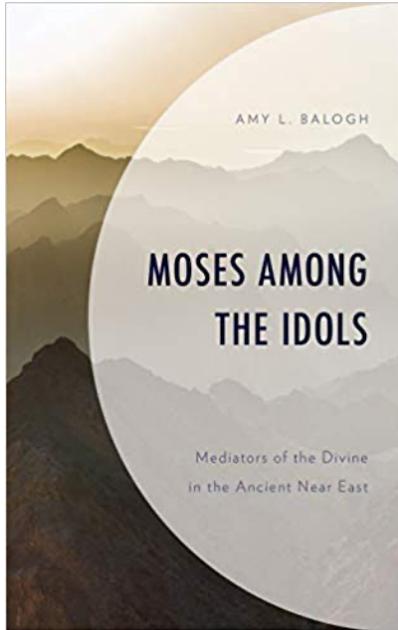


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Amy L. Balogh

Moses among the Idols: Mediators of the Divine in the Ancient Near East

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In this conceptually provocative and methodologically rigorous study, Amy Balogh seeks to reorient our conventional appraisals of just who—and even what—Moses is: “The circumcision of Moses’s lips [Exod 6:28–7:1] is the most pivotal moment of his life, but because it is so briefly and oddly described, it is often missed among the more dramatic scenes in the Book of Exodus” (xv). Balogh grounds her investigation upon the notion of “status change,” and this enables her to undertake a fine-grained study that compares the transformations of character undergone by Moses in the Bible versus idols in the *Mīs/Pīt Pî* (“Washing/Opening of the Mouth”) ceremony from Mesopotamia. The latter “symbolizes rebirth into a new, divine nature.... Moses seeks for himself authorization and status like that conferred by this ritual.... Moses is best understood as YHWH’s idol, undergoing a status change akin to that brought about by the induction ritual for ancient Mesopotamian idols” (xix–xx).

Balogh in the remainder of the introduction lays out the ancient texts and modern methods that she will use to make her case, and the consistent and clear signposting throughout this volume are as impressive as they are helpful. In terms of historical dependence, she argues that, “while the biblical authors do not have direct access to the written form of the *Mīs Pî*, they do intensively engage Babylonian cultural principles and adapt them to their own systems of thought” (xxxvi). In a comparative vein, she relies upon religion historian J. Z. Smith’s “third term” construct in order

to focus and stabilize (“like the third leg of a tripod”) her analysis: “I compare Moses and idols *with respect to* the process of status change; thus, status change is the third term of my comparison” (xxxvii). Before the tripod can take shape, however, each of the other two legs must be firmly grasped. This leads Balogh to adopt anthropologist C. Geertz’s method of “thick description” in order to gain substance and depth as further controls for her comparison.

Chapter 1 proceeds with a thick description of Mesopotamian idols, at the core of which subsisted this paradox: “an idol was a passive entity subject to human manipulation and, simultaneously, the incarnation of a cosmic deity” (1). Balogh adroitly untangles this tension by situating idols within their ancient cosmological context: “the physical core of the idol is envisioned as an *axis mundi*, connecting heaven, earth, and subterranean.... the materials comprising the idol were endowed with divine essence *before the idol was fashioned*” (7). The Mis Pi ritual refines and actuates that which is already nascent, as a cult object transforms into a godly subject, and divine transcendence becomes immanent. This reverberated sociopolitically, since “it was the divine presence that enabled the existence and prosperity of civilization and all of its power structures” (16). Balogh hones in on the capital city of Babylon, its patron god Marduk, and the annual spring Akitu festival to illustrate these cosmic-societal dynamics at work. She then draws attention to a fateful calendrical convergence: “less than two days after the close of the *akitu*-festival, began the eight-day festival of Passover during which the community of Judean exiles and later Babylonian Jews commemorated a different procession ... the journey of the Hebrew people out of Egypt, through the power of YHWH as enacted through Moses” (23). It is these overlapping yet contesting experiences, Balogh will argue, that inform the biblical portrayal of Moses in idol-like terms.

Chapter 2 undertakes a deep dive into “the transformation of Moses as it unfolds in Exod 3:1–7:7” (31). Balogh contends that Moses’s journey from social misfit to divine mediator parallels that of the Mesopotamian idol’s pathway from potentiality to actuality. Just as the idol’s mouth must be ritually “opened” in order for divinity to flow forth, so, too, must Moses’s lips be “circumcised” in order to become “god to Pharaoh.” This comparative tack by Balogh fundamentally reconfigures the trajectory of Moses’s ascent, for no longer can the burning-bush encounter be viewed as the locus of his apotheosis. Instead, that episode embodies merely his preliminary commissioning as YHWH’s agent, for “all of the revelations, signs, and happenings of Exod 3:1–4:17 are collectively inadequate for the task Moses must face.... divine power does not [yet] flow through Moses in a way that brings about the change in the Hebrews’ situation that YHWH promises” (33). Balogh is cognizant of her argument’s novelty, so she devotes considerable space (36–50) to positing it vis-à-vis the history of interpretation, contending that the “dual requirement that YHWH’s presence be established in and with Moses, and that Moses be ‘reborn’ so that YHWH’s presence might move through him, explains the form and function of Exod 3:1–7:7 as a whole” (51). The Mosaic renaissance, furthermore, is embedded within Exod 6:2–7:7, which Balogh notes is attributed to the Priestly (P) source: “this is the point at which Moses’s destined life truly begins—he is now reborn into his new life as YHWH’s mediating idol” (52).

Chapter 3 looks to the mechanisms of transformation for Moses and the Mesopotamian idol “with respect to the shift in essential nature that this status change requires” (59). In confessing himself to be “uncircumcised of lips” (Exod 6:30; cf. v. 12), Moses identifies with biblical imagery elsewhere that variously conveys foreignness, impurity, and obstinacy against YHWH. Yet such baggage has already been disposed of by the very next verse (Exod 7:1), as YHWH has made Moses “god to Pharaoh.” So what exactly happened in between? Balogh concedes that “the biblical author leaves little to no information as to what change YHWH makes to Moses’s essential nature” (71). But when filtered through the comparative lens of the *Mīs Pî*, she argues that Moses has effectually had his lips “circumcised” by YHWH: “The metaphor of ‘uncircumcised lips’ puts a characteristically Yahwistic spin on the ancient Near Eastern idea that a mouth needed to be pure and open in order to act as the mouthpiece of the divine” (81). Though this requires an interpretive leap, Balogh is fairly judicious with her limited evidence, and her arguments here are both contextually and comparatively plausible. More daring is her accompanying contention that the personal name *Mōšeh* (not “*Mošeh*,” *passim*) is etymologically cognate with Akkadian *mesû*, “to wash, to clean.” This is not phonologically inconceivable (cf. Peripheral Akkadian *mešû*, *CAD* 10.2:31; also Jewish Babylonian Aramaic *mšy/mš*, *DJBA*, 712). Nevertheless, the more popular proposal linking Moses to Egyptian *ms < msi*’ (“to give birth”; cf. nominal *mesu*, “child”)—whether originally with or without a theophoric element¹—still has much to commend it, both contextually and historically. The name Moses existed well before the P source employed it, judging by its ubiquity in J and E (and assuming conventional source-critical models). If P is indeed constructing its narrative in contestation to Babylonian ritual theologies, then it is conceivable that Hebrew *Mōšeh* came to incorporate Akkadian *mesû* as a folk etymology amid Babylonian hegemony. But is this any more or less convincing from a historical-linguistic perspective than the Bible’s own proposed etymology of *māšāh* (“to draw out”)?

Chapter 4 turns to the outward signs associated with the inward transformations of Moses and Mesopotamian idols into conduits for the divine. This typically involves “a distinct, uncontrollable glow radiating from the face of the mediator ... [a] symbol of luminosity” (89). For Moses, Balogh locates this amid his third descent from Mount Sinai (Exod 34:29), in the wake of beholding the glory of YHWH. The precise quality of this radiance has long been debated, given that the Hebrew root *qrn* evidently can mean either “to beam forth” or “to be horned” (cf. *BDB*, 902). So what exactly is Moses’s “suitable emblem of divinity”? Balogh returns to the *Mīs/Pî* ceremony in efforts to discern this. There the dynamics of luminosity typically include a majestic crown that is imbued with an awesome splendor that emanates from within the idol itself. Although this aligns with the first meaning of Hebrew *qrn* cited above, the same root in Akkadian seems to be used exclusively for the second meaning (*CAD* 13:133–40). So what would it have meant theologically to claim that Moses’s face “was horned”? Balogh taps into the ancient Near East’s rich wellspring

1. See J. Huddleston, “Was Moses’ Name Egyptian?,” *Bible Odyssey*, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/was-moses-name-egyptian>.

of bovine-divine imagery, concluding that “the image of Moses as horned prompts an analogy with the gods of the ancient Near East, including YHWH” (106) and arguing for intentionally multivalent imagery by the biblical author(s). Nevertheless, “whether one reads the skin of his face as shining, horned, or somehow both, the image functions as a metaphor for the nature of the deity whose presence lies behind this visual manifestation” (109).

How was it that divine conduits such as Moses and Mesopotamian idols actually accomplished their jobs? Balogh considers this in chapter 5, focusing upon the episode wherein YHWH declares that he speaks *peh ’el-peh* (“mouth to mouth,” Num 12:8) with Moses, unlike any of his other mediators. Although this is generally not taken to be a P text, Balogh argues: “With the view of P and the compiler in mind, we are able to read earlier traditions such as E in their light.... What flows from YHWH’s mouth flows through Moses’s mouth” (120, 121). With Moses, therefore, there is nothing of God’s word that gets lost in translation—for no translation is necessary. Moses evidently is becoming less of a divine mediator and more of a divine manifestation. Balogh draws upon comparative Semitic evidence (including Akkadian *nabātu*, “to shine brightly, make resplendent,” CAD 11.1:22) to suggest that the form of YHWH which Moses “perceives” (*√nbt*, Num 12:8) is also the divine form that “emanates” from him, akin to Exod 34. Via his quasi-divine status, Moses effectually activates YHWH’s “tabernacle system” among the Israelites, rendering divine transcendence immanent in a manner reminiscent of an idol within its temple complex. Despite these functional similarities, however, Balogh also notes the ontological distinctions that are at work. Notwithstanding his remarkably elevated status, Moses throughout his mediatory career is portrayed as the thoroughly human “servant of YHWH” (139). This contrasts with the Mesopotamian idol, which is conceived of as being intrinsically divine even from its nascent material origins. “As for Moses, his status elevates his humanity.... As for idols, their status imposes constraints upon their divinity” (140, 141).

Among the most significant claims of this clever monograph is that the Priestly source was engaged in deliberately crafting a sophisticated theological counternarrative to Babylonian hegemony. “The juxtaposition of the *akitu*-festival and Passover, as parallel yet competing celebrations focused on victorious chief male deities who instill proper order in the cosmos and the symbolically laden procession of their respective idols into the wilderness, provides the historical and religious occasion for dialogue between ancient Mesopotamian idols and biblical traditions pertaining to Moses” (149). In light of this, Balogh would have done well to trace out the larger contours of her proposed counternarrative within the P source. Do not, for instance, the well-known tensions between the respective creation accounts of Gen 1 and Enuma Elish (the latter discussed briefly at 9–10) establish the overarching cosmological frameworks within which these Moses-idol dynamics subsequently play out? Situating her proposed dynamics even more broadly yet firmly within their corresponding cultures could further thicken Balogh’s already impressive descriptions, on behalf of even more securely balancing her comparative third term of status change with respect to Moses and the idols.