

H-Net Reviews

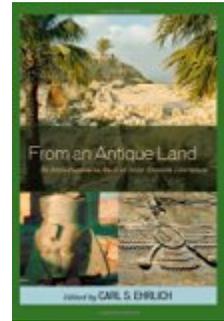
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carl S. Ehrlich, ed. *From an Antique Land: An Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Literature*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011. 522 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-4335-5; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-4334-8.

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A Different Approach to Introducing Ancient Near Eastern Literature

If you walk around the SBL-AAR (Society of Biblical Literature-American Academy of Religion) annual meeting book display every autumn and roll your eyes at each new “introduction” on display (who will write the next *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew?*), you may be pleasantly surprised with editor/contributor Carl S. Ehrlich’s *From an Antique Land*. By quoting Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818) in toto as the epigraph, Ehrlich sets the right tone, giving the audience a sense of awe as they begin reading. Indeed, this sonnet’s first line provides the volume’s title. This monograph is a good introduction not only to the literature of the ancient Near East, but also to its cultures, people, and history. Its fundamental strength and the feature that sets it apart from similar studies is its methodology: *From an Antique Land* is diachronic. Comparative/synchronic references occur throughout (for example, flood narratives or similarities in wisdom literature), but they are rare.

The targeted readership is “the student, the incipient scholar, and the general public learning about the ancient world” (p. xiii). Each of the eight essays and most of the bibliographic references are in English. The authors, specialists in their field, devote approximately the first third of their chapter to explaining the nuances of the relevant language and the history of the people/civilization under discussion. The rest of the chapter surveys that language’s literature from its appearance in history until either its extinction or the advent of the Hellenistic period, whichever came first. But what constitutes liter-

ature? This question is difficult to answer, as Ehrlich asserts: “The options range from *belles lettres*, literary creations of a consciously artistic nature, at one extreme, up to any piece of writing, such as a shopping list, at the other” (p. 7). Ultimately, how it is defined rests with each contributor. But for the most part, their explanations orbit around the *belles lettres* definition. Thus, if you seek an introduction to ancient Near Eastern law or economic texts, then you are advised to look elsewhere. In terms of the geographic parameters, the boundaries are Egypt and western Asia, as expected.

A primary function of the introduction (by Ehrlich) is to demonstrate the need for this book in the market. He underscores that many works treating ancient Near Eastern literature view the topic through the lens of biblical studies. Four anthologies are listed here, including William Hallo’s three-volume *The Context of Scripture* (1997, 2000, 2002) and Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer’s *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (2002). Ehrlich’s edited volume positions the literature of ancient Israel within the larger context of antiquity, equal to the counterpart literature from Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Canaan, and Egypt. Further, *From an Antique Land* is not anthological. Texts are cited here and there, but it is precisely what the subtitle states: an introduction to (not a collection of) the literature of the ancient Near East. Finally, this book contrasts the “comparativist genre-based” approaches of Kenton L. Sparks’s *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*

(2005) and John H. Walton's *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (2006), the former of which "is perhaps more a reference work than an introductory textbook" (p. 8).

After this introduction, the order of the chapters is "a temporal sequence reflective of the order in which writing was introduced in the regions and among the linguistic groups under consideration" (p. 7). My comments in this and the following paragraph detail the highlights of each of the subsequent chapters. In the second chapter, Gonzalo Rubio elucidates the basics of Sumerian literature, contextualizing it in a historical overview. Significant genres and compositions include material on kings, myth, (pseudo-)history, hymns, wisdom, Inanna-Dumuzi, and laments/songs/prayers. This chapter is the most technical in the book. Yet it is well written, lucid, and annotated with transcriptions and translations throughout. Chapter 3, by Susan Tower Hollis, contains a brief discussion on literary theory with respect to Egyptian literature, followed by sections on genre: royal inscriptions, autobiographies, wisdom, love songs, hymns and prayers, mortuary texts, myths, and Harper's Songs, among others. Benjamin R. Foster details the nuances of the Akkadian language, writing, and literature (chapter 4). His section on literature about gods treats myth, hymns/psalms, and prayers. Royal literature follows and addresses legends, epics, letters, and inscriptions. The final major part of the chapter reviews literature on the human condition: wisdom, fables, parodies, love and death, poetry, and others.

In chapter 5, Hittitologist Gary Beckman outlines local and foreign mythology; historiography (early folk history, royal annals, deeds, and inscriptions); royal

prayers and hymns; and foreign and domestic wisdom. Wayne T. Pitard is the author of chapter 6, "Canaanite Literature," which discusses the Akkadian of both the Amarna tablets and some letters from Ugarit, cuneiform Ugaritic, and Phoenician. This corpus includes many literary texts in several genres: narrative poems, cultic texts, letters, and inscriptions (royal and funerary). Ehrlich is responsible for chapter 7, "Hebrew/Israelite Literature." The three primary parts of this chapter's literature section are about inscriptional material (the expected collection is present); the context of the Hebrew Bible (canon, biblical criticism, texts/versions, and more); and the Hebrew Bible's content (including biblical book summaries). Ingo Kottsieper is the author of the final chapter: "Aramaic Literature." His sources (explaining the Ahiqar tradition, Papyrus Amherst 23, and a handful of other texts) are Old Aramaic inscriptions, later Old Aramaic texts, and documents from the Persian period.

This review begins by suggesting that readers will be pleased with this introduction to antique literature. The implications here are that there are too many "introductions" on the market and that they typically do not forge into new territory. But there is enough difference between *From an Antique Land* and comparable books to merit a positive review. Yes, if one culled enough of Jack Sasson's *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (1995), one would find much of Ehrlich's book therein. But if you want a single-volume textbook to introduce your students to the fundamentals of ancient Near Eastern literature and history in accessible prose absent of the biblicalist's slant, then this book is for you. In terms of physical quality, my five-hundred-page paperback review copy is well bound with nicely weighted paper and the volume is well priced for classroom use.

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