

Review of The Context of Scripture

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Book Reviews

The Context of Scripture. Edited by William W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002. Vol. 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World, 28 + 599 pp., \$129.00; Vol. 2: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World, 26 + 438 pp., \$131.00; Vol. 3: Archival Documents from the Biblical World, 54 + 406 pp., \$129.00.

William Hallo's monumental work, *The Context of Scripture* (COS), is the logical successor to James Pritchard's equally ambitious (for its time) *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ANET), which has served as the standard for English readers since 1950 (3rd ed., 1969). Their aims are very similar. ANET's goal was "to make available to students of the ancient Near East—serious students of the Old Testament, we believe, are necessarily such—the most important extrabiblical texts in translations which represent the best understanding which present-day scholarship has achieved" (p. 19). COS's purpose is "to assemble the existing renderings [of ancient Near Eastern texts], update them where necessary, and indicate their relevance for biblical scholarship" (1:25).

Beyond this, COS's aims are more ambitious and nuanced, even if a bit confused in their expression. They are to bring together a "combination of an intertextual and a contextual approach to biblical literature [that] holds out the promise that this millennial corpus will continue to yield new meanings on all levels: the meaning that it holds for ourselves in our contemporary context[;] the meanings it has held for readers, worshippers, artists and others in the two millennia and more since the close of the canon; the meaning that it held for its own authors and the audiences of their times; and finally the meanings that it held when it was part of an earlier literary corpus. It is to the clarification of that oldest level of meaning that *The Context of Scripture* is dedicated" (1:28). (The ambiguity in this statement lies in the antecedent for "it" in the first sentence: grammatically, it most naturally should be "this millennial corpus," but in the context of the statement, it appears to be "biblical literature.")

COS's expanded goals reflect a half-century's worth of discussion on the place of ancient Near Eastern texts in the study of the Bible (and also the reverse question). No longer are biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts simply to be lined up and "compared," on a one-to-one basis, as many did in the first part of the 20th century. Now, scholars of a "contextual" approach—of whom Hallo is the leading spokesman—speak of understanding the Bible's context in both a vertical and a horizontal dimension, and Hallo highlights this as one of the major differences between COS and ANET (1:25–26). The horizontal dimension is roughly the synchronic one—i.e. the geographical, historical, religious, political, and literary setting in which a given text was

created and disseminated (1:25)—whereas the vertical dimension is roughly the diachronic (or “intertextual”) one—i.e. “a vertical axis between the earlier texts that helped inspire it and later texts that reacted to it” (1:26). This diachronic dimension functions on the text-critical level (where there are multiple copies and editions of the same text) as well as for purposes of comparison of different texts that are related genre-wise.

ANET accounted very well for the horizontal dimension, but not as self-consciously as COS for the vertical one. Thus, for example (to illustrate the text-critical principle), in ANET, Theophile J. Meek’s translation of Hammurapi’s law code is done from the [JETS 47:1 (March 2004) p. 138] Louvre stela, supplemented in a few cases by one tablet from Nippur, and large gaps nevertheless remain in the resulting text, whereas in COS, Martha Roth’s translation takes into account some 50 different versions, and almost no gaps remain. In addition (to illustrate the genre principle), COS comments much more in its introductions about relations among the various law codes from different time periods—Lipit-Ishtar, Esh-nunna, Hammurapi, Middle Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and others—than does ANET.

The geographical breadth of coverage in ANET and COS is similar. Each volume in COS covers Egyptian, Hittite, West Semitic, Akkadian, and Sumerian texts, in that order. In ANET, the first organizing principle was genre, not geography, but its geographical reach was roughly the same.

COS is a larger project than ANET, containing more texts and a greater number and variety of contributors. ANET began with 11 contributors in 1950 and grew to all of 18 by 1969. By contrast, COS includes a total of 63 contributors, 37 in volume 1, 33 in volume 2 (22 of these new), and 17 in volume 3 (4 new). Several of COS’s contributors are recognized evangelicals—including the project’s associate editor, K. Law-son Younger, Jr., whose role was more akin to a co-editor—whereas no evangelicals were represented in ANET. ANET’s three editions came to a total of 735 folio-sized pages, while COS’s three volumes come to 1,551 equally large-sized pages. Both works contain the standard apparatus for aid in reading, such as introductions for each text by the translators, bibliographies, explanatory notes, scriptural cross-references, and extensive indexes of Scripture and topics, although COS’s indexes are significantly more extensive. Another difference between the two projects is that ANET’s translations were all done specifically for that work, whereas COS uses some translations that have appeared previously in addition to its original translations.

COS uses four criteria for inclusion, all things being equal:(1) newer texts, whether newly discovered or newly reedited; (2) complete texts; (3) well-preserved texts; and (4) texts shown to be relevant to biblical studies. In practice, the preference for newer texts means many texts from ANET are missing, although all of the most famous “standards” are included, such as the great creation or flood myths, the important law codes (Eshnunna, Lipit-Ishtar, Hammurapi, and others), the tale of Sinuhe, the Baal myths, the Assyrian royal annals (Tiglath-pileser 3, Sargon 2, Sennacherib, and others), the Babylonian Chronicle, the Babylonian Theodicy, and many more. Two disappointments for me nevertheless were (1) the inclusion in COS only of Tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh Epic—vs. all 12 tablets of the epic in ANET—rendering a contextual understanding of the Babylonian flood story more difficult; and (2) the omission in COS of the administrative documents listing the provisions given to

Jehoiachin in Babylonian captivity (see ANET 308), seemingly minor texts but with important connections to 2 Kgs 25:27–30.

How is COS organized? Volume 1 contains what Hallo calls “canonical compositions,” a term that has confused some reviewers. By this, he does not mean “holy” or “religious” texts like the Bible, but rather works belonging to the Mesopotamian or Hittite “canon,” i.e., those compositions intended for long-term preservation, studied, copied, and preserved in the scribal schools (2.21). (The term is used today in such phrases as “the Shakespearean canon” or “the Western canon,” i.e. a standard, bounded corpus of works that is preserved and studied. Likewise, scholars of Mesopotamia often refer to the “Ashurbanipal canon” to refer to the great collections of works this king assembled in the library at Nineveh.)

Under the five geographical headings mentioned above, the canonical compositions in volume 1 are further classified in terms of their “focus”: divine, royal, and individual. Under “Divine Focus” are found cosmologies, myths, hymns, prayers, rituals, incantations, divinations, lamentations, even certain songs and love poems. Under “Royal Focus” are grouped historiographical texts, biographies and autobiographies, epics, royal hymns, oracles, and certain instructions. Under “Individual Focus” are found narratives, [JETS 47:1 (March 2004) p. 139] “prophecies,” instructions and school texts, love poems, proverbs and other wisdom texts, even disputations, fables, and humor. Needless to say, not every one of these categories is attested in every geographical area.

The monumental inscriptions in volume 2 consist of everything from great building inscriptions and royal annals, which are relatively lengthy, to short seal impressions and inscriptions on bowls, ivories, etc. Some of the categories overlap those in volume 1, particularly some of the Hittite inscriptions. For example, in this volume, the “Bilingual Edict of Hattušili 1 (2.15)” and “The Ten Year Annals of Great King Mursili of Hatti (2.16),” both monumental texts, are very similar in genre to the “historiographical” texts in vol. 1, the “Deeds of Suppiluliuma (1.74)” or “Suppiluliuma IPs two inscriptions telling of “The Hittite Conquest of Cyprus (1.75).”

The archival inscriptions in volume 3 consist mostly of letters, contracts, court cases, and other legal documents. Volume 3 also contains two extensive and helpful indexes for the entire work: (1) Scripture (18 pp.) and (2) names and topics (44 pp.). The latter consists mostly of names (divine, royal, geographical, ethnic, personal, including many biblical names), but it also (unlike ANET) includes some topics (e. g. conditional law, creation, more than a dozen festivals, magic, marriage and marriage customs, scribes, and soul), and more specific items (e.g. asherah, atef-crown, bison, haltikku-wool, irrigation canal, juniper, plow, and yoke). Another helpful feature not found in ANET is the “Register of Contributors” (3.405-6), where one can see at a glance exactly which texts each contributor has translated.

In addition to the short prefaces in each volume and the short introductions to each text, COS also contains seven useful essays on the “contextual” approach, one each in volumes 1 and 2 and five in volume 3, three by Hallo and one each by James K. Hoffmeier, Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., K. Lawson Younger, Jr., and David B. Weisberg.

The translations in COS are mostly smooth, “Niv-style” renditions. Certainly some of the “KJV” feel of ANET is done away with (e.g. “man” now replaces the archaic “seignior” for awilu(m) in the laws of Hammurapi, although losing something of

the essence of awilu in the process). Originally, Hallo desired to use this project as a test of translation theory, whereby there would be “a 1:1 relation in which each word (and only that word) is rendered by an English equivalent,” not only within one language but for every language (1.26). Not surprisingly, this extreme formal-equivalence approach was unattainable, a fact Hallo himself admits in the end (3.13).

How can COS be used? Essentially in the same ways that ANET has been. COS is obviously more up to date, so we find accessible translations of all the important discoveries in recent decades, including the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions containing the references to “Yahweh of Teman and his asherah,” the Jerusalem pomegranate, containing a likely reference to “the temple of Yahweh,” the Tel Dan stele, containing the reference to “the house of David,” the Ketef Hinnom amulets, containing the Aaronic blessing, the Deir Alia plaster inscriptions, containing references to Balaam, and many more, both well-publicized and more obscure. A welcome expansion in COS is the relatively larger corpus of Hittite texts included compared to ANET. The publisher intends to release COS on CD-ROM, as it did with *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (according to Younger in a personal communication), which will allow for greatly expanded uses. It is to be hoped that Brill—as Pritchard did—will also release one or two smaller paperback versions that are more suited to classroom work than the large, three-volume set.

What is the value of COS? In a word: enormous. Assembling this work in a little over a decade was a monumental task for Hallo and Younger, and they deserve much credit for the superior line-up of scholars, the fine choices of texts, and the excellent overall presentation of the work. There is much here to be explored, savored, and used. Given the fast-paced world of archaeological discovery and the advances in publishing, [JETS 47:1 (March 2004) p. 140] COS may not enjoy undisputed sway in biblical studies for close to 50 years the way ANET did, but it undoubtedly will do so for several decades. This treasure trove of texts is a true gift to the scholarly world, and we who study these texts—both biblical and extrabiblical—owe Brill, the editors, and their teams of contributors a great debt of thanks.

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