

Bronson Brown-deVost, *Commentary and Authority in Mesopotamia and Qumran*.

Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements, 29 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019). Pp. 296. Hardback. € 74.99. ISBN: 978-3-525-54072-5.

*Commentary and Authority in Mesopotamia and Qumran* explores commentary writing in Mesopotamia and the Qumran scrolls. The book contains an introduction, six unnumbered chapters, an index of passages, and extensive appendices, which occupy about a quarter of the book and provide transliterations and translations of all the pesharim and of *Enūma Eliš* commentary 1.

The first three chapters are largely descriptive. The first offers a general description of the genre and Jewish background of the pesharim and explains Brown-deVost's selection of Qumran commentaries. The second is an elaborate description of the structure of the pesharim, covering their use of technical formulae; their use of other texts than the base texts; and the presence of manuscripts of multiple pesharim to the same base text (e.g. Psalms, Hosea, Isaiah). On the basis of his structural analysis, Brown-deVost argues against the idea that the continuous pesharim constitute a homogeneous corpus, proposing instead the existence of "at least four types of continuous *pesharim*" (92). The third chapter offers a description of the physicality and structure of Mesopotamian text commentaries, interspersed with comparative observations on their similarities and differences with the pesharim. This comparison yields interesting insights, e.g. when Brown-deVost notes that the pesharim, unlike Mesopotamian commentaries, serve "as independent literary works in their own right" (110) or when he suggests, on the basis of Mesopotamian *šaniš* ("another [interpretation]") that the marginal *'alef* in 1QpHab 2:5—presumably a secondary addition to Peshar Habakkuk—stands for *'aher* (112; cf. 139-43).

Brown-deVost's descriptions of the Mesopotamian commentaries are notably briefer than those of the pesharim: the third chapter, which discusses both Mesopotamian and Qumran commentaries, spans 29 pages; the second, which only treats the pesharim, 48. This lack of an extensive description of the Mesopotamian material is not necessarily problematic given the recent work on these texts by e.g., Eckart Frahm and Uri Gabbay (both of whom are amply cited by Brown-deVost), but it does raise the issue of readership. Judging from the series in which this book appears, most of its readers will be more familiar with the pesharim than with the Mesopotamian material. The absence of a chapter-length description of the latter may affect the value of this book as a starting point for future comparative work.

Moving beyond the descriptive level, the fourth chapter applies a literary-historical lens to argue that commentaries in both traditions often underwent literary developments. Drawing on Mesopotamian commentaries attested in

multiple manuscripts (particularly *Enūma Eliš* commentary 1), Brown-deVost discusses passages in the pesharim where literary development is plausible. Brown-deVost's analysis in this chapter is wide-ranging and persuasive, and his attention to Mesopotamian commentaries yields an insightful contextualisation of literary developments reflected in the Qumran material.

The fifth chapter compares the “commenting communities” in which the Mesopotamian commentaries and the pesharim originated. The comparative outlook of this chapter opens up intriguing possibilities, such as Brown-deVost's suggestion that the Isaiah pesharim originated with a “group of interpreters at Qumran ... [that] was not directly involved in the creation of the other *pesharim*” (151). The chapter ends somewhat unexpectedly—seeing that another chapter follows after this one—with formulating general conclusions on the relationship between Mesopotamian and Qumran commentary writing. Brown-deVost treads cautiously, suggesting that, on the one hand, “Mesopotamian interpretative techniques ... were transmitted into Aramaic literature” (156) and subsequently reached Qumran, whereas, on the other, no genetic relationship between the structure or genre of the two corpora must be assumed.

The final chapter concerns authority and canonicity. After arguing that “the Mesopotamian commentaries and Qumran *pesharim* only deal with works that are functionally canonical” and “had achieved a standard text version” (173), Brown-deVost turns to consider the nexus between authority and commentary. Following Michael Satlow,<sup>1</sup> Brown-deVost thinks of authority in terms of “somewhat different discrete areas of influence” (173) and defines four such areas—i.e. “normative” (related to the base text as establishing cult praxis and social norms); “oracular” (related to the base text as a divine message relating to events contemporaneous with the exegete); “mytho-historic” (related to the base text as an account of past events); and “scholarly” (related to the base text as a scholarly compendium of knowledge) authority. Brown-deVost argues that, for Mesopotamian commentators, their base texts held primarily normative and scholarly authority, whereas the base texts in the pesharim were given mainly oracular and (to a lesser extent) mytho-historic authority.

The book as a whole has much to commend it, but also exhibits some drawbacks. A large part of Brown-deVost's work (especially the first three chapters) is descriptive rather than analytical. Although Brown-deVost applies some new tools (e.g. statistics) to the material, the added value of his results compared to previous descriptions of the pesharim by e.g., Maurya Horgan, Moshe Bernstein, or Shani Tzoref is somewhat limited. This is true also for Brown-deVost's

1 Michael Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

suggestions regarding the intercultural transmission of exegetical methods and traditions: his conclusions in the fifth chapter mostly confirm previous studies by e.g., Martti Nissinen, Daniel Machiela, and Mladen Popović, who have also pointed to Aramaic traditions as channels through which Mesopotamian knowledge reached Qumran.

That said, Brown-deVost's treatment of literary development in the pesharim is excellent. Brown-deVost shows more extensively than others before him that the pesharim are neither autographs (as Frank Moore Cross famously held) nor uniform literary works. They rather exhibit the same kind of textual fluidity as other interpretative traditions in the ancient world, including Mesopotamian ones. Moreover, Brown-deVost's analysis poignantly illustrates the need to bridge the gap between Qumran and Hebrew Bible studies and the methods applied in these two fields. The extensive philological work Brown-deVost has carried out on the pesharim in particular (as witnessed in the appendices) is another strong feature of this book and will prove a valuable point of reference for future work on the Qumran commentaries.

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