# Approaches to Literary Readings of Ancient Jewish Writings

*Edited by*

Klaas Smelik and Karolien Vermeulen



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2014

CONTENTS

PART ONE

HEBREW BIBLE

PART TWO

OTHER ANCIENT JEWISH WRITINGS

PART ONE

HEBREW BIBLE

# "LITERARY" CRAFT AND PERFORMATIVE POWER
## IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST:
## THE HEBREW BIBLE IN CONTEXT

Scott B. Noegel

### *Abstract*

Biblical scholars have done a great deal to advance our appreciation of the literary sophistication of biblical texts. Biblical commentaries and a host of other publications now regularly draw our attention to a multitude of textual devices that operate on micro- and macro-levels such as punning, allusion, inclusio, chiasm, repetition, and ring structure, to name just a few. While such research has at times emphasized literary similarities at the expense of cultural differences, it nonetheless has removed the study of the Hebrew Bible from its relative literary isolation. The combined influence of these factors has allowed scholars to speak about biblical texts on par with Homer, Beowulf, Shakespeare, and other great works of literature. In this essay, I shall argue that while such literary and comparative approaches have helped us to appreciate more fully the repertoire of technical devices employed by the Israelite writers, in the main, they have not helped us to understand their functions. In particular, I shall argue that a comparative examination of the social context for textual production in the ancient Near East suggests that we should think of biblical literary devices not as stylistic embellishments, but as performative devices of perceived power.

כְּבֹד אֱלֹהִים הַסְתֵּר דָּבֶר

The glory of God is to conceal a word
Prov 25:2

A number of biblical scholars have done a great deal to advance our appreciation of the literary sophistication of biblical texts. Biblical commentaries and a host of other publications now regularly draw our attention to a multitude of clever literary devices, tropes, and figures of speech. The recognition of such devices has allowed scholars to speak about Israelite literary skill on par with the artistry of Homer, Shakespeare, and other great works of literature.

What makes the devices especially fascinating is that many of them are not unique to the Hebrew Bible, but appear also in texts from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Ugarit. Not only are some metaphors and similes shared, but even compositional

devices such as parallelism, chiasm, repetition, and ring structure appear to have transcended cultural and geographic boundaries.[1] This tells us that these devices were learned techniques; wide-spread oral and textual conventions that were passed on within scribal communities. They enjoyed centuries of consistent use and they were employed with a purpose. But what exactly were these devices meant to achieve? I should like to answer this question, in part, by examining Israelite literary craft in the light of comparative evidence from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Ugarit. I divide my essay into three parts.

In the first, I shall argue that we obtain insight into ancient Israelite literary craft by recognizing the cosmological underpinnings that inform the production of literary texts throughout the Near East. Foremost among them is an ontological understanding of words and script as potentially powerful. This conception, I maintain, permits us to understand the Bible's literary devices not merely as embellishments of style and rhetoric, but as performative devices of perceived power.

In the second, I shall argue that the social context for the production of *literary* texts in the Near East is one closely associated with learned ritual professionals, such as diviners and priests, whose preoccupation with divine power and cosmic order further complicates our notion of literariness.

In the third and final portion, I shall build upon my previous observations and consider as a case study the literary device known as "word play." Drawing upon comparative evidence, I shall argue that the Israelite literati viewed word play as a powerful technology capable of manipulating reality.

*Ontological Conception of Words*

I begin with the cosmological underpinnings. It is well known that the literati of the ancient Near East regarded words, whether written or spoken, to be inherently, and at least potentially powerful.[2] Georges Contenau has

---

[1] See, e.g., Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (JSOT. SS 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); Yitzhak Avishur, *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs in Biblical and Ancient Semitic Literatures* (AOAT 210; Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), to cite just two important works among many.

[2] For a discussion of how the writing systems operate under, and are influenced by different cosmologies, see Scott B. Noegel, "'Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign'": Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East," in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in*

characterized the illocutionary power of words and texts in Mesopotamia as follows:

> Since to know and pronounce the name of an object instantly endowed it with reality, and created power over it, and since the degree of knowledge and consequently of power was strengthened by the tone of voice in which the name was uttered, writing, which was a permanent record of the name, naturally contributed to this power, as did both drawing and sculpture, since both were a means of asserting knowledge of the object and consequently of exercising over it the power which knowledge gave.[3]

A classic demonstration of this concept appears in the opening lines of the Babylonian creation account, in which the author describes the primordial world of pre-existence as one that has not yet been put into words.

1.  When the heavens above had not yet been termed
     *enūma eliš lā nabû šamāmu*
2.  Nor the earth below called by name
     *šapliš ammatum šuma lā zakrat*
                              *Enuma Elish* I 1–2

Since spoken and written words were understood as capable of wielding divine power, the elite group of literate scribes naturally guarded this power carefully and considered it a secret that was not for the uninitiated. Indeed, in their own words, writing was nothing less than the "secret of scribes and gods."[4] It is probably for this reason that we lack native terms for the many textual devices they employed. At the upper end of the scribal elite were the scholars, who referred to themselves as integral links in a chain of transmission originating from the gods. Some scribal masters are even said to have transmitted knowledge directly from the mouth of their patron god Ea, the god of wisdom, magic, music, and the crafts.[5]

---

*the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus (OIS 6; Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 143–162.

[3] George Contenau, *Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria* (London: Edward Arnold, 1955), 164.

[4] On this topic, see Alan Lenzi, *Secrecy and the Gods: Secret Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia and Biblical Israel* (SAAS 19; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2008).

[5] See Piotr Michalowski, "Sailing to Babylon: Reading the Dark Side of the Moon," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century: The William Foxwell Albright Centennial Conference*, ed. Jerrold S. Cooper & Glenn M. Schwartz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 177–193.

Moreover, in so far as writing was perceived as a technology of power, it also served to establish the cosmic order. Several cuneiform texts underscore this by referring to the art of writing as "the (cosmic) bond of everything" (*markas kullat*).[6] The use of writing for keeping the cosmic order is perhaps best embodied in the Mesopotamian conception of divine ledgers or "Tablets of Life" on which gods were believed to inscribe the destinies of individuals.[7] The preoccupation with performative power and maintaining cosmic order explains the format and organization of the hundreds of divinatory compendia and lexical lists that the scribal elites produced. According to Mogens Trolle Larson, these texts represent an effort to "present a systematic and ordered picture of the world."[8] Joan Goodnick Westenholz similarly registered the cosmological import of such texts, as she noted, "On the intellectual level, knowing the organization of the world made it possible to affect the universe by magical means."[9]

A similar preoccupation with divine efficacy and cosmic control undergirds the Egyptian conception of text. As David O'Connor points out, art and writing were

> [. . .] ritually and magically empowered to literally transform contexts (temples, tombs, palaces and others) into cosmically charged settings that reflect the belief that the activities carried out in them were effective beyond the human realm.[10]

Moreover, as in Mesopotamia, the Egyptian priests believed that speech and writing could manipulate the universe, and thus, establish cosmic order. As David Frankfurter states:

---

[6] Ake W. Sjöberg, "In Praise of the Scribal Art," *JCS* 24 (1972): 126–131.

[7] Shalom M. Paul, "Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life," *JANES* 5 (1973): 345–353.

[8] Mogens Trolle Larsen, "The Mesopotamian Lukewarm Mind: Reflections on Science, Divination, and Literacy," in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, ed. Francesca Rochberg-Halton (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1987), 209–212.

[9] Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "Thoughts on Esoteric Knowledge and Secret Lore," in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd rencontre Assyriologique internationale, Prague, July 1–5, 1996*, ed. Jiri Prosecky (Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Oriental Institute, 1998), 451–462 (453).

[10] David O'Connor, "Ancient Egypt: Egyptological and Anthropological Perspectives," in *Anthropology and Egyptology: A Developing Dialogue*, ed. Judith Lustig (MMA 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 13–24 (17–18).

> [...] Egyptian letters were the chief technology of a hierocratic scribal elite who preserved and enacted rituals—and by extension the cosmic order itself—through the written word.[11]

The Egyptians also referred to the hieroglyphic script as *mdw nṯr*, literally "the words of the gods," and the scribal art was to them an occupation without equal. The ibis-headed god Thoth, who is credited with the invention of writing, is said to be "excellent of magic" (*mnḥ ḥkꜣ*) and "Lord of hieroglyphs" (*nb mdw nṯr*). He sometimes is depicted writing the hieroglyphic feather sign representing *maat* (*mꜣꜥt*), a word that stands for the cosmic force of equilibrium by which kings keep their thrones and justice prevails.[12] The link between writing and *maat* underscores how integral the scribal elites perceived their art for maintaining the cosmic order.

An illuminating demonstration of the power that written words possessed can be seen in the Ptolemaic Tale of Setne Khamwas, in which a revived mummy describes how written spells were made effective even for the illiterate.

> I read another formula for writing [...] though I cannot write. I was speaking with regard to my elder brother Na-nefer-ka-ptah, who is a good scribe and a very wise man. He caused that a new sheet of papyrus be brought before him. He wrote down every word that was on the papyrus, completely. He burned it with fire; he dissolved it with water. He recognized that it had dissolved; he drank it and he knew that which was in it.
>
> Setne I col. 4/1–4[13]

A belief in the power of words is well attested also in the literary texts found at the Canaanite seaport of Ugarit. A textbook example appears in the *Epic of Baal*, in which we find the dually-named craftsman god Kothar-wa-Hasis ritually empowering the weapons he created so that storm-god Baal might defeat Yamm, the god of the Sea. Of specific import is that he empowers his weapons by naming them.

> Kothar fashioned two maces,
> and he pronounced their names:
> You, your name is "Driver" (*ygrš*)

---

[11] David Frankfurter, "The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: The Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek Traditions," *Helios* 21 (1994): 189–221 (192).

[12] On the concept of *mꜣꜥt*, see Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimation in Ancient Egypt* (SAOC 57; Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute, 1997).

[13] Found in Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (SAOC 54; Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1993), 108.

Driver, drive (*grš*) Sea!
Drive (*grš*) Sea from his throne,
River, from his seat of dominion.

[and over the second mace he proclaims]
You, your name is "Expeller" (*ʾaymr*)
Expeller, expell (*mr*) Sea!
Expell (*mr*) Sea from his throne,
River, from his seat of dominion [. . .]
                          KTU 1.2 iv 11–13, 19–20

The two weapons' functions are embodied in the meanings of their names, Driver and Expeller, and Kothar activates them by transforming their names into verbal commands. As Seth Sanders has described it, "The direct discourse of Kothar is not performative by virtue of social conventions but on a higher level: as sheer self-enacting divine language, Kothar's speech is performative by cosmic law."[14]

Kothar's ability to empower items through speech is directly connected to his role as a god of magic, music, and technology.[15] Elsewhere in the Ugaritic corpus, Kothar-wa-Hasis demonstrates his expertise in metallurgy and architecture. He also is described as a divine mantic.

Kothar is your magician
   *kṯr ḥbrk*
And Hasis your diviner
   *wḫss dʿtk*
        KTU 1.6 vi 49–50

Kothar's use of language as a vehicle of performative force is again representative of a wide-spread understanding of words. Since the land of Israel served throughout its history as a conduit for cultural influences from Canaan and the dominant Mesopotamian and Egyptian powers around them, we should expect to find a similar conception in Israelite texts. According to Isaac Rabinowitz, this is precisely the case, as he remarks:

[in ancient Israel] words were not merely presumed to have the properties of material objects, but might be thought of as foci or concentrations of dynamic power. They were plainly regarded as not only movable but mobile, not only susceptible to being acted upon, but capable of acting upon other

---

[14] Seth Sanders, "Performative Utterances and Divine Language in Ugaritic," *JNES* 63 (2004): 161–181 (174).

[15] On the connection between word manipulation, technology, and magic, see Scott B. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (AOS, 89; New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2007), 36–45.

entities in ways not confined to communication, of producing and enacting effects, conditions, circumstances and states.[16]

The conceptual link between a word and a physical object is reflected most clearly in the Hebrew word *dābār*, דבר, which means "word" and also "thing, object."[17] The understanding that spoken words also could embody power is represented best by YHWH's creation of the universe in the first chapter of Genesis in which the narrator tells us: "And God *said*, 'Let there be light'" (Gen 1:3).

Like the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the Israelites also attributed a cosmologically powerful role to writing. One could cite many proof texts, such as the role that divine writing plays in issuing the Ten Commandments (Exod 31:18), or YHWH's heavenly text in which he keeps the names of the sinless (Exod 32:32–33), or the priestly curses that must be written on a scroll, dissolved in water, and imbibed by a wife to test her for unfaithfulness (Num 5:23–24), or of course, the many prophecies that YHWH orders his prophets to put into writing (e.g., Jer 36:18, 36:27–28).

Perhaps one of the best demonstrations appears in Numbers 11 in which we hear how YHWH gave a portion of Moses' spirit to seventy leading Israelites so they could help bear the people's burdens. In this story, the names of the seventy men are written on a list at the Tent of Meeting, *outside* the camp. As the text tells us:

> Now two men stayed behind in the camp, one named Eldad, the second Medad; but as they were among those written (on the list), the spirit rested upon them even though they had not gone out to the Tent; so they were prophetically possessed within the camp. Thereupon a lad ran and told Moses, and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying *within* the camp" (Num 11:26–27).

This text illustrates that the written names of the seventy men alone sufficed to bring on the spirit of prophesy. The expectation was that prophesying would occur close to the Tent of Meeting and not within the camp.[18]

Such references could be multiplied, but these should suffice to demonstrate that speaking and writing in the ancient Near East could be perceived as acts of cosmological power. This conception of words would appear to be a necessary starting point for understanding the perceived

---

[16]  Isaac Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel's Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 16.

[17]  Discussed by Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever*, 9–12.

[18]  Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever*, 34.

nature of language, writing, and text in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, it is seldom integrated into studies of scribal culture or text production, and even more rarely into studies on literary craft.

Moreover, it is no accident that the illocutionary power of words was closely affiliated with gods of technology. You will recall, that in Mesopotamia it was associated with Ea, in Egypt, with Thoth, and at Ugarit, with Kothar-wa-Hasis—each wielding skill in magic and crafts. The connection to these gods offers additional evidence that the ancients conceived of literary craft as a technology that could influence reality. I contend that such a context must also inform our understanding of its devices.

### Social Context for the Production of Literary Texts

The social context for the production of *literary* texts throughout the ancient Near East also was closely associated with performative ritual and mantic praxis. In Mesopotamia, the central role that mantic professionals played in the production and dissemination of literary texts should call into question how we understand Mesopotamian "literature" and its devices. At least from about 1500 BCE and onwards, a master scholar, whether serving as an author in the modern sense or merely as a redactor, would have been responsible for transmitting a wide variety of texts including the full gamut of divinatory lore, including omens, medical texts, incantations, prayers, and a variety of myths. He would have been perceived as having transmitted oral and textual traditions directly from the divine. Therefore, to understand the function of literary devices in Mesopotamia we must foreground this context.

Perhaps no Mesopotamian text best demonstrates the overlap between the worlds of mantic practice and literary production as the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Of particular interest is that the epic was redacted and expanded by a *kalû*-priest named Sîn-lēqi-uninnī.[19] Our knowledge of this person is unfortunately scant. Nevertheless, we know by his profession that he represented the pinnacle of Mesopotamian intellectual and eso-

---

[19] Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Descendants of Sîn-lēqi-unninni," in *Assyriologica et Semitica: Festschrift für Joachim Oelsner anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstages am 18. Februar 1997*, ed. Joachim Marzahn & Hans Neumann (AOAT, 252; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2000), 1–16. Wilfred G. Lambert, "A Catalogue of Texts and Authors," *JCS* 16 (1962): 59–77, originally suggested the reading *mašmaššu*, though this appears less likely in the light of the work by Beaulieu.

teric thought, encompassing mastery in astronomy, astrology, mathematics, mythical history, magic, divination, and ritual. The *kalû*-priests were the true polymaths of ancient Mesopotamia. They were a highly interdisciplinary lot whose many areas of expertise were subsumed under the label of "wisdom." As I have written elsewhere, when read through the lens of the *kalû*-priestly profession, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* betrays signs of that craft's erudition and ideology.[20] Given this background, it is difficult to think of the epic as literature *qua* literature and devoid of performative detail and function.

Indeed, Assyriologists have long observed a close relationship between Mesopotamian ritual and mythological re-enactments, as well as the use of mythological references in ritual and divinatory texts. More recently, they have begun to question the degree to which Mesopotamian literary and mythological traditions acquired a performative function.[21] Since mantic interests played a central role in the creation, transmission, and redaction of literary traditions, it is plausible to think that when the scribal masters transmitted their mythological lore, the recitation of its contents constituted a demonstration, if not activation, of its performative power.

We derive added insight into the performative dimension of ancient literary texts by turning to the work of historians of religion, who have begun to ask similar questions about the performative power of narration. A representative example is Frankfurter's study of Egyptian *historiolae*. A *historiola* is a brief tale built into a magical text that provides a mythic precedence in order to make a charm magically effective. Frankfurter explains how this works in his definition of "narrating power."

> [Narrating power]: a 'power' intrinsic to any narrative, any story, uttered in a ritual context, and the idea that the mere recounting of certain stories situates or directs their 'narrative' power into this world. Egyptologists have long been familiar with this concept of narrative, since ancient Egyptian ritual traditionally involved the recitation of mythic narratives as a kind

---

[20] Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 57–82.
[21] See, e.g., Jean van Dijk, "Une incantation accompagnant la naissance de l'homme," *Or* 42 (1973): 502–507 (505); Walter Burkert, "Literarische Texte und funktionaler Mythos Ištar und Atrahasis," in *Funktionen und Leistungen der Mythos: Drei altorientalische Beispiele*, ed. Jan Assmann, Walter Burkert & Fritz Stolz (OBO 48; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1982), 63–82; Ulla Jeyes, *Old Babylonian Extispicy: Omen Texts in the British Museum* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1989), 186, n. 8; Alasdair Livingstone, "The Magic of Time," in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretive Perspectives*, ed. Tzvi Abusch & Karel van der Toorn (AMD 1; Groningen: Styx, 1998), 131–137.

of instrumental praxis, but also because Egyptians have a highly nuanced sense of the power of the spoken word.[22]

Though Frankfurter's texts functioned in different social and cultural matrices, much of his definition is applicable to the Mesopotamian mythological corpus. Consider again, for example, the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, whose tablets narrate the creation of the cosmos and provide a hierarchy of beings. This narration too contains a citation of events and acts performed in cosmogonic time, and thus, we might understand it as activating its performative power by establishing precedence and paradigm. Perhaps, we should think of it as becoming dynamically real within the ritual context of reciting it.

In Egypt, the social context for the production of literary texts also was located in ritual, for advanced literacy was exclusively the provenance of the priesthood. There is little doubt that the recitation of Egyptian texts that we today classify as "literary" bore cosmological import. Obvious examples, such as the *Pyramid* and *Coffin Texts*, and the *Book of the Dead*, aimed to secure for the deceased a safe place in the afterlife. When reciting these texts, Egyptian priests believed they were not merely describing the journey, they were making it happen; they were participating in cosmogonic time.

The same may be said of many other texts that one now finds in anthologies of Egyptian literature. For example, the story of the *Tale of Two Brothers* has been understood as a complex cosmic allegory whose characters personify deities.[23] The *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* is widely regarded as a hallmark of Egyptian literature. Nevertheless, John Baines has argued that we read it as a didactic piece that spoke directly to the esoteric ideology of the solar cult.[24] Even its circular compositional form, he suggests, embodies and enacts the cyclical nature of the cosmos. The autobiographical fiction known as the *Tale of Sinuhe* is similarly considered one of the finest pieces of Egyptian literature. Yet, it too has been understood as an allegory with a cosmic dimension. The journey undertaken by its main character, from Egypt to Canaan and back, is reminiscent in theme and

---

[22] David Frankfurter, "Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer & Paul Mirecki (RGRW 129; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 457–458.

[23] On the diverse interpretations this text has received, see Susan T. Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers": A Mythological, Religious, Literary, and Historico-Political Study* (Oakville, CT: Bannerstone Press, 2008).

[24] John Baines, "Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor," *JEA* 76 (1990): 55–72.

language of cultic texts that ritualize death and entrance to the afterlife.[25] Indeed, there are few Egyptian literary texts that have not been mined for their cultic and cosmological meanings, because the social context for text production in Egypt was the priesthood.

At Ugarit, the evidence for the production and dissemination of literary texts also adheres to this pattern. The literary texts discovered there, such as the epics of *Baal, Aqhat, Keret*, and the *Rephaim* were all located in the private house of the high priest, between the Baal and Dagan temples.[26] In fact, a colophon appended to the end of the *Baal* epic tells us that the text was written by a scribe who is described as follows:

> [The] scribe is Ilimilku from Shuban,
>   *spr. ilmlk. šbny*
> disciple of Attenu the diviner,
>   *lmd. atn. prln*
> chief of the priests,
>   *rb.khnm*
> chief of the shepherds,
>   *rb.nqdm*
> (and) secretary of Niqmaddu,
>   *t'y. nqmd*
> the king of Ugarit
>   *mlk.ugrt*
>
>                    KTU 1.6 54–58

The colophon leaves little doubt that, just as in Mesopotamia, diviners with priestly functions played central roles in the creation and transmission of literary texts.[27]

Indeed, as Olof Pedersén has shown, from roughly 1500–300 BCE the great majority of Mesopotamian and Ugaritic texts that we might today label as literary, such as prayers, laments, myths, wisdom texts, and epics, *and* those we might label scholarly, such as lexical and grammatical lists, astrological reports, omens, and medical texts—were found in temple libraries or private archives owned by priests and diviners.[28] Texts of a more mundane type, such as letters, treaties, loan and tax dockets,

---

[25] On the multiple meanings conveyed in Sinuhe, see John Baines, "Interpreting Sinuhe," *JEA* 68 (1982): 31–44.

[26] See Olof Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East, 1500–300 B.C.* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1998), 73–74.

[27] See also Wilfred van Soldt, "*Atn prln*, 'Attā/ēnu the Diviner,'" *UF* 21 (1989): 365–368.

[28] Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East, 1500–300 B.C.*, 273–282.

chronicles, and lists of employees and supplies, were typically found in palace archives or those of private officials.

Unfortunately, much less is known about the social and cultural background for the production of literary texts in ancient Israel. While positing a role for mantics in the creation of the Bible's prophetic texts seems clear, we are on less sure footing positing such a background for the production of narrative and other non-prophetic texts. Nevertheless, since biblical texts contain the same devices found in other Near Eastern literary texts, and since they evince a conception of speech and writing on par with Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Canaanite dogma, it is plausible to think that the priesthood played some role in the production of non-prophetic literary texts, even if such a role was state-sponsored.[29]

This conclusion adds further support to Karel Van der Toorn's view that we should see the temple in Jerusalem as the locus of the scribal elite whose primary period of collection, copying, and transmission occurred roughly between the years 500 and 200 BCE. As he concludes:

> The affiliation of the scribal school [...] to the temple is especially important in view of the role of the school as a center of text production. In the ancient Near East, the men who taught others to read texts were also the men who wrote texts themselves. All over the Near East, schools were not merely centers of text transmission but also of text composition. While the temple scribes in Israel were responsible for teaching the scribal craft, they were also the ones who created the bulk of the biblical literature.[30]

Thus far, I have argued that in order to understand ancient Israelite literary craft we must recognize the importance of two factors usually not integrated into the study of biblical literature. The first is a conception of words and texts as powerful technologies capable of manipulating reality. The second is a well-evidenced social context that places literary production in the hands of mantics, diviners, and/or priests, who viewed themselves as receivers, transmitters, and vehicles of the divine word.

*The Problem with "Literary" Devices: The Case of "Word Play"*

With these factors in mind, I should like to look anew at one of the Hebrew Bible's literary devices. Specifically, I shall focus on the device commonly

---

[29]  See Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 177–182, 278.
[30]  Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 89.

referred to as "punning" or "word play," of which there are essentially two basic types: polysemy and paronomasia.[31] "Polysemy" refers to devices that involve multiple meanings in a *single context*, whereas "paronomasia" refers to devices involving sound that function *across* word divisions and involve a dissimilarity in meaning.

Word play has long been observed in biblical texts. The early rabbis referred to it as לָשׁוֹן נוֹפֵל עַל לָשׁוֹן *lāšōn nōpēl ʿal lāšōn*, "language falling upon language" (Gen. Rab. 18:6, 31:8). Though the topic still lacks comprehensive study, it is fair to say that scholarship on the topic, with few exceptions, has understood the device as one of style and rhetorical flare. In his now classic study authored in 1893, Immanuel Casanowicz characterized paronomasia as follows:[32]

> Paronomasia in the Old Testament is, like all other embellishments of speech, an element of higher style, that is, of the poetical and prophetical diction. In the historical books, except in the poetical passages embodied in them and the plays on the etymology of proper names, cases in which it occurs are few and far between. It is everywhere merely a casual, not an organic, element of diction. Hebrew poetical style hardly differs from the rhetorical; both have in common all the peculiarities which distinguish them from the lower style.[33]

Though scholars of more recent vintage typically avoid imposing a higher or lower value on biblical word play, the perception of its function as a device of style and rhetoric remains the dominant view.

Compare this with Raymond Faulker's discussion of the device in Egyptian texts. Under a rubric entitled "The Magical Power of Word Play," Faulkner states:

> Since words were a major category of images for the Egyptians, manipulating the sounds or the signs of a word was thought to affect the object it represented. The goal of such word play, or paronomasia, was far more than the creation of incantations with mysterious sounds. [...] Word play was an important method of linking the earthly realm with the world of the gods.

---

[31] On this subject, see Scott B. Noegel, "Polysemy," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), in press; "Paronomasia," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, in press; *Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000); *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 9–11; *"Word Play" in Ancient Near Eastern Texts* [forthcoming].

[32] Immanuel M. Casanowicz, "Paronomasia in the Old Testament," *JBL* 12 (1893): 105–167. The article derives from work found in Immanuel M. Casanowicz, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1892/Boston, 1894).

[33] Casanowicz, "Paronomasia in the Old Testament," 120.

Egyptian puns seem heavy-handed, but they were not intended to amuse. They created an alternate focus which could deflect the power in a word.[34]

Antonio Loprieno similarly sees word play in Egyptian as a performative device, one that was perceived as capable of manipulating the cosmos while serving as a method of "scientific classification of the world and its entities."[35] See, for example, the following Egyptian dream omen.[36] Here we read that if one dreams of

[…] cutting up a bull with his own hand; good, (it means that) his (own) opponent will be killed.

[…] ḥr sf.t jḥ m dr.t=f; nfr, smꜣ p[ꜣ] y=f jry-n-ꜥḥꜣ(.t)

r. 4:16

Here the bovine hieroglyphic sign (i.e., 𓄛) is read as jḥ "bull." Nevertheless, it forms a lexical association with the word smꜣ meaning "killed," because the latter word also can mean "wild bull," and even takes as its determinative the bovine glyph (i.e., 𓄛 or 𓃮 ).

See similarly the Egyptian *Coffin Texts* in which the Egyptian Lord of All proclaims: ἰw rmṯ m rmwt ἰrt=ἰ "I made humankind from tears" (Spell 1130, § 465a). Here the word for "humankind" (rmṯ) resounds in the word for "tears" (rmwt). The paronomasia forges a creative link, and thus binds the essences of the divine substance of creation and the created mortals, while it also classifies the place of humankind within the cosmos.[37]

The understanding of word play among scholars of Mesopotamia is very similar, as Sheldon Greaves' comment illustrates:

[…] word play was thought to play an active role in magic by taking advantage of the linkage that was thought to exist between the word for an object and the object itself. In practical terms this means that if the magician can use a verb or an object in the incantation that puns with the object or condition he or she is trying to alter, the association creates a link to that object that will achieve the desired result.[38]

---

[34] Raymond O. Faulkner, et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1994), 147.

[35] Antonio Loprieno, "Puns and Word Play in Ancient Egyptian," in *Puns and Pundits*, 3–22 (13).

[36] See Scott B. Noegel & Kasia Szpakowska, "'Word Play' in the Ramesside Dream Manual," *SAK* 35 (2007): 93–212; text on 200.

[37] See similarly the creation of "the man" (hā-ʾādām, האדם) from the dust of the "ground" (hā-ʾădāmāh, האדמה) in Gen 2:7.

[38] Sheldon W. Greaves, "Ominous Homophony and Portentous Puns in Akkadian Omens," in *Puns and Pundits*, 103–116 (113).

Two Babylonian omens illustrate this well. The first is a dream omen.[39]

> If a man dreams that he is traveling to Idran (*id-ra-an*); (it means) he will free himself from a crime (Á-*ra-an*).
>
> > K. 2582 rev ii, x + 21

Here the cuneiform sign *id* also can hold the value Á, which permits the diviner to read the toponym Idran as the word *aran*, meaning 'crime.'

The second omen derives from the practice of extispicy, the reading of abnormal features on the liver of an animal.[40]

> When (the) lobe is like the grapheme (named) *kaškaš*, (then) (the storm god) Adad will inundate (with rain).

Here the name of the cuneiform sign *kaškaš* suggests to the diviner the word *kaškaššu*, meaning "all powerful," which is an epithet used of the storm god Adad.

These omen texts illustrate that the use of word play did not mark elevated style, but rather served to make sense of the divine sign.[41] Since words were loci of divine power, an ambiguous omen put into words naturally represented a potentially unbridled form of power. Punning interpretations limit that power by restricting the parameters of an omen's interpretation. The omen cannot now mean anything, but only one thing. Therefore, the employment of word play constitutes an act of power. Moreover, diviners manipulated not just words, but behavior and belief. By deploying the performative puns, they determined an individual's fate. At some level, therefore, we must see the function of the punning technology as a form of social and cosmic control.

Moreover, it is important to realize that acts of divination also constitute acts of divine judgment. Not only do diviners use the word *purussû* "legal decision" or "verdict" to refer to an omen's prediction, but as Francesca Rochberg has shown, divinatory texts share in common with legal codes the formula *if x, then y*.[42] Therefore, as I have concluded elsewhere:

> [...] within this performative juridical context, word plays connecting omens to their interpretations constitute vehicles for demonstrating and justifying divine judgment. They are persuasive legal arguments based on

---

[39] Discussed in Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 21.
[40] See Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 13.
[41] See Noegel, "'Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign'."
[42] Francesca Rochberg, "Empiricism in Babylonian Omen Texts and the Classification of Mesopotamian Divination as Science," *JAOS* 119 (1999): 559–569.

analogy that establish precedent. Insofar as they underscore the tie between the sign and its prediction, they illustrate the principle and process of *lex talionis* "the law of retribution." Thus, the punning not only affirms theological and legal principles, it embodies them; and it is more performative than literary, since words index power and since the acoustic impact is only the result of a pun's function.[43]

Since the literati who composed the omen compendia also created the literary texts, their word plays in the latter corpus function similarly as indices of transformative power and vehicles of divine judgment.

To illustrate further, I turn to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which we hear the god Ea instructing Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, what to tell the people when they see him building an ark. Since we later learn that this message came in the form of a dream, the god's message constitutes an omen. According to the text, Ea instructs him to say:

> He (Ea) shall provide you with abundance (or rain down a torrent) [. . .]
>   *eli kâšunu ušaznanakunūši nuḫšamma* [. . .]
> in the morning, cakes (*kukkū*),
>   [*ina šēr*] *kukkī* [. . .]
> and in the evening, he shall provide (or rain down) a "rain" of wheat (*kibātu*).
>   *ina līlāti ušaznanakunūši šamūtu kibāti*
>
>                                      *Epic of Gilgamesh* XI 43–47

For the erudite, there is a hidden message here. The words "cakes" (*kukkū*) and "wheat" (*kibātu*) can be read as "darkness" (*kukkû*) and "heaviness" (*kibittu*).[44] Moreover, the verb *zanānu*, can mean "provide with food" or "rain down," and the word *nuḫšu*, "abundance," can refer to "agricultural yield" or "flood waters."[45] Thus, in one statement the god of magic and craft conceals his real intentions and relies on Utnapishtim's *wisdom* to decode the signs of Ea's divine missive.[46]

As the aforecited examples demonstrate, throughout the ancient Near East word play was not understood as a feature of literary style and

---

[43] Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 44–45. On word play as a means of demonstrating *lex talionis* in biblical narrative, see Scott B. Noegel, "Drinking Feasts and Deceptive Feats: Jacob and Laban's Double Talk," in *Puns and Pundits*, 163–179.

[44] Carl Frank, "Zu den Wortspielen *kukku* und *kibâti* in Gilg. Ep. XI," *ZA* 36 (1925): 218. On other omenistic puns in Gilgamesh, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 57–83.

[45] Scott B. Noegel, "Raining Terror: Another Wordplay Cluster in Gilgamesh Tablet XI (Assyrian Version, ll. 45–47)," *NABU* 75 (1997): 39–40.

[46] On the connection between word play and wisdom, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 28–35.

rhetorical flare. Such a view is not in keeping with the ontological conception of words and text as vehicles of power or with the social context for the production of literary texts. Indeed, it is more appropriate to think of word play as a technology of power and a vehicle for enacting divine judgment.

I submit that a close examination of word play in the Hebrew Bible suggests that the Israelites employed the device to similar ends. Two biblical texts will illustrate my point, though I could cite many more.[47] I first turn to the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9).

1. Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.
2. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.
3. They said to each other, "Come, let us make bricks (*nilbənāh ləbēnîm*, נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים) and bake them." They used the brick (*hal-lebēnāh*, הַלְּבֵנָה) instead of stone (*lə-ʾāben*, לְאָבֶן), and tar (*ha-ḥēmār*, הַחֵמָר) for mortar (*la-ḥōmer*, לַחֹמֶר).
4. Then they said, "Come, let us build (*nibneh lānū*, נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ) ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."
5. But YHWH came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of humankind were building (*bānū bənē hǎ-ādām*, בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם).
6. YHWH said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.
7. Come, let us go down and confuse (*nābəlāh*, נָבְלָה) their language so they will not understand each other."
8. So YHWH scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building (*libnōt*, לִבְנֹת) the city.
9. That is why it was called Babel (*bābel*, בָּבֶל), because there YHWH confused (*bālal*, בָּלַל) the language of the whole world. From there, YHWH scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The passage contains several cases of paronomasia that set the scene for lingual manipulation and inversion. In particular, note the narrator's statement in verse 3 that the Babylonians built their structure with brick instead of stone and tar instead of mortar. The replacement of one item for another is embodied in word play. In this case the expression "let us make bricks" (i.e., *nilbənāh ləbēnîm*, נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים) is contrasted with "stone" (i.e., *lə-ʾāben*, לְאָבֶן) and the "tar" (i.e., *ha-ḥēmār*, הַחֵמָר) replaces "mortar"

---

(i.e., *la-ḥōmer*, לַחֹמֶר). Far from being embellishments, these puns char-
acterize the materials of construction as inversions of Israelite normative
practice, and thus as aberrations of the cosmic order.

For their act of hubris in trying to make a name for themselves, the
Babylonians receive a divine judgment that is again carried out by means
of paronomasia. In verse 7 the performative force of YHWH's words "let us
confuse," (i.e., *nābəlāh*, נָבְלָה) manipulates the very letters contained in the
Babylonians' original pronouncement "let us make bricks" (i.e., *nilbənāh
ləbēnîm*, לְבֵנִים נִלְבְּנָה). Indeed, the power of God's lingual transformation
is underscored at tale's end when the narrator explains: "That is why he
called its name 'Babel' (*bābel*, בָּבֶל), because there YHWH confused (*bālal*,
בָּלַל) the language of the entire earth" (Gen 11:9). In effect, God altered
the essence and destiny of Babylon simply by manipulating the letters
in its name. Since the text's puns tie Babylon's deeds directly to YHWH's
judgment, they again embody the juridical and theological concept of *lex
talionis*.

Jeremiah's prophecy against Babylon (Jer 51:34–37) will be my final
demonstration of the performative power of puns. Here again we find
ourselves in a juridical context as verse 36 makes clear.[48]

> 34. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us:
>     He has thrown us into confusion; he has made us an empty jar.
>     Like the primordial serpent (*tannîn*, תַּנִּין), he has swallowed us
>     (*bəlāʿānū*, בְּלָעָנוּ)
>     and filled his stomach with our delicacies, and then he has spewed
>     us out.
> 35. "May the violence done to us and our children be upon Babylon (*bābel*,
>     בָּבֶל)," say the dwellers of Zion.
>     "May our blood be on those who live in Babylonia (*bābel*, בָּבֶל)," says
>     Jerusalem.
> 36. Therefore, this is what YHWH says:
>     "See, I will defend your cause (*hinənî rāb ʾet rîbēk*, הִנְנִי־רָב אֶת־רִיבֵךְ)
>     and avenge you;
>     I will dry up her sea, and make her fountain run dry.

---

[48] On the *rîb*, "cause," "case," as grounded in legal usage, see Berend Gemser, "The Rîb-
or Controversy Pattern in Hebrew Mentality," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near
East*, ed. Martin Noth & D. Winston Thomas (VT.S 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 120–137; Herbert
Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *JBL* 78 (1959): 285–295; James Limburg,
"The Root ריב and the Prophetic Lawsuit Speeches," JBL 88 (1969): 291–304; Kirsten Nielsen,
*Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge: An Investigation of the Prophetic Lawsuit (Rîb Pattern)*,
(JSOT.SS 9; Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1978).

37. Babylon shall become rubble heap (*gallîm*, גַּלִּים), a den of jackals (*tannîm*, תַּנִּים), an object of horror and hissing, without inhabitant."

In this prophecy, Jeremiah invokes several forms of polysemy and paronomasia to affect Babylon's violent reversal of fortunes. His first is the word *gallîm*, גַּלִּים, in verse 37, a polyseme that can mean "water waves" or "rubble heap." Since God has just stated that he will dry up Babylon's waters, *gallîm* first suggests the meaning "waves." It is only when we hear the remainder of the passage and its reference to wasteland that we realize it must mean "rubble heap." In essence, the prophecy has transformed Babylon's abundant "waters" into "rubble" simply by changing the linguistic context of a single word—the transformation happens in the recitation.

A second use of transformative punning is the word *tannîm*, תַּנִּים, "jackals," in verse 37. Just previous to this, in verse 34, YHWH had described the king as a *tannîn*, תַּנִּין, i.e., "the primordial serpent of chaos." By altering one consonant, the prophet transformed the serpent of chaos into a lair for jackals.

The prophecy continues with performative language that ties "Babylon" (i.e., *bābel*, בָּבֶל) with the act of swallowing (*bəlāʿānū*, בְּלָעָנוּ) in verse 34. These words are resound later again in verse 44 where YHWH issues his verdict: וּפָקַדְתִּי עַל־בֵּל בְּבָבֶל וְהֹצֵאתִי אֶת־בִּלְעוֹ מִפִּיו וְלֹא־יִנְהֲרוּ אֵלָיו עוֹד גּוֹיִם גַּם־חוֹמַת בָּבֶל נָפָלָה, "I shall punish Bel in Babylon, and I will make him disgorge what he has swallowed. The nations shall no longer stream to him, and the wall of Babylon shall fall." Here the words "in Babylon" (i.e., *ba-bābel*, בְּבָבֶל), "swallowed" (i.e., *bilʿō*, בִּלְעוֹ), and the god "Bel" (*bēl*, בֵּל), recall the primordial dragon who had swallowed Jerusalem, and in so doing, they connect Babylon's deeds with its punishment. Note also how the words *wə-lōʾ-yinhărū*, וְלֹא־יִנְהֲרוּ, *wə-lōʾ-yinhărū*, "they shall no longer stream," remind us of the drying of the sea and fountains in verse 36 and the punful use of *gallîm*, גַּלִּים, in verse 37. The referential language again embodies the very means by which the principle of *lex talionis* is activated.

The reversal of fortunes through the performative power of words reaches a climax in verse 41 by way of an Atbash cipher. An Atbash occurs when one exchanges the first letter of the alphabet with the last, the second with the penultimate, the third with the antepenultimate, and so on.[49] The alphabetic reversal results in transforming the name "Babylon" (*bābel*,

---

[49] For other instances of Atbash in Jeremiah, see Scott B. Noegel, "Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance," Parts 1–3, *JBQ* 24/2, 24/3, 24/4 (1996): 82–89, 160–166, 247–250.

בְּבֶל) into "sheshak" (*šēšak*, שֵׁשַׁךְ), a word devoid of meaning, and thus without essence or destiny. YHWH has turned it into a "rubble heap" of letters.

In this essay, I have argued that in order to understand ancient Israelite literary craft we must recognize the importance of two factors. The first is a conception of words and texts as powerful technologies capable of manipulating reality and activating divine judgment. The second is a social context that places literary production in the hands of mantics, diviners, and/or priests.

Though I have used cases of punning to illustrate how textual devices operated beyond the realm of literary and rhetorical flourish, the evidence I have raised naturally calls into question the presumed "literary" functions of other devices often categorized as elements of style. For example, is it possible that similes and metaphors served as performative technologies in order to connect the essence of one thing to another, as they do in ancient Near Eastern incantations? Is it possible to understand repetition as more than just an emphatic feature of persuasion? Might repetition have served, as it does in ancient magic texts, as a formulaic means of legitimating and strengthening the power of the utterance? And what about so-called compositional devices such as chiasm, parallelism, and ring structure? Were they too perceived as having more than a prosodic or organizational purpose? Since they often appear in poems that were intoned and accompanied by music, could they have functioned not merely to *express* the numinous, but like music itself, to invoke it? While a preoccupation with performative power might not inform every textual device typically deemed literary, I do think we have good reason to contemplate it.