Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East. By Scott B. Noegel. American Oriental Series 89. New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2007. Pp. xvi + 346. $69.99 (cloth).
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The seed for this book was sown in a paper entitled "Nocturnal Secret Ciphers: The Punning Language of Dreams in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature" that Scott Noegel delivered to the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in 1996. Noegel has since sustained his interest in the function of wordplay in dream interpretation and has published several papers that provide the basic thesis and textual data for this book. *Nocturnal Ciphers* is the fruition of Noegel's decade-long passion for the subject.

In this book, not only does Noegel attempt to demonstrate the function of wordplay as a hermeneutical key to dream interpretation, but he also seeks to determine its social, cultural, and religious contexts. Pointing to the hermeneutical function of punning in various omen texts of Mesopotamia, Noegel avers that wordplay in dream interpretation serves a similar function owing to the mantic context of the production and transmission of literary texts that contain enigmatic dream accounts. This leads him to argue further that the presence of punning oneirocritic strategy in other parts of the ancient Near East displays mantic knowledge and possible Mesopotamian influence. According to Noegel, wordplay is not merely "literary" in the sense of being ornamental, but a more serious device with performative force in the following two senses. First, at the level of a story itself, oneirocritic punning not only adumbrates and anticipates, but also activates and determines the fate of a dreamer in a story. Second, at the level of the *realia* behind a story, it promotes "a mantic ideology of erudition and the theological concept *lex talionis*" (p. 54).

After stating his goal and the thesis of the book in the first chapter, Noegel discusses literary and non-literary dream texts from various cultures in the ancient Near East. He begins with Mesopotamian enigmatic dream accounts (the Gilgamesh Epic, epistolary documents from Mari) and moves on to those of Egypt (Pharaoh Tantamani's dream), Ugarit (El's dream), the Hebrew Bible (Genesis and Daniel), Greece (Homer and Artemidorus), and the Babylonian Talmud. Each chapter is meant to illustrate the major points covered in chapter 1, such as the mantic context of the production and transmission of the text, the hermeneutics of punning in dream interpretation, its mantic ideology, and the possible Mesopotamian influence on other oneirocritic literatures of the ancient Near East. In the concluding chapter, he fleshes out some of the implications of his study such as the formative role of cuneiform script in the construction of Mesopotamian divinatory conceptions and his preference for the term "enigmatic" to the more traditional "symbolic." Noegel argues that the oft-cited typology that distinguishes message dreams from symbolic ones is less helpful because the ancient approach to dreams was informed by "a logocentric ideology that permitted the perception of images as script, and viscera and stars as texts" (p. 275). The book concludes with sixty-five pages of bibliography. There are, however, no indexes of any kind, which would have enhanced the utility of this book as a reference.

The author's attempt to go beyond cataloging various wordplay phenomena and to establish Mesopotamian mantic influence on other literary traditions by employing the hermeneutics of punning as its definitive evidence is certainly commendable. But when it comes to discussion of some of the textual data, this book leaves something to be desired in that the hermeneutics of punning is sometimes not as obvious as he would have us believe. This may be owing to the confusion in two areas that the author's analysis of punning in oneirocritic literary texts shows. First, in discussing enigmatic dreams embedded in literary texts, Noegel tends to discuss all the puns in a given literary unit that may be taken to adumbrate the plot of a story; yet some of these do not connect dream content to the text interpretation, unlike in Mesopotamian dream omina where the protasis clearly—judging from the selective examples Noegel provides—leads to the apodosis by way of punning. This is most prominent in the biblical examples. The punning between ראש and ראשון in Gen. 40:13, for instance, does not connect the cupbearer's dream (vv. 9–11) and Joseph's dream interpretation (vv. 12–13). Second, in order to demonstrate the hermeneutics of punning, Noegel frequently depends on metaphorical meanings or leitmotifs in dream reports. For example, he appeals to metaphoric meanings of גפן and פרחת (e.g. "people" and "restored" respectively) in order to explain Joseph's favorable interpretation of the cupbearer's dream (p. 129). But neither word works as a pun in the strict sense with any word in the dream interpretation. This is in a sense prefigured in the definition of punning that he gives at the beginning of the book (p. 1, n. 2), a definition that encompasses any allusive use of language, such as metaphor, leitmotif through a key word, alliteration, and so forth. This seems to be an attempt to stretch "punning" into more than what it is. Abrams, for instance, defines "pun" as a "play on words that are either identical in sound ('homonyms') or similar in sound, but are sharply diverse in meaning."[1] Furthermore, the metaphorical sense of a given word can still remain ambivalent or multivalent. All this seems to show that wordplay, as it is defined so broadly, does not determine one interpretation, contrary to Noegel's argument to that effect (p. 40), although it may narrow the parameters of interpretation.

The reservations discussed above notwithstanding, Noegel's book is highly recommended to anyone who is interested in the role of wordplay in the interpretation of dreams, both for the author's insightful observations and for his up-to-date discussion of ancient Near Eastern dreams and dream reports.

[1] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York, 1971), 139.