

The Use and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Antiquity

Catherine Hezser and Diana V. Edelman, eds. *The Use and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Antiquity*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2021. 288 pp. \$100. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781781798768.

Emerging out of a joint conference hosted by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oslo and SOAS, University of London, *The Use and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Antiquity* preserves the discourse of a diverse group of scholars. The book holds a collection of essays linked by their interest in the transfer of religious knowledge among and between religious specialists and ordinary practitioners. The conference's expansive aim—to examine “social and institutional contexts and oral, literary and material formats in which religious knowledge emerged and was transmitted in antiquity”—results in a volume that contributes to several additional areas of inquiry, such as the relationship between so-called “official” and “popular” religion; mediation and religious experience; and materiality, practice, and embodiment in religious studies (1). The essays are deftly organized by editors, Catherine Hezser and Diana V. Edelman, each of whom also contributes her own original work.

The book is divided into three major sections, each drawing together essays by religious tradition, including ancient Mesopotamia, Ancient and Medieval Judaism, and Early and Byzantine Christianity. These sections are framed by Hezser's introduction, which discusses key terms and common thematic threads addressed by contributors. Divided unevenly between the sections are ten essays, each of which includes endnotes and an individual bibliography—a feature that eases the task of the researcher tracking down additional information. The volume concludes with indices organized by subject, source, and author. There are no major typographic or stylistic details that impinge upon the reading experience; instead, the reader encounters a text that can be enjoyed either from beginning to end or essay-by-essay, depending on individual interest.

Regardless of specialization, readers will benefit from Hezser's introduction, which articulates definitions of key terms, such as “religion” and “religious knowledge.” This is an essential contribution to the volume, since only a few essays therein denote these important yet controversial concepts. Hezser admits the enormity of the category, “religious knowledge,” noting it potentially includes everything from text to artifact, temple to household, and ritual to belief. She thus utilizes Stanley K. Stowers's definition of religion, which centers the sociality of religion as a collection of practices involving gods or otherwise non-observable entities.¹ Necessarily then, Hezser firmly states that the religious knowledge under investigation is much more than the Christian concept of belief, which has been robustly critiqued in religious studies broadly.² Rather, this knowledge is essentially embodied; it can be obtained through texts or in places of worship, but may also be shared in the daily movements of the household. Essays then take up these themes as they appear in particular contexts and traditions.

In Part I, Andrew George and Sam Mirelman examine the transmission of religious knowledge from specialists, such as priests, diviners, or scribes, and the Mesopotamian public. George argues that religious knowledge in ancient Babylonia was disseminated along two parallel and non-intersecting paths. On the one hand, the religious elite shared knowledge internally within the temple complex through oral instruction, ritual observation, and scribal education. On the other hand, since this knowledge was protected from the public, George posits a second path for the transmis-

sion of religious knowledge, one taking place primarily within households. Mirelman's essay then complements George's conclusions, largely agreeing with George's two paths of transmission, but nuancing the category of "religious knowledge" with the addition of what he calls "religious participation" (36). Mirelman thus goes on to argue the intersection of specialist and non-specialist knowledge at the level of ritual participation, specifically in the practice of lament.

The largest section of the volume, "Ancient and Medieval Judaism," follows George and Mirelman's chapters. Five essays comprise Part II, including Hezser and Edelman's own essays on Palestinian Rabbinic traditions and late Persian/early Hellenistic Judaism, respectively. Edelman's is the first and chronologically earliest exploration of Judaism. She examines the textual traditions of the Hebrew Bible, specifically Torah, for strategies employed by the "educated elite" to transmit knowledge of the biblical text to the "illiterate masses" (62). Edelman concludes that these elite created a system of ritualized practices that provided opportunity for communities to encounter the overarching narratives of emergent Judaism. Following Edelman, David Hamidović contributes a second essay on early Judaism by examining the process by which the Qumran community derived new laws after the death of the historical Teacher of Righteousness. He analyzes the Community Rule, alongside passages from the Damascus Document and 4Q279, concluding that the production of such religious knowledge took place among full members of the community, who together drew upon Torah study to produce new rules for communal life and to discuss said rules as they pertained to daily activities.

Following Edelman and Hamidović's essays are three chapters exploring rabbinic Judaism. The first, by Philip Alexander, employs the somewhat dated anthropological theory of a "great tradition" and a "little tradition" to deconstruct the terms of the conference itself (123–25). Alexander demonstrates that the conference's call for papers represents a "classic statement of a hierarchical or elitist view of religion" (122) by demonstrating a dynamic movement in the rabbinic tradition of Judaism, whereby custom (*minhag*) influenced law (*halakhah*). Hezser's own contribution follows and examines the location in which Palestinian rabbinic sources imagine interactions between rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews to have taken place. She concludes that the rabbinic texts do indeed present the rabbis as superior to the ordinary practitioner, whether in private or public. Hezser further argues that oral instruction was only one mode by which rabbis transferred knowledge. Equally important was the embodied knowledge they imparted to non-rabbinic Jews through their "personification of halakhic views through daily practice" (160). Finally, Stefan Reif wraps up Part II with his analysis of the introductory material of medieval rabbinic prayer books. He demonstrates that the prayer books, some of which directly state the intent to educate the Jewish public, served the dissemination of religious knowledge.

Part III considers knowledge dissemination in Christianity. Christine Amadou's essay opens this section by considering how three major texts about the life of Thecla—the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Methodius's *Symposium*, and *The Life and Miracles*—contribute to an understanding of women's access to and production of religious knowledge. She argues that writings about Thecla reveal a connection between asceticism and authority that "transgresses all borders of gender and social class" and provides for Thecla's ability to transfer knowledge in both terrestrial and celestial spheres (208). Following Amadou, Hugo Lundhaug explores the role of Coptic apocrypha in the religious life of monks in Egyptian monasteries. While the texts almost certainly functioned for knowledge dissemination among the monastics who produced and read them, Lundhaug also contends that their contents imply a lay audience as well. He thus concludes the texts had a pedagogical function not only among monks but also among laypersons, for whom they were read aloud. In the volume's closing chapter, Jan Stenger demonstrates the existence of a single discourse in which both

monastics and sophists participated in 6th century Gaza. Considering both traditions in mutual conversation allows Stenger to show that there was a distinct interest in and even “demand” for both theoretical and practical knowledge of the Christian faith—among specialists, but also among laypeople in this period (252).

Overall, the volume achieves its aim by providing a wide-ranging exploration of the contexts and formats of religious knowledge production and dissemination in antiquity. Essays cover an expansive range of history, and touch on aspects of similarity and dissimilarity between three major religious traditions. As a result, the book will appeal to scholars of Assyriology, biblical studies, Judaism, and early Christianity. However, and despite Hezser’s excellent introduction, readers will notice that there is a sparsity of critical attention paid to religion in practice and materiality. All essays take texts and textual analysis as their primary data set. Further, and as Alexander discusses in the volume itself, the privileging of so-called “elite” perspectives on religion is pervasive, so that the possible breadth of the category “religious knowledge” discussed by Hezser in the introduction is reduced primarily to the knowledge of religious specialists and the texts they produced. Given the recent and wide-ranging interest among scholars of religion in matters of materiality, practice, and religion as lived, the above sparsity presents itself as a significant gap.³ Broadly, engagement with this literature would have strengthened the analysis of several essays and the volume as a whole. Still, for those interested in the study of religion in antiquity, *The Use and Dissemination of Religious Knowledge in Antiquity* will no doubt serve as a helpful conversation partner, contributing to existing understanding of the sociality of religion in the past and posing new questions for future inquiry.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Stanley K. Stowers, "Theorizing the Religion of Ancient Households and Families," in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, edited by John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 8–9.
- 2 See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1993); and Birgit Meyer, "An Author Meets Her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer's 'Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion,'" *Religion and Society*, no. 1 (2014)
- 3 For example, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For examples of ethnographic works on religion as lived that simultaneously offer methodological examples and theoretical conversation partners see Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); and Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope Frustration, and Ambivalence Before and After 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015)