COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND ANCIENT ISRAELITE RELIGION

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BRETT MAIDEN IS THE FIRST, TO MY KNOWLEDGE, WHO CONSISTENTLY applies theories and methods from Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in a full-length study. He does this together with, or rather, as an integral part of, traditional historical in-depth analyses of texts and artefacts. The book is based on an Emory dissertation, but in spite of being the author's first book it reflects the writing of a mature scholar. In this pioneering study, Maiden demonstrates both the usefulness of CSR for Biblical Studies and how CSR can be fully integrated with the traditional toolbox that exegetes and ancient historians normally employ. Maiden

in a sense does for Hebrew Bible Studies what Risto Uro and Istvan Czachesz have done for CSR in the field of New Testament.[1] The only other work I know of so far to similarly review various CSR approaches and apply them to the Hebrew Bible, is Isaac Alderman's *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, published later the same year, but the two are very different in structure and content.[2]

The book consists of seven chapters: an introduction, five main chapters, and a conclusion. In the first chapter, Maiden introduces CSR perspectives in general, with special emphasis on issues relevant for a distinction between optimal and costly religion. The chapter serves as an excellent short introduction to CSR in general and the author shows his ability to explain, summarise, and make accessible a research area which is otherwise not quite so easy to appropriate through the publications of its main proponents. The introduction especially paves the ground for the subsequent chapters two and three; in chapter four, more CSR aspects are added.

In the second chapter, Maiden revisits the common popular/official religion dichotomy and suggests replacing it with a more nuanced understanding, based on CSR perspectives, of optimal versus costly religion. He dispels not only earlier and outdated dichotomies but also more recent understandings of the difference between elite and folk religion and goes further than recent revisions. He in fact successfully questions and dismantles a very popular paradigm.

In chapter three, the discussion is taken further by examining Deuteronomic theology as an example of cognitively costly religion. Maiden revisits major scholarly issues, such as the Deuteronomic reform, Deuteronomic name theology, cult centralisation, and aniconic worship with the help of CSR perspectives. In all this, he makes a markedly balanced and critical use of CSR – far from all those dissertations that pick up a fancy method and press it onto the material, whether it fits or not. Maiden, in contrast, is careful and discriminate in his application of method, clearly aware of its limitations, as he integrates CSR with classical Biblical Studies approaches in an exemplary manner.

In the fourth chapter Maiden discusses ancient Near Eastern hybrid creatures, in art as well as in texts. Here he takes the concept of minimal counterintuitiveness, already introduced and employed in the first chapters, further and complements it with Sperber's theory of cultural epidemiology. The chapter especially analyses iconographic evidence and is filled with illustrations. CSR perspectives contribute

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1. Uro, 2016; Czachesz, 2017.
2. Alderman, 2020.

to a nuanced understanding of how hybrid creatures were variously represented and remembered, mentally as well as in iconography and in texts.

From here, the fifth chapter, "On Artifacts and Agency", follows naturally. The focus is on the *mis pi* ritual, and the application of the concept of minimal counterintuitiveness results in a revised understanding of cult statues as simultaneously artefacts and deities, which goes beyond previous interpretations and critiques them.

In chapter six, Maiden revisits another major scholarly issue, the interpretation of the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16. Again, he complements his initial survey of CSR methods with McCauley and Lawson's Theory of Ritual Form and manages to explain this highly complicated construction and sift out its main components, which are useful for his purpose. He combines this with Whitehouse's Modes theory, already employed earlier, and complements with a couple of other CSR perspectives (Hazard-Precautions Systems, Cognitive Resource Depletion, and Ritual Efficacy). Leviticus 16 is then analysed with the help of these CSR theories and perspectives, in continuous critical dialogue with current and dominant interpretations. To do this in such an accessible and convincing way requires a thorough familiarity with both CSR and the textual issues.

The final chapter summarises the study and places the various issues studied along a scale with the intuitive/optimal at one end and the reflective/costly at the other. Maiden ends with a list of further topics to be studied, which his book does not cover.

The volume has two indices: and index of Biblical texts (but no other sources) and a subject index of which maybe half consists of authors mentioned in the main text (Kauffman in the index is Kaufmann in the text). Fuller indices would have been appreciated, but perhaps most people today read their books on the screen, so search-and-find takes care of all needs.

On the last page, the author describes "the relationship between biblical scholars and cognitive researchers [as] a two-way street, with vital roles to be played on both sides" (p. 262). I think that Maiden's book proves his case and that it will be instrumental in adding fruitful new perspectives to Biblical Studies, perspectives that *do not detract from but deepen* the application of more traditional historical, linguistic, and literary methods, as well as studies of material culture. Brett Maiden's *Cognitive Science and Ancient Israelite Religion* is highly recommended.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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