

Review of Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2016

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In *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*, Eva Mroczek invites her readers to imagine the production of texts in a world foreign to modern bibliographic assumptions. Her book portrays the genres, uses, and availability of literature to and by ancient Jewish authors within the Second Temple Period (530BCE–70CE). Focusing on non-canonical texts, Mroczek makes clear that these texts were not written as inferior exegetical commentaries on the Bible, nor were they bound, catalogued, or stable, for these bibliographic categories would have been anachronistic to ancient Jewish writers. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and attendant shifting interests in biblical criticism, the study of non-canonical texts has increased, yet these texts are never read on their own terms, but through a biblical lens. In an effort to re-evaluate our perception of non-canonical texts, Mroczek thus explores ancient concepts of “book,” “author,” and “canon.” She does so using three popular Hebrew texts as a case study: the 11QPsalmsa scroll (a Dead Sea scroll similar to *Psalms*), *Ben Sira*, and *Jubilees*. By steering the reader away from ‘Bible’ and ‘bibliography’ perspectives, Mroczek hopes the world of ancient Jewish literature, inconceivable through strictly modern assumptions, can be seen.

The first half of the book covers misconceptions surrounding the terms “book” and “author.” Chapter one, “The Mirage of the Bible: The Case of the Book of Psalms,” reimagines the concept of “book.” Using the 11QPsalmsa scroll, Mroczek shows intersections of textual clusters and expanding genres in a variety of psalms (21). Psalms, canonical and non-canonical, ranged in genres, were organized differently, and were composed for different purposes. This chapter argues that among ancient Jewish literature, no “book of Psalms” existed. There was no ancient effort to combine a single and stable collection of psalms. In the next chapter, “The Sweetest Voice: The Poetics of Attribution,” Mroczek deals with pseudonymous attribution and the concept of “author.” This chapter is centred on Davidic superscription and attribution in psalm scrolls. Attributions about (dative) or by (genitive) a particular author were secondary to the writing of the text. This chapter shows authors in search of a text, not texts in search of an author, an opposite approach to that of higher criticism. Attribution gave honour and poetic aesthetics to important historical figures by widening their reputation and target demographic. Attribution sometimes served political means as well.

Chapter three, “Like a Canal from a River: Scribal Products and Projects,” covers the first self-identified Jewish author, Ben Sira. Mroczek argues that the second-century BCE text, known as *Ben Sira*, was never intended to be original or completed, but was only ever a temporary record. She uses select passages in *Ben Sira* to explain how writers may have imagined their own literary world. For example, *Ben Sira*’s personification of Wisdom (the writer of the Torah and Wisdom books) as ever-growing (a “river,” “rays of light,” “ever-producing tree,” 93) suggests no distinct author or canon was established. Texts were multigenerational

and never complete. Wisdom was an anthology—a constant search for understanding. The covers of a codex-style book after the first century were hardly restrictive to the open text of *Ben Sira*; they were in a sense illusory. Authors used the name Ben Sira to give texts a supposed author with a known reputation while invoking student-teacher relationships. *Ben Sira*'s different manuscripts make it difficult to publish a consistent, stable text of this work, suggesting that it was not intended to exist as a bound, completed, or individually authored book.

After covering “book” and “author,” the latter half of Mroczek’s book explores evidence of existing libraries and canons in Jewish antiquity. Chapter four, “Shapes of Scripture: The Non-biblical Library of Early Judaism,” covers the literary world of the Second Temple Period. Mroczek begins by suggesting ancient Jewish writings should not be considered texts arranged according to a hierarchy but as a horizon—not as a wheel with the Bible as its hub, but as a web. Next, Mroczek concentrates on biblical critics from the eighteenth century up to 2013 and their role in creating and conserving the false concept of the “Bible” as the dominating document among other non-canonical texts. By doing so, Mroczek contrasts her perspective to those that have defined the study of similar texts in the past. Ending the chapter, she covers *Jubilees*, an early first-century text which uses Genesis and Exodus as well as other texts that were written and edited during the Second Temple Period. Mroczek uses this combination of texts by an unknown author within one unstable text to defend her claim that “God’s constant, multiform, and renewing communication ... is only indexed, not collected as a central corpus” (126).

Finally, the chapter “Outside the Number: Counting, Canon, and the Boundaries of Revelation” ends the book with a discourse about texts that exhibit an ambiguous sense of a fixed canon. Examples include *4 Ezra*, which mentions a canon of twenty-four books, Josephus’s *Against Apion* which lists twenty-two books, and a variety of psalms in the Septuagint. Mroczek argues these numbers are rhetorical, poetic, and hyperbolic and do not represent a actual number of collected books. What is deemed “canonical” today exists as a result of a vague scholarly decision, not as a value judgement.

An accommodating—but in some ways unsatisfactory—feature of this book is Mroczek’s use of metaphor. She begins her first chapter introducing Milton’s “vial” which describes books as “preserving as in a viol [vial] the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect which bred them” (19). Mroczek uses her own metaphors—digital material, databases, and archives—as well as phrases such as “heavenly archive” and “revelatory project,” all invoking modern conceptions of unstable, unauthored texts. Mroczek’s objective is to broaden our scope of the ancient literary world and to destabilize our bibliocentric assumptions. Unfortunately, it also reduces the literary world of ancient Jewish writers across seven hundred years to one single analogy. Additionally, Mroczek’s stated aim throughout this book is to evaluate only literature of the Second Temple Period, but she often includes or alludes to texts written after the first century CE.

The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity is Mroczek’s first book. It illuminates texts outside modern respective canons to give a new, broader understanding of the world in which ancient Jewish writers operated. Acting as a catalyst to re-evaluate the horizontal worlds of ancient texts, she also offers multiple

methods of text-focused research. Overall, Mroczek uncovers a world where terms and concepts such as “bibliography” and “bible” did not reign, where “canons” may have existed only symbolically, and where metaphor is entry to an otherwise unrecognizable past. Her book is introductory but unfinished, not due to her failure in delivering a convincing narrative, but because the re-evaluation of non-canonical texts is an endless project.



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