DOES BIBLICAL STUDIES DESERVE TO BE AN OPEN SOURCE DISCIPLINE?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The disciplines of Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East have always been closely intertwined.¹ Each has informed and been shaped by the other in ways that have created a tight coupling between their respective fields of inquiry. This is shown by their historiography, literary-critical methodology, and linguistic analysis. Yet, as work on the digitization of the ancient Near Eastern textual corpus progresses, a critical difference between the fields of Biblical studies and Assyriology is emerging. While Biblical studies is dominated by proprietary products, developed commercially and sold under license, the vast majority of online resources for Assyriology are based on open source and open access models. As a result, biblical scholars generally pay to license the electronic tools they work with while Assyriologists enjoy an increasing array of resources freely available on the web. In my opinion, the situation in computer assisted Biblical studies is one which, for a number of reasons, should be rectified to follow the Assyriological model more closely. The best way to do this, I will suggest, is for Biblical scholars to take it upon themselves to build the tools to meet their specific research needs.

Many of us who are comfortable with the electronic medium will first conduct an extensive search of online resources for an electronic copy of a text before actually heading to a library to take out a book. With cuneiform literature, for example, we have access to many canonical and quasi-canonical texts online, as well as a respectable and ever growing number

¹ This paper is aimed at Biblical scholars who have an understanding of the technical issues facing application development today. The confluence of research skills with technological know-how is always increasing, and academics are more often called on to have input into devising computer assisted tools to facilitate their own research. As this paper is directed at the discussion around the development of future online resources for biblical research, I have foregone references to printed literature, and refer only to those online resources that are relevant to the discussion. I thank the editors for their patience and guidance on the final form of this essay.
of texts that fall outside the mainstream of Mesopotamian tradition. In
certain electronic corpora it is possible to conduct detailed searches across
huge ranges of material, taking grammatical forms, lexical and semantic
considerations into account. Projects like the Cuneiform Digital Library
Initiative, the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus, and the Corpus of
Ancient Mesopotamian Scholarship have led the way in creating
openly accessible sources for scholars and the general public to use.

The study of the Bible reaches across a much broader demographic
than does the study of the cuneiform traditions from ancient Mesopota-
ia. It is surprising, then, that the use of web based resources, as seen in
Assyriology, is not even more widespread in Biblical studies. The corpus
that directly concerns scholars of the Bible is much smaller in comparison
to the Mesopotamian corpus, and there are a large number of websites
that presently host some form of the biblical text, along with its myriad
translations and some capacity for conducting searches on the literature.
However, major collections, like many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, remain
accessible electronically mainly through the use of commercial products,
such as Accordance and BibleWorks, and only recently have seen the
publication of significant tools online. While there are definite advan-
tages to using stand-alone tools such as these to read, search, and collate
statistics from ancient sources, placing control of these texts in the hands
of private companies is ultimately detrimental to the discipline, as it takes
the task of creating and adapting the tools of research out of the hands
of the scholars who use them.

2. Comparison between Biblical and Assyriological Resources

Open access models promote the development of better, more ‘field ready’
applications for scholarly use. Plus, by using open source platforms to

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2 CDLI, accessed at http://cdli.ucla.edu. All URLs referred to in this essay were active
during the time of writing in December 2012.
5 Created by Oaktree Software Inc. and BibleWorks, LLC respectively. One could
include the Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Reference Library published by Brill, admittedly a
much more specialized product, but one which is priced to compete with the commercial
products just mentioned.
6 A prominent example is the ongoing project by the Israel Antiquities Authority to
publish high resolution images of the Scrolls online in a searchable database. See the paper
by Pnina Shor in the present volume, ‘The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library. The
Digitization Project of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Israel Antiquities Authority’. 