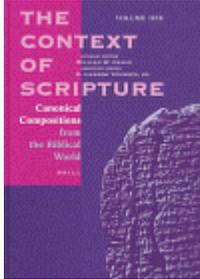


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Hallo, William W. and K. Lawson Younger, eds.

The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World

Leiden: Brill, 1997. Pp. xviii + 599, Hardcover, \$109.50, ISBN 9004106189.

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This substantial work is the first installment of a promised three-volume set. Whereas the first volume is devoted to canonical compositions, the second and third volumes will be devoted to monumental inscriptions and to archival documents from the ancient Near Eastern world. The title's reference to "the context of scripture" is deliberate. The volume contains no biblical texts, yet the work is paradoxically about the Bible. The editors of this ambitious project, William W. Hallo of Yale University and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., of LeTourneau University, have deliberately selected a variety of documents from the ancient Near East and Egypt that readers may compare with portions of the Hebrew Bible. The biblical orientation of this publication is apparent in another respect. The page layout features full cross-referencing to comparable passages in the Hebrew scriptures and other ancient Near Eastern works. In this sense, the compendium has an intertextual orientation.

But, lest readers be misled by the work's title, context is also used in another, very different sense. The editors have asked the translators, all eminent authorities in their fields, to comment on the contexts of their assigned texts. Instead of scriptural context or contemporary context, context in this sense designates a given document's original geographical, historical, religious, political, and literary setting. The contextual approach employed by the various translators thus concentrates on the reconstruction and evaluation of the ancient Near Eastern settings in which these documents were created and disseminated. Some attention is also paid to the questions of genre (*Gattung*), earlier literary influence, and structure. Much less attention, if any, is given to the reconstruction of the later contexts in which these same texts may have been read by worshipers, artists, and scholars in the two or three millennia since their creation.

The work is divided into five major sections: Egyptian canonical compositions, Hittite canonical compositions, West Semitic canonical compositions, Akkadian canonical

compositions, and Sumerian canonical compositions. Each of these major sections is in turn divided into parts and subparts (which may vary), categorized according to the principle of focus. It will be useful to take the first two major sections—Egyptian canonical compositions and Hittite canonical compositions—as examples. Under the first standard heading, "Divine Focus," the section on Egyptian canonical compositions contains subsections on (1) Cosmologies, including selections from the "Book of Nut," the "Coffin Texts Spell 714," the "Pyramid Texts Spell 527," and "The Book of the Dead 112"; (2) Other Myths, including the "Repulsing of the Dragon," the "Legend of Isis and the Name of Re," the "Legend of Astarte and the Tribute of the Sea," and the "Destruction of Mankind"; (3) Hymns, including the "Great Cairo Hymn of Praise to Amun-Re," the "Great Hymn to Osiris," "Two Hymns to the Sun-god," and the "Great Hymn to the Aten"; (4) Prayers, comprising the "Prayers to Re-Harakhti," (5) Harper's Songs, including the "Song from the Tomb of King Intef" and the "Song from the Tomb of Neferhotep"; (6) Divination, Incantation, and Ritual, including the "Execration Texts," the "Dream Oracles," and the "Daily Rituals of the Temple of Amun-Re at Karnak."

Under the second standard heading, "Royal Focus," the section on Hittite canonical compositions contains subsections on (1) Epic, comprising "The Queen of Kanesh and the Tale of Zalpa"; (2) Historiography, including the "Proclamation of Anitta of Kuššar," the "Crossing of the Taurus," the "Deeds of Šuppiluliuma," the "Hittite Conquest of Cyprus: Two Inscriptions of Suppiluliuma [sic] II"; (3) Biography and Autobiography, including "The Proclamation of Telipinu" and the "Apology of Hattušili III"; (4) Oracles, including an "Excerpt from an Oracle Report" and "Assuring the Safety of the King during the Winter." Under the third standard heading, "Individual Focus," the section on Hittite canonical compositions contains subsections on (1) Proverbs, comprising "Hittite Proverbs"; (2) Other Wisdom Literature, including a "Fragment of a Wisdom Text(?)" and an "Excerpt from the Hurro-Hittite Bilingual Wisdom Text"; (3) Instructions, including the "Instructions to Priests and Temple Officials," the "Instructions to Commanders of Border Garrisons," and the "Instructions to the Royal Guard." The final standard component in each section is a bibliography oriented toward recent secondary literature. Some other aids to the reader, most notably the index, glossary, and gazetteer, have been postponed of necessity to the third and concluding volume in the series.

The thrust, organization, and content of *The Context of Scripture* may be best compared with the current industry standard: the third edition of *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET)*, edited by J. B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). One of the great achievements of *ANET* was to assemble for the first time a significant selection of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian texts, edited and translated by an assortment of first-rate academics. These scholars drew upon a bewildering variety of earlier publications not readily accessible to the average biblical scholar. Another notable achievement of *ANET* was to render into English for the first time a number of newly discovered or recovered inscriptions. But *ANET* also had its detractions. First, many of the ancient Near Eastern inscriptions were translated in stilted

and archaizing English, limiting their accessibility to students. Second, the scope of *ANET* was by its nature quite limited. Considering the sheer number of literary, diplomatic, and legal texts available, the translators of *ANET* could only make a small selection. In this respect, the collection of texts appearing in the German series *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, edited by Rykle Borger, Wilhelmus Delsman, et al. (1982-85), was more comprehensive. Third, the translations in *ANET* were accompanied by only the briefest of introductions and furnished with only sparse annotations.

The Context of Scripture fulfills some of the same desiderata fulfilled by *ANET* but moves significantly beyond the older publication. Like *ANET*, this compendium contains both newly recovered or newly (re-)edited texts and well-known older stand-bys. But the editors have also given preference to texts that can be presented in their entirety; to well-preserved rather than fragmentary texts; and to texts whose relevance for biblical studies, by way either of comparison or of contrast, has been demonstrated or argued in the secondary literature. To its great merit, *The Context of Scripture* contains helpful introductions of varying length, up-to-date bibliographical annotations, and detailed, sometimes technical, commentary. That the scholarly apparatus appears in footnote, rather than in endnote, form is a great convenience. Indeed, the readable translations and the detailed scholarly annotations should make the volume attractive to libraries.

Three additional comments may be made about this impressive volume and the larger series of which it is a part. First, a word about terminology. The initial volume of *The Context of Scripture* carries the subtitle *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, but it is unclear what particularly is canonical about these writings. Most people think of a canon as an authoritative or standard group of writings within a given community. Is there any clear evidence that the different societies of the ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian world made such determinations? To be sure, the editors have a fairly open notion of canonical works: "those responses to the world about them by which the creative minds of antiquity sought to come to terms with their environment, real or imaginary." But such a wide-ranging explanation, focusing on literary compositions, effectively creates a new definition of canon. Second, it may be useful to offer a suggestion about the format and price of the volume. The cost of *The Context of Scripture* is considerable, but this cost could be reduced if the series were also published in an inexpensive paperback edition or if certain works from the series were placed online for selective classroom use. Unless the issue of affordability is addressed, the series' good translations and useful scholarly notes, readily accessible to graduate and undergraduate students alike, will be nevertheless unavailable to them because of high cost.

Third, perhaps it is time to rethink one of the central criteria of selection of both *ANET* and the *Context of Scripture*—whether scriptural relevance is a necessary or altogether helpful criterion for inclusion into a volume of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian texts. For people in biblical studies it is certainly convenient to have links pointed out and comparisons made. But one would like to think that even those readers with a keen

interest in the biblical world would also be interested in reading certain literary works from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, regardless of whether those works were similar to or could be directly compared with a particular biblical writing. One hopes that the field has moved far enough along that readers would be interested in the intrinsic worth of these literary works for their own sake.

Given the high quality of this compendium, one of the editors' hopes for this series would seem to be well founded, namely, that *The Context of Scripture* will become a standard reference work in college, seminary, and university libraries well into the twenty-first century.