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Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature

3rd edition

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In order to develop a historical, cultural, and literary perspective on the literature of the Hebrew Bible and its worldview, I can think of no better approach than immersing oneself in the Akkadian literary tradition—its products and its patterns of development. The Akkadian corpus is vast (and still growing), including genres of virtually every sort, from the more mundane to the sublime, from records and word-lists to epics and prayers. Many texts exist in various versions so that processes of literary formation can often be traced. Studies of the language, imagery, and rhetoric of these texts frequently yield insights into the notions, beliefs, and ideas that lie behind them. Familiarity with Akkadian linguistic, literary, and cultural norms cannot but influence, sometimes profoundly, the contextual and hermeneutical frameworks within which one reads and understands a text such as the Hebrew Bible.

Today's student is being provided with more and more access to the literature of the ancient Near East in general and to that of ancient Mesopotamia in particular. (Since the volume under review is in English, I shall limit my examples to Anglophone publications.) The monumental *Context of Scripture* in its three volumes, edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002), includes many more texts and genres than one found in Pritchard's justly classic and still useful *ANET*. The SBL's Writings from the Ancient World series features several volumes of Akkadian texts in translation (and there are more on the way). Several literary and nonliterary works in Akkadian appear in the multivolume State Archives of Assyria project published in Helsinki. An overview of Akkadian by David Marcus, oriented toward the interests of Biblicalists, is included in the SBL volume *Beyond Babel*, edited by John Kaltner and Steven L. McKenzie (2002). For pure Akkadian in the Bible, one consults Paul V. Mankowski's *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns,

2000), and for etymological relations one eagerly awaits Hayim Tawil's forthcoming *A Biblical Hebrew and Akkadian Comparative Lexicon* (announced by CDL). Cultural, historical, and literary parallels are examined in *Mesopotamia and the Bible*, edited by Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), and an extensive guide to the pertinent use of Akkadian and other ancient Near Eastern texts in biblical studies is Kenton L. Sparks's *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005). All aspects of ancient Near Eastern history and culture are addressed in the multivolumed, multiauthored *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995). The bibliography can go on.

So do we really need Laffan Professor of Assyriology at Yale University Benjamin R. Foster's anthology of Akkadian literature in translation, *Before the Muses*, now in a third, expanded edition? Oh, yes. It does not have everything we need, but now that we have it, we can hardly do without it. It is a magnificent selection of most of the masterpieces and many of the set pieces and occasional pieces of ancient Semitic literature from Mesopotamia (for Sumerian, one can turn to Thorkild Jacobsen's *The Harps That Once...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987], Bendt Alster's two-volume *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer* (CDL, 1997), Herman Vanstiphout's *Epics of Sumerian Kings* [SBLWAW, 2003], and other sources). Foster's volume of over one thousand pages, in a smart and sturdy paperback binding, includes over 360 individual works of poetry and prose, distributed over numerous genres and categories.

The content of the volume extends substantially beyond the contents of the first two editions (1993, 1996) and incorporates the major addition of *From Distant Days*, Foster's condensed paperback edition of 1995—the so-called “Epic of Creation,” *Enūma eliš*. The one major work of Akkadian literature that is not included in *Before the Muses* is arguably the major work—the Epic of Gilgamesh. For that astonishing poem, we have had many English translations, including the excellent volume by Benjamin R. Foster himself, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Norton, 2001), which features introductions, parallel material from Sumerian, Hittite, and Akkadian, and critical essays by William Moran, Thorkild Jacobsen, Rivkah Harris, and Hillary Major. Another significant but deliberate omission is that of the scholastic literature—manuals for divination, scribal activity, and other learned functions—which are excluded for lack of the space that is necessary to do justice to these text types (omens comprise the largest category of Akkadian literature). Such texts would also demand much more background material from the translator and patience from the reader than the more familiar poetry types and narratives that comprise the bulk of the volume.

Among the texts newly included in the expanded edition of *Before the Muses* are some third-millennium texts from Ebla (a paean to the sun and an intriguing incantation) and Akkad (royal inscriptions of the *res gestae* type); some of the Mari prophecies; the prologue and epilogue to the laws of Hammurapi; the inscription of Samsuiluna, son of Hammurapi, which features a dialogue among the gods; four love poems from the Old Babylonian period, including the dialogue between the lovers; six relatively short creation accounts; the extraordinary letter to a god delineating Sargon II of Assyria's eighth campaign; some laments, prayers, parodies, incantations, and diatribes; and the bilingual (Sumerian-Akkadian) poem "in praise of the scribal art." The last two texts in the volume, among the newly added, are a lyric about Ishtar and Tammuz in a setting that recalls the Song of Songs and an "apocalyptic" prophecy reminiscent of Daniel's vision of the succession of empires.

Since this new edition includes several texts written or copied outside Mesopotamia proper, I would have incorporated the peculiar but lengthy and fascinating inscription of Idrimi, king of Alalakh, from mid-fifteenth-century northern Syria. Some of us see in this Akkadian text a prose narrative that is culturally related to biblical prose narrative. For now, see, for example, my treatment in "Autobiographies from Ancient Western Asia," in *Civilizations from the Ancient Near East*, 4:2421–32, and Tremper Longman III's in *Context of Scripture*, 1:479–80.

This third edition of *Before the Muses* is arranged like its two-volume, hardcover predecessors. It is made to serve the general reader, the student, and the specialist alike. The introduction gives an overview of Akkadian literature that treats both text types and the literary conventions for reading them, as well as something of the history of discovery and publication of the texts. Neither the selection of material nor the introductions and notes are tailored to the needs and special interests of students of the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, Biblicists are apt to be particularly interested in Foster's concise discussion of authorship (including divine revelation) and intertextual phenomena, whose potential implications for the history of biblical literature will be evident. It is useful to know, for example, that Mesopotamian authors might freely incorporate extant compositions within their texts.

Concerning the perennially challenging question of the possible oral origins of literary texts, Foster indicates that no "singer of tales" is explicitly mentioned and that no direct attestation to oral composition has been found. Nonetheless, in discussing the development of different versions of a literary text, Foster observes that, "with respect to form, texts that lent themselves readily to expansion or shortening seem to have had the best chances of survival. In general, the greater a text's capacity to change in length, without losing its contours, the more likely successive generations were to preserve it"

(47). Those of us inclined to presuppose the existence of oral stages of development in some of the Mesopotamian literature may see in the phenomena described by Foster possible evidence of bard-like composition. In any event, Foster does not simply render his own opinions. His judicious descriptions and assessments are accompanied throughout by pertinent and wide-ranging bibliographic references, expanded and brought up to date for this edition.

One quibble I have is that in certain prose texts, where the discourse turns to parallelism and would seem to constitute poetry, I would want the text to be printed in lines of verse, like other exemplars of poetry in the volume. An example is in the inscription of Samsuiluna, wherein the lines of dialogue tend, as in epic, to be parallelistic in form. On the other hand, there is a tendency toward parallelistic expression in other highly literary compositions, such as the prologue and epilogue of Hammurapi's laws, and one would have difficulty deciding in every case whether one is dealing with prose or poetry or something in between.

The texts are each presented by category and, more or less, by chronological sequence. The volume is divided into four general periods: the archaic (2300–1850 B.C.E.), the classical (1850–1500), the mature (1500–1000), and the late (1000–100). However, in Foster's helpful arrangement, genre trumps era. In order to keep certain classes of texts, such as myths or devotional poetry, together, chronological boundaries are often crossed. Each text is provided with a general introduction and is followed by bibliographic references to the cuneiform publication, text editions, translations, and sometimes selected studies. Asterisks within the translation alert the advanced reader to textual notes following a text or group of texts that indicate uncertain or disputed readings and the basis for the reading adopted by Foster. This information is a great service to the specialist. Technical, explicatory, and bibliographic information for all serious readers is provided in numbered footnotes.

The footnotes to *Enūma eliš*, for example, indicate sources and parallels, provide explanations and interpretations, including secondary meanings, puns, and the popular etymology of names, and direct the reader to pertinent secondary literature. Often explications drawn from ancient commentaries are cited. The material is all up-to-date, although it is in the nature of the vigorous field of Assyriology that new material is continuously being published. Thus, for example, at about the same time that this new edition of *Before the Muses* appeared, the first comprehensive text edition of *Enūma eliš* was published (Philippe Talon, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma Eliš* [SAACT 4; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005]).

The new text edition does not necessarily settle philological dilemmas, of course. For example, in tablet IV, line 139, Foster opts to read *išdud maška*, “(Marduk, after splitting Ti’awat in two) “stretched out the hide,” spreading half her carcass across the sky like a waterskin, preventing the water above the firmament, so to speak, from raining down. Talon (see above, 56) reads *išdud parka*, “he drew a bolt” across the sky to keep the heavenly water from falling. The alternate readings result from the bivalence of the cuneiform sign *bar/maš*. I tend to side with Talon in this instance, on the basis of comparative biblical evidence. The book of Job is known to describe the deity’s primordial combat with Sea in terms redolent of *Enūma eliš*. For instance, a word in Job 26:13 is redivided by many of us to read שם ים שפרה, “he put Sea in his net,” in light of *Enūma eliš* IV 95: “The Lord (viz., Marduk) spread out his net (*saparru*, cognate to Hebrew שפרה/ספרה) and engulfed her (Ti’awat).” In Job 38:8–10 YHWH restrains Sea with a door-bolt (בריה ודלתים; see, e.g., Marvin H. Pope, *Job* [AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965], 251), an image that favors the reading of “bolt” in the apparent *Enūma eliš* parallel.

The Biblicist using *Before the Muses* will have to do more legwork and use more imagination than one would in using, say, *The Context of Scripture*, where possible parallels are routinely suggested by the editors. Thus, for example, the proverbial saying embedded in the last stanza of the so-called “Dialogue of Pessimism”—“Who is so tall as to reach to heaven? Who is so broad as to encompass the netherworld?” (Foster, 926)—has parallels in Job 11:8 and elsewhere in the Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern literature. One would have liked Foster at least to have referred the reader to Frederick E. Greenspahn’s article, “A Mesopotamian Proverb and Its Biblical Reverberations,” *JAOS* 114 (1994): 33–38, where these and the other references may be found.

However, it would be churlish to fault Foster for occasional omissions when he has furnished us in this book with so much textual material and accompanying information. And it would be unfair to expect that Foster serve the special interests of the Biblicist when he has a more universal humanistic purpose, as well as an Assyriological one, in mind. The aim of the volume is to present a broad and long view of Akkadian literature, and Foster has done this superbly. All those interested in world literature—and I would hope that Biblicists are to be counted in this number—are deeply in his debt.