pardee forthcoming), Wright believes that the authors' portrayal of rituals, though serving their immediate narrative purposes, may also shed some light on how the people of Ugarit viewed their rituals, the roles of the gods in them, and their success or failure.

After reviewing various definitions of ritual, Wright opts for that of Catherine Bell (1992: 71), which focuses on what distinguishes ritual from ordinary, everyday activities in a given culture and on the ways in which it is privileged, especially by reference to transcendent powers. He then identifies twenty "ritual scenes or elements" in *Aqhat*, which fall into four categories: feasts, blessings, mourning rites, and retaliation rites. Wright examines each of these twenty units (in the order in which they occur in the story) in twenty chapters divided into four parts headed: Felicitous Feasts and Offerings (covering cols. I to V of the first tablet), Infelicitous Feasts and Offerings (tablet 1, col. VI to tablet 2, col. IV), Mourning and Retaliation

(from the end of tablet 2, col. IV to tablet 3, col. IV, line 9), Renewal and Revenge (the rest). These titles adumbrate Wright's conclusions about the function of the rituals in different parts of the narrative. Most chapters follow a common pattern: presentation of text and translation, discussion of textual and philological problems, and discussion of the role of the ritual in its narrative context. This pattern is varied according to the particular character or problems of each text.

Wright's philological treatment of the texts is usually thorough, but sometimes less than convincing, especially when, as in several cases, it is based on speculative restorations. With this caveat, his literary criticism is generally faithful to the text and, although it does not significantly advance or alter our view of the poem as a whole, it sometimes casts fresh light on a passage or relationship.

Given our ignorance of the everyday activities and assumptions of the people of Ugarit, however, the application of Bell's distinction between quotidian activities and privileged ritual activities to Ugaritic culture is more difficult than Wright acknowledges, and rendered the more uncertain when the evidence is a literary text. Hence, a fundamental question that arises in reading Wright's book is whether some of the passages that he discusses are appropriately characterized as rituals. Wright recognizes differences between Daniel's opening ritual and his hospitality to the visiting Kotharat and Kothar and Khasis. But while the former, in which the gods are not actors (until their response in their own realm), is described as a ritual performed by a real person might be described, the latter two incidents, in which the gods are treated as guests, may not be distinct from hospitality to visiting human dignitaries. This is surely more significant than Wright allows in deciding whether they are rituals or not. Similarly, Wright interprets Anat's complaint to El in tablet 1, col. VI as a ritual. This encounter is also modeled on relations between humans, but since it is between two deities, it does not involve any reference to yet higher powers.

The recurring list of filial duties in tablet 1, I-II is treated as a description of a ritual, even though Wright recognizes that many of the duties are not rituals (and it does not describe an action that is a component of the plot). The "blessing" of Aqhat by Daniel in tablet 1, col. V, 11. 37-39 is rather, as Wright translates it, a command or instruction. Moreover, since Aqhat is commanded to bring the first fruits of his hunt to the residence of Daniel, not to that of a deity, it is far from obvious that its execution would constitute a ritual. In his discussion of the feast of Aqhat and Anat in 1 VI, Wright introduces literature that discusses problematic performances of ritual and "infelicitous" rituals, warning us against too simple a classification of a rite as felicitous or infelicitous. But, again, given the limitations of our understanding of Ugaritic custom, Wright's own classification of this particular feast seems to take too much for granted.