Dead Religion and Contemporary Perspectives: Commending Mesopotamian Data to the Religious Studies Classroom

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Abstract
Ancient Mesopotamian religion offers an under-appreciated body of data to religious studies. Because Mesopotamian religion is ancient and dead, it poses no threat to modern religious convictions. Students approach it with a curious antiquarian’s interest rather than a threatened believer’s resistance and thus freely adopt through it critical concepts in the study of religion. This essay shows how Mesopotamian data can illustrate three such concepts. Moreover, it suggests that because Mesopotamian culture is geographically and chronologically proximate to those that produced the Bible and Quran, this data can provide a unique bridge to critical discussions of the major monotheistic religions.

Keywords
Assyriology and the study of religion, ancient Mesopotamian religion, mythmaking, insider/outsider, pedagogy, cultural embeddedness of religion

“For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as exempli gratia of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion.” So writes Jonathan Z. Smith in the introduction to his Imagining Religion (1982: xi). Smith proceeds to explain that the primary skill in studying religion—though we may include teaching it as well—is the ability to exercise “articulate choice” when utilizing data in one’s work. One must ask: What data will best illustrate or demonstrate the concept at hand? For someone trying to convey broad categorical concepts to students in, for example, an “Introduction to the Study of Religion”
course articulate choice is key to pedagogical success. Given the pragmatic basis for data selection, I offer in this essay an exploration of the utility of an under-appreciated body of data for illustrating three basic (and inter-related) concepts in religious studies. The body of data comes from ancient Mesopotamia. The three concepts that I will illustrate with it are (1) the social and cultural embedded-ness of religion, (2) the role of mythmaking in politico-religious ideology, and (3) the insider versus outsider perspective. This essay does not offer original research toward a comprehensive theory or even an overview of alternative approaches to these concepts. Nor does this essay specify how one should implement teaching them in the classroom—though I will draw upon my own experiences at times. Rather, the intention here is simply to commend Mesopotamian data as a useful and in many ways unique entrée to several critical concepts in the study of religion, especially as these are presented in introductory religious studies classes.

Apologia: Why Mesopotamia?

With a virtual smorgasbord of religious data traversing human history and the globe, why do I wish to focus attention on obscure ancient Mesopotamian data? I offer three reasons.

First, I originally began drawing upon Mesopotamian data because I am academically trained in the discipline. Thus, I know the data and use it in my research and teaching.

Second, the study of ancient Mesopotamia, otherwise known as Assyriology, remains an arcane field. Due to its exotic materials and necessary preoccupation with philology, it has lain outside the mainstream of the humanities historically and thus the fruits of its labor are often little known to outsiders, even if there are notable exceptions (e.g., Smith 1978: 132-36). This is sometimes true even among scholars in fields closely related to Assyriology: Bibli- cists, Classicists, and traditional Ancient Historians (i.e., of Greece, Rome, and Egypt). By choosing to illustrate the above named concepts with Mesopotamian data I intend to advocate reciprocal, inter-disciplinary activity between scholars of religion and Assyriologists and to offer to both some constructive ways the study of ancient Mesopotamia can be integrated into the humanities more broadly and into the study of religion specifically—a growing trend in the field of Assyriology (Veldhuis; Lenzi; Pongratz-Leisten 1999).

Finally, and most importantly, I believe Mesopotamian religion offers a unique pedagogical opportunity for religious studies, and I wish to commend