

Reading Ancient Scripture and Hearing its “Whisper out of the Dust”

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“And thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust.” - Isaiah 29:4

Perhaps the most exciting development in ancient Chinese scholarship is the ongoing discovery of manuscript texts buried beneath the ground for over two millennia. These manuscripts come in the form of narrow slips of bamboo, silk cloth, and even bronze ritual vessels discovered in tombs of the nobility. The texts carried by these manuscripts range from legal proceedings and census records to political-philosophical theory, military strategy, and cosmogony. The advent of these manuscripts has caused scholars to reconsider long-held assumptions about authorship, orality, textual production, and other significant aspects of early Chinese civilization.

Every time I pore over an ancient Chinese manuscript, I cannot help but think about Isaiah’s prophecy of words that will “speak out of the ground” and of “speech [that] shall whisper out of the dust” (Isaiah 29:4). As I painstakingly attempt to decipher characters of long-forgotten orthography, I try to imagine the scribe at the time he wrote it—holding a slip of bamboo in his left hand while writing with an ink brush in his right. To whom was the text written? Was the text dictated to him orally or was he copying from an existing manuscript? When observing the handwriting, the punctuation, and even the smudge marks I hear a “voice . . . out of the ground” which has “a familiar spirit” (Isaiah 29:4).

This auditory and tangible response to reading ancient Chinese manuscripts is not surprising, as manuscripts are a written version of a text at a particular time and place. It is normal for two separate manuscripts containing the same text (and even buried together within the same tomb) to differ in lexicon, orthography, and even the arrangement of content. Martin Kern explains that this phenomenon “remind[s] us . . . that texts are not just free-floating sets of ideas. They do not exist by themselves but depend on social acts and contexts of transmission and reception.”¹ In other words, texts invariably depend on the social-cultural context in which they are produced, recited, and read, for as a professor of mine often said, “no text is created in a vacuum.”

¹ Martin Kern, “Methodological Reflections on the Analysis of Textual Variants and the Modes of Manuscript Production in Early China,” *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 4.1 (2002): 167.

Understanding these principles of textual production, transmission, and reception from Chinese antiquity has caused me to reconsider my own assumptions about the composition of biblical scripture. For instance, I learned that intertextual and linguistic evidence of the documentary hypothesis suggests that Moses probably did not compose the Pentateuch; instead, the first five books of the Old Testament are most likely the product of scribal traditions in the Israeli-Judaic world prior to the Babylonian conquest of 586 BCE and contain traces of Assyrian and Mesopotamian influence.² I also discovered that Isaiah’s triumphant proclamation that “a child is born” (Isaiah 9:6) speaks literally of King Ahaz’s son Hezekiah, who will later resist Assyrian attack and protect Jerusalem from destruction.³ Additionally, the original Hebrew phrasing of Job’s famous declaration “I know that my redeemer liveth” (Job 19:25) indicates that Job is not referring to a Messianic Savior but rather to an “avenger” that can vouch for his reputation.⁴

When I first delved into biblical scholarship, my impulse was to dismiss these intellectual findings that I thought undermined the divine authenticity and purpose of scripture. After all, I had believed that all biblical scripture, by virtue of being the word of God, is divine urtext revealed to prophets holding priesthood authority. As such, I supposed that all ancient scripture would necessarily reinforce a twenty-first century, Latter-day Saint conception of the gospel.

Yet as I reflected on the difference between my assumptions of ancient scripture and the broad consensus of biblical scholarship, I began to discern between what the Bible is and how it has been (re)presented over many centuries. In its essential form, the Bible is a collection of texts from the ancient Near East that were redacted and standardized over many centuries. Like ancient Chinese manuscripts, the books of ancient scripture were also once just texts—composed for a particular reason at a given time and place before being canonized. The disciple Luke, for example, expresses that he sought to establish the truth about Jesus in response to the competing accounts which circulated (Luke 1:1–4), and I suspect he didn’t imagine that his own account would be canonized as scripture among other early Christian writings centuries later.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding their production and reception, however, biblical scripture for centuries has been (and ever ought to be) inspiration for devotional worship. Surely Nephi is an excellent example of this as “likens” Isaiah’s Old World prophecy of Judah’s re-establishment in Palestine for a sweeping New World eschatology of his own posterity’s restoration to covenant blessings. So, too, is faith in the Savior felt and expressed sublimely in Samuel Medley’s beloved hymn “I Know that My Redeemer Lives” (Job 19:25) and triumphantly in Handel’s Messiah (Isaiah 9:6). Paul Ricouer describes biblical reading as “a creative operation unceasingly employed in decontextualizing its meaning and recontextualizing it in today’s *Sitz-im-Leben* [setting in life].”⁵

² For a good introduction to the documentary hypothesis, see David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

³ Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 211.

⁴ Michael Austin, *Re-Reading Job: Understanding the Ancient World’s Greatest Poem* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 9.

⁵ Paul Ricouer, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 145.

Yet perhaps if we *only* read ancient scripture as decontextualized passages that reinforce our pre-existing belief system, we may miss an opportunity to engage with sacred text meaningfully in its social-historical context. The authors of biblical scripture were once individuals like you and me—subject to many of life’s privations and yearnings. Their words were composed and put into writing in response to an actual, contemporaneous need or concern. Even if the historical setting surrounding the text can never be fully recovered, I believe we can nevertheless understand much about the original nature and function of biblical text through careful observation of its intratextuality, structure, narration, word choice, and other features.

My hope is that, along with “likening” scripture for personal devotion, we can also learn to read biblical scripture as ancient text, recognizing that it has been reformatted, edited, transmitted, and translated. To do so requires the willingness to suspend commonly held assumptions and interpretations of scripture and sincerely seek to learn from—rather than impose meaning on—the text. We’ll discover, for instance, that the Book of Job is much more than the story of a patient man who suffers; it is a compelling poetic debate that grapples with the theodicy of God and was possibly composed in light of Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. As we read ancient scripture on its own terms, we may be surprised to hear the speech of ancient covenant peoples—muffled by centuries of theological hermeneutics—once again “whisper out of the dust.” When we discover how their lived experience parallels our own, these voices take on “a familiar spirit.”

A couple of years ago I spent a few months quickly reading the Bible, cover to cover, to get a sweeping view of its contents. From it, I gained a deep love and appreciation for this collection of sacred literature, and especially the Old Testament, which I found to be a rich anthology of legend, myth, ritual, history, song, poetry, aphorism, and prophecy that was composed, collated, and transmitted over centuries by a covenant people struggling—yet striving—to interpret and enact the will of God. I came to better understand Alma’s reflection that God “doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word...all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). While societal norms and behaviors among peoples and nations inevitably change, He is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Mormon 9:9), and He works through the weak things of the world—perhaps even the scribe sitting at Jerusalem’s temple—to bring about His word.

There will come a day when books that have been sealed “shall be read upon the house tops” and “all things shall be revealed unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 27:11). Until that day comes, may we lend an ear to these whisperings from the dust and find in them renewed relevancy for today.