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

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The year 1753 was a good year for Old Testament scholarship. It saw the publication of two seminal works: Bishop Robert Lowth's *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*; and Jean Astruc's *Conjectures* on Genesis (published anonymously when the author was Professor of Medicine at the College Royal in Paris). Both works have shaped the nature of biblical studies down to the present day, Lowth's with regard to the poetry in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and Astruc's with regard to its prose.

To mark and reflect on the 250th anniversary of the publication of these two works in the year 2003, the University of Oxford hosted a Conference entitled *Sacred Conjectures* at St. Catherine's College and New College (Lowth's own college). An international group of scholars discussed Astruc's and Lowth's contributions, and the present volume is the result of that conference.

The first part of the volume, on the context and legacy of Lowth's *Sacred Poetry*, contains seven essays: S. Mandelbrote on "Biblical Scholarship at Oxford in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: Local Contexts for Robert Lowth's *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*" (1–24); A. Cullhed on "Robert Lowth and Eighteenth-Century Poetics" (25–47); Stephen Prickett, "Robert Lowth and the Idea of Biblical Tradition" (48–61); C. Bultmann, "After Horace: Sacred Poetry at the Centre of the Hebrew Bible" (62–82), J. Rogerson, "Charles-François Houbigant: His Background, Work and Importance for Lowth" (83–92), M. Witte, "Die literarische Gattung des Buches Hiob: Robert Lowth und seine Erben" (ET: "The Literary Genre of the Book of Job: Robert Lowth and His Successors"; 93–123) and W. G. E. Watson, "The Study of Hebrew Poetry: Past—Present—Future" (124–54).

The second part, on the context and legacy of Astruc's *Conjectures* on Genesis, has five contributions: R. Smend on "Jean Astruc: A Physician as a Biblical Scholar" (157–73); P. Gibert on "De l'intuition à l'évidence: La multiplicité documentaire dans la Genèse chez H. B. Witter et Jean Astruc" (ET: "From Intuition to Evidence: The Multiple Documents Hypothesis according to H. B. Witter and Jean Astruc"; 174–89); J. C. Gertz on "Jean Astruc and Form Criticism in the Book of Genesis" (190–203); A. Nahkola on "The *Memoires* of Moses and the Genesis of Method in Biblical Criticism: Astruc's Contribution" (204–20); and, nicely rounding off the work, O. Kaiser's essay on "An Heir of Astruc in a Remote German University: Hermann Hupfeld and the 'New Documentary Hypothesis'" (220–48).

All in all, the volume fulfills its two main aims admirably. First, the various essays provide an overview of the various contexts in which our two heroes were shaped, in particular the intellectual milieu in which the questions arose to which they provided the groundbreaking answers that made their contributions such long-lasting legacies. Second, they provide detailed background knowledge of the afterlife of both works, their influence on Lowth's and Astruc's contemporaries as well as on subsequent generations.

In doing so, this volume makes an important contribution to the history of the discipline of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies. It sketches for a new generation of students of the Bible part of the genesis of our discipline, helping us to appreciate the heroes of the past and their interactions with neighboring fields of study. Not least, the volume has resurrected from near obscurity some of the heirs of Lowth and Astruc, such as Hermann Hupfeld, Henning Bernhard Witter, and Charles-François Houbigant.

What this book does, it does very well. Wilfred Watson's study on the past, present, and future of the study of Hebrew poetry also draws out the significance of Lowth for the present and the future of the discipline. A comparable essay on Astruc's significance for the present and future study of the Pentateuch, however, would have been helpful. What I have also missed are reflections on the limitations of Lowth's paradigm of *parallelismus membrorum* and the limitations of the Documentary Hypothesis in its various forms as it developed from Astruc's work. What is it that made the work of these two giants inspire and dominate the study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for the last 250 years, longer than any other theory? In part, the answer lies in the genius and the quality of their contributions. Yet in the last two decades or so, the number of voices that urge new approaches to the study of Hebrew poetry and prose has steadily increased. What is it that strangely makes us cling to theories that have, by now, almost outlived their usefulness and threaten to stifle new approaches? This question is not so easy to answer.

The volume is well edited. It opens with an informative preface by John Jarick, the editor (vii–viii), as well as abstracts of all the contributions (ix–xvii). The backmatter includes indices of references and authors. Typing errors are virtually absent, even in the German and French contributions. This volume is a joy to read and a treasure to keep.