



Sparks, Kenton L.

Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005. Pp. xxxvii + 514.
Hardcover. \$39.95. ISBN 1565634071.

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This volume fills an important gap in the existing resources for understanding the Hebrew Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context. We have important compendia of a wide range of relevant ancient Near Eastern texts, including the venerable but dated *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ANET) and the more recent three-volume *The Context of Scripture* (COS), both of which usually include introductions to the specific texts they contain, but these treatments are all too brief. Similarly, one can find anthologies of texts from specific locations that contain fuller discussion of the literature of a specific region. Now this work combines the best of both approaches by providing solid discussions of a wide range of ancient Near Eastern literature relevant to the Hebrew Bible, organized both by genre and by geographic regions.

The book's introduction provides a theoretical basis for what follows with a clear discussion of the comparative analysis of genres. Chapter 1 then considers the archives and libraries of ancient texts discovered in Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, and Persia. After an orientation to the issues of language, writing, literacy, and textual canonicity, Sparks discusses the location, language, material, types of literature, and date of each find. Chapter 2 moves to wisdom, grouping the regional bodies of literature in terms of "standard" and "speculative" wisdom and providing an overview of the main

representatives of each category. Subsequent chapters are devoted in turn to “Hymns, Prayers, and Laments”; “Love Poetry (and Related Texts)”; “Rituals and Incantations”; “Intermediary Texts: Omens and Prophecies”; “Apocalyptic and Related Texts”; “Tales and Novellas”; “Epics and Legends”; “Myth”; “Genealogies, King Lists, and Related Texts”; “Historiography and Royal Inscriptions”; “Law Codes”; “Treaty and Covenant”; and “Epigraphic Sources from Syria-Palestine and Its Environs.”

In the preface Sparks outlines how he has structured this material, both within each chapter and in the book as a whole. Since much of the ancient Near Eastern literature was found as part of collections and was copied by trained scribes, he envisions the first two chapters as important for understanding the subsequent genres. Similarly, he discusses historiographies after narrative and chronological genres such as tales, legends, king lists, and the like, since the latter constitute source material used in the production of the former. Each chapter also follows a definite order: a general introduction to the specific genre(s) is followed by discussion of individual examples, with each accompanied by a bibliography comprising (where applicable) texts and translations, and only then scholarly treatments. Specific texts are organized geographically in terms of importance, which is usually Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria/Palestine, and Hatti (there are occasional deviations when a later region is more significant); on occasion other areas are also included, such as Persia (apocalypses and historiographies) and Greece (apocalypses, genealogies, historiographies, law codes). The individual texts are also organized chronologically within a region, all of which makes it easier to note development and influence from place to place and over time. Each chapter (except the last) ends with “Concluding Observations” that summarize the preceding treatments and usually, but not always, indicate similarities with the Hebrew Bible plus a general bibliography.

It is impossible in a review to even begin to consider in detail the texts dealt with in this book, and more general comments will have to suffice. The range of material covered is comprehensive but not totally inclusive, as Sparks acknowledges. The amount of published comparative material alone, to say nothing of finds yet to be published, is simply too vast to be treated in a single volume. Of course, one could always quibble over an inclusion or omission (e.g., on one occasion when he does assert inclusivity, namely, that there are eight Ugaritic texts mentioning the *marzēah*, Sparks misses *KTU* 4.399), but the selection is generally both judicious and appropriate, with all the major texts one would expect plus important lesser-known examples. At points the volume might benefit from more cross-references among genres, such as with the story of Wenamun; Sparks correctly classifies this as a “tale,” but it would be helpful to have a note under “Intermediary Texts” that Wenamun succeeds in his mission when his god possesses a local seer, an instance of ecstatic prophecy. I also missed having “Concluding Observations” in the final chapter relating the inscriptional evidence to the Hebrew Bible.

But these are minor points. Overall, the breadth and depth of Sparks's familiarity with these texts and the scholarly interpretation of them is evident on every page. The various bibliographies are up to date as of the book's initial publication, with few gaps. In response to the author's request to be informed of lacunae (xv), he is probably already aware of these recent publications: Gordon J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006); and Mark S. Smith, *The Rituals and Myths of the Feast of the Goodly Gods of KTU/CAT 1.23* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006). A few earlier items that were overlooked include Conrad E. L'Heureux, *Rank among the Canaanite Gods: El, Ba'al and the Repha'im* (HSM 21; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979); John L. McLaughlin, *The Marzēah in the Prophetic Literature: References and Allusions in Light of the Extra-Biblical Evidence* (VTSup 86; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 11–31 (for the Ugaritic *marzēah*); and J. Glen Taylor, "A First and Last Thing to Do in Mourning: KTU 1.161 and Some Parallels," in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* (ed. Lyle Eslinger and J. Glen Taylor; JSOTSup 67; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 151–77.

This book is essential for everyone dealing with the Hebrew Bible in its ancient context (its scholarly value is undoubtedly reflected in the fact that it received a second printing the year after its initial appearance). Taken as a whole, it is a thorough introduction to the variety of genres in ancient Near Eastern literature and their relevance for the Hebrew Bible. The chapters can be consulted individually for an orientation to specific literary forms, exemplars from specific locations, or individual texts, as well as for contemporary scholarship on any aspect of the preceding. In short, all future comparative scholarship will take this book as its starting point. The ability to dip into the book for a specific point of reference is greatly enhanced by the six indexes: modern authors; Hebrew Bible and early Jewish literature; ancient Near Eastern sources; English translations found in *ANET*; English translations found in *COS*; museum numbers, textual realia and standard text publications.

Sparks promises a second volume, already underway, dealing more directly with the Hebrew Bible itself. Based on the current work, that book is eagerly awaited.