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*Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc*

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The year 1753 was an important one for Old Testament studies. It was the year that saw the publication of two major works of scholarship, presenting to the academic world and to the public two grand hypotheses that have had lasting impact on biblical scholarship to the present day: Robert Lowth's definitions of parallelism and Hebrew poetry in his *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum*; and Jean Astruc's principles for source-critical work on the prose text of Genesis in his *Conjectures sur les mémoires originaux dont il paroît que Moÿse s'est servi, pour composer le Livre de la Genèse*.

The 250th anniversary of these publications was marked (and reflected upon!) at a Sacred Conjectures conference in Oxford in April 2003. The contributions from this conference have been published in this volume, edited by John Jarick. The volume is divided into two parts: "On the Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth's *Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*" (seven articles); and "On the Context and Legacy of Jean Astruc's *Conjectures on Genesis*" (five articles). The collection of essays is supplied with a preface, a set of abstracts, and indexes.

Lowth's contribution is often analyzed in the context of the history of biblical studies. According to such analysis, Lowth wrote in opposition to Bishop Hare's metrical system and drew on earlier Jewish exegesis. The essays in *Sacred Conjectures* widen the context of Lowth's work.

Scott Mandelbrote presents an essay on "Biblical Scholarship at Oxford in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: Local Contexts for Robert Lowth's *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*." The key phrase here is "local contexts": the contexts of appointments, careers, and Trinitarian disputes. Often a scholarly contribution as that of Lowth is analyzed solely in its history-of-

biblical-scholarship context. Mandelbrote's essay gives an insight into the complexity of personal and political agendas that shape the production and reception of scholarly ideas.

Anna Cullhed views Lowth from the point of view of the history of poetics. Lowth's lasting contribution to biblical studies is well-known, but his lectures were also lectures on poetics in general, and Cullhed explores Lowth's contribution in that line of research. This also helps one to understand Lowth in relation to the epochal shift between classicism and romanticism. Lowth regarded poetry as "the language of the passions," which makes him a forerunner to the romantic movement; at the same time, he understood poetry as a means to an end, which makes him belong to a classicist view of poetry.

Stephen Prickett explores "Robert Lowth and the Idea of Biblical Tradition." The fact that Lowth uses the word "tradition" only three times in his *De sacra poesi* and in his *Isaiah: A New Commentary* (1778) may be a coincidence, but it may also be due to the fact that the idea of *tradition* in the political and religious pluralism of the eighteenth-century England was gradually becoming an idea of *traditions*.

Christoph Bultmann, in a pleasant and erudite essay, "After Horace: Sacred Poetry at the Centre of the Hebrew Bible," discusses Lowth's bold choice of Hebrew poetry as the subject for his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry, in the context of eighteenth-century English literary culture and the religious discussions of the time. A close reading of Horace reveals that, in Horace's view, poets should not occupy themselves with lofty themes. According to the Horatian view, "there is enough to observe in human life to occupy a poet and entertain a reader, and although some touches of religious convention here and there may not distort the work of art, there is no need for a poet to go beyond an attitude of such restrained piety" (Bultmann, 77). How does one read biblical poetry in an age in which Horace is the patron saint of the literary culture? Lowth's solution was to extend the narrow limits that Horace set for poetry by making Longinus's notions of the sublime central in his understanding of poetry. Poetry from now on was the language of the passions! Bultmann sees a theological significance of making poetry the center of the Old Testament: "traditional conceptual and doctrinal definitions recede from the centre as the focus of exegetical interest shifts to the poetic texts in all their diversity" (81). This, Bultmann suggests, is perhaps more important to theology today than the technicalities of parallelism.

John Rogerson has retrieved a neglected masterpiece of biblical scholarship, Charles-François Houbigant's *Biblia Sacra*—from 1753! Rogerson not only demonstrates how much Lowth owed to Houbigant but also presents a few neglected emendations that could be worth considering for modern biblical scholarship.

Markus Witte treats the literary genre of the book of Job. Lines are drawn to Lowth's treatment of the book of Job in his *De sacra poesi*, but the essay offers a lot more than that and is in reality a condensed history of research on the book of Job focusing on the question of genre.

Wilfred G. E. Watson's "The Study of Hebrew Poetry: Past—Present—Future" is a gold mine of an annotated bibliography of recent and current work of Hebrew poetry and sets out questions to be explored and methods to be applied and developed in the future.

Rudolf Smend introduces the book's section on Jean Astruc with a survey on Astruc's life and work in his essay "Jean Astruc: A Physician as a Biblical Scholar." Smend borrows from Goethe the illustrative image of a surgeon who also treats the Bible with scalpel and probe. The essay, which is fascinating and full of much detail and vivid description, concludes with a report on the (lacking) reception in France and the (reluctant) acceptance in Germany of Astruc's work. It is interesting that Johann David Michaelis, who edited and commented on Lowth's *De sacra poesi* with great enthusiasm, treated Astruc's work in a very condescending manner. It was Michaelis's Göttingen successor, Eichhorn, who saw the possibilities in Astruc's thesis and added to the theory.

Pierre Gibert, who has done the scholarly community a great service by producing a new annotated edition of Astruc's *Conjectures* (1999), presents a relatively unknown predecessor to Astruc, Henning Bernhard Witter, born in Hildesheim south of Hanover. His work *Jura israelitarum* (the title is much longer) was unknown to Astruc. It precedes the thesis of Astruc in an intuitive kind of way, as is stated in the title of the essay: "De l'intuition à l'évidence: La multiplicité documentaire dans la Genèse chez H. B. Witter et Jean Astruc."

Jan Christian Gertz compares Astruc and his analysis of the sources in Genesis with Benno Jacob (1862–1945), who denied the validity of source criticism. The *Conjectures* of Astruc is analyzed in terms of its scientific consistency and apologetic aim (the dogma of Mosaic authorship is transformed into a historical thesis: Moses was an "inspired historian"). Astruc became the father of modern pentateuchal research, whereas Jacob unintentionally contributed to the development of composition history.

Aulikki Nahkola argues and demonstrates that we have in Astruc's *Conjectures* "the genesis of method in biblical scholarship." Lowth's contribution to modern biblical scholarship is analyzed in much detail, and what is perhaps more important, the (often tacit) presuppositions of biblical scholarship, are discussed: when Astruc and virtually every biblical scholar ever since registers repetitions, inconsistencies, and anachronisms as something unusual, it is only because one has a notion of "what a text should be like." But where did Astruc get this notion of "what a text should be like"? Nahkola shows how

humanists turned the Bible into a literary document like any other: “one that reflected the inherently rational, continuous experience of the Enlightenment” (218). Lowth, however, represents, as Nahkola puts it, “a very different concept of literature, where repetition is seen as an artistic device” (218–19).

Otto Kaiser presents the life and work of Hermann Hupfeld in “An Heir of Astruc in a Remote German University: Hermann Hupfeld and the ‘New Documentary Hypothesis.’”

The book as a whole is well-conceived. Many facets of the intellectual contexts, to which the work Lowth and Astruc responded and to which they gave rise, are explored. As the subtitle of the book clearly has it: *The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc*. In addition, many of the essays are concerned with today’s questions in biblical scholarship and present (highly informed!) suggestions to tomorrow’s exegetical work. I strongly recommend the book as an introduction to and reflections on two of the most important ideas in biblical scholarship.

What one could have wished is an article that brought the ideas of Lowth and Astruc together and analyzed their presuppositions critically. It is remarkable how little Astruc is mentioned in the articles on Lowth and vice versa. Yet Lowth and Astruc produced not, as Nahkola would have it, two different concepts of literature but rather a concept of *poetry* (where repetition is seen as an artistic device) and a concept of *prose* (in which consistency is expected). These notions of poetry and prose are very much alive in modern scholarship (see further my “Why Is There a Documentary Hypothesis, and What Does It Do to You If You Use It?” at [www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=566](http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=566)).