Michael D. Swartz

The Signifying Creator: Nontextual Sources of Meaning in Ancient Judaism


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This slender volume (119 pages) represents the revised version of the inaugural Benita and Sigmund Stahl Lectures in Jewish Studies at the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. Earlier versions or portions of three of the six chapters have already appeared (in 2002, 2003, and 2009). As such, it is not surprising that the author seeks to present the reader not with a comprehensive study but rather with a series of vignettes.

As Swartz explains in the preface to the work, he has long been intrigued by things that language does other than generate meaning. While the average reader might not understand what Swartz means, he explains right off that in the course of his study of Jewish magic and mysticism he often studied language that most people would think is meaningless but apparently is not. Within the framework of this background and while studying postbiblical concepts of sacrifice, Swartz noticed that patterns of thought in midrash, synagogue poetry, and ritual practices constituted “a kind of indigenous semiotics of the nontextual”; this formed the basis of the book under review. Ancient Judaism embedded signs in the world that could be read with the proper knowledge and consciousness. Meaning could be found in unexpected ways, and Swartz is particularly interested in those that took place in a ritual context and especially within the framework
of the “material turn” in which objects, body parts, and images were seen to speak to the deepest needs of communities and individuals.¹

Swartz seeks to study those sources that provide evidence that concrete objects, garments, and everyday events spoke to Jews no less eloquently than the Torah itself and indeed that these may even provide an alternative to the myth of the centrality of Torah and its authoritative interpreters that lies at the heart of normative Judaism. Swartz examines this in four stages that more or less correspond to the chapters of the book. The first explores the idea that, before God created the world, he created both the Torah and the Jewish ritual system and that he intended to signify to human beings by embedding meaning in animals, objects, and events. The next stage considers how a particular set of objects, the sacred vestments of the high priests, served as a source of a large and complex system of interpretation. Finally, he examines ways in which ancient and medieval Jews developed systems to decipher all this, that is, divination and the final stage returns to creation, bringing it teleology by exploring legends in which created objects act out the divine will through their own agency.

Right at the beginning, Swartz points out that the work has a “peculiarity”; others might prefer to call it a “problem.” There is seemingly an inherent contradiction in the work: the subject is why non-textual sources were important to ancient Jews, yet the sources that the author examines are Jewish texts of all kinds of the rabbinic canon, from synagogue poetry, and from manuals of divination. He makes short shrift of ancient Jewish art, in the synagogue and elsewhere, by saying that he is dealing with something else: the idea of location of meaning in the physical world and not its visual expression. His claims regarding the potential of Jewish art for his topic are not convincing. While the author can legitimately decide what he seeks to study or not, perhaps he should contemplate a change in title, removing “nontextual” and finding some other appropriate word.

Indeed, by trying to deflect objections to the underlying basis of his project by stating that Jewish art is not relevant or helpful to him, he shows how removed he is from entire worlds of “nontextual” in which material objects do not need texts to impart meaning. The study of Jewish divination and its Umwelt, for example (ch. 4: “Divination and Its Discontents”), and there is no doubt that Swartz is an expert in this, might have benefited from some study of or reference to the actual physical objects such as dice or astragaloi.² These and other objects in their object physical form are also signifiers. That having been

said, and accepting that a work on “nontextual” revolves around texts, it is possible to return to what Swartz has written and not to dwell on what he has not written.

As mentioned above, the four stages of Swartz’s examination of the nontextual correspond to the four main chapters of the book. After the introduction, which also serves as chapter 1 ("Introduction: Outside the Text"), Swartz studies myths of creation in Judaism and especially the midrashim that deal with procreation, those things conceived before creation as well as relevant *piyyutim* (ch. 2: “Myths of Creation”). The result is threefold. First, it is shown that the Torah was not the main precreated instrument of creation nor the only one, but rather at least some Jews thought that the temple and the sacrificial and ritual system were also primordial elements of creation. Second, the author shows how this realization inspired creativity, poetry, and systems of interpretation. All this led at least some Jews to believe that God embedded signification in the natural world so that human beings could use those signs in their daily lives. The next three chapters deal with three manifestations of that embedded signification.

Chapter 3 ("The Semiotics of the Priestly Vestments") deals with the significance of the clothing of the high priest after the destruction of the temple, when the vestments of the high priest ceased to be physical objects but became just objects of discourse. The vestments were imagined to have an active role in representing Israel before God, with their fabric, form, and order commanded by God, taking on layers of significance and the ability to perform significant functions. Thus, the rabbis had the vestments play a role in Israel’s drama of atonement. The liturgical poets presented vestments as both representatives of Israel as well as active instruments in the entrance of the priest to the divine world. Not only did the clothes “make” the high priest, but to some extent the high priest was emptied of his own personality when the vestments became the vehicle of his essence.

Chapter 4 ("Divination and Discontents") discusses Jewish divination and divination techniques within the framework of divination as a general cultural-religious phenomenon. Swartz shows how Jewish divination was a system in which every detail of the environment was filled with meaning and then discusses the divination techniques that developed seeking to reveal those encoded messages. The techniques might have been available to only a few, but they could become accessible to those who would patronize those few. The signs might be embedded in everyday actions, and thus the particular verse a child studied or games a child played could have great significance for the initiated who knew how to interpret them. Or divinatory procedures might be “establishment” such as the Urim and Thumim of the high priest. There were also forms of divination based on celestial events, reflected perhaps by the use of the zodiac in synagogues. Some forms were forbidden, although it was not always clear as to what
differentiated these forms from what was permitted, or at least tolerated. In divination the focus is clearly the object and its interpreter, such as a priest, and not the text and its interpreter, the sage.

In chapter 5 ("Bubbling Blood and Rolling Bones") Swartz shows how some of the embedded objects, creatures, and natural elements in creation serve not only to reveal a divine plan for Israel but how they also sometimes act on their own and complete the fate of an individual. To cite an example, blood might have a life of its own, such as the blood of Zechariah killed in the temple precincts. His blood took it upon itself to avenge the murder and to extract justice. The earth, seemingly in cooperation, refused to accept the blood of Zechariah, and God does not intervene until he has to. Mosquitoes, frogs, snakes, and scorpions are all ready to the bidding of God and are given the agency and freedom to do so. Thus, these creatures may sometimes know something that we do not; however, in spite of the fact that they are part of the divine plan, not all of them will tell the truth.

This may be a short book, but it is chock full of insightful and powerful ideas. Swartz reads ancient material that has been read and studied numerous times and succeeds in revealing the embedded signifiers, to use his phraseology, and in creating new ways to understand ancient and medieval Judaism. It is hoped that he will transform these vignettes into a larger comprehensive work that might also include the study of the physical object qua object and its embedded meanings. All who are interested in Judaism ancient, medieval, or modern will be well served by reading this fascinating book.