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RegionalASOR

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inscriptions of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age. Numerous variants of scripts in the Phoenician Proto-Semitic alphabets occur as well; sources towards the end of the 1st millennium BC hold a plethora of writings in Old Aramaic and Greek scripts; later on, there were Latin and Arabic scripts. All these systems were used for local production of texts, suggesting that the scribes who used these systems were not only multilingual but multiscriptic. Add to this that the average literacy during these early periods was very low, and the picture becomes quite baffling. It is no doubt that Levantine people who put their wit to writing were exercising elite cultural paradigms; but what was the political motivation and interest in developing national texts and literatures in a largely oral society? Before this question can be addressed, one must explore the cultural paradigm of collections of canonical writings, meaning collections of superb writings staged as a charter for collective cultural or social identity. This does not simply concern the collections themselves, but what Dr. Stordalen refers to as “canonical ecology,” meaning to name the complex social configurations of the use of these writings. If a canonical ecology is one specific instance of scriptural usage, then the cultural paradigm behind that is the grammar that makes the use of scriptures in one ecology comparable to that of the use of scripture in another ecology. Dr. Stordalen uses this concept in attempt to track the history of the cultural paradigm of collections of canonical writings.

Because this paradigm was applied in different ways throughout five millennia it was originally Pan-Mediterranean, but it got a definitive reformulation in the Hebrew-speaking, Hellenistic-Roman Levant. Its many later reenactments seem to mirror some of the characteristics of cultural production associated with the Levant in the Iron Age. A number of collections of superb literatures are documented in the 2nd millennium BC, staged as basis for (and the means to regenerate) group identities (e.g., the Egyptian Pyramid Texts, Ugaritic

mythology, and Hittite epics, myths, and hymns). The 1st millennium BC added more collections, including Greek mythology (e.g., Homer), the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Septuagint. From an objective viewpoint, the Greek and Hebrew adaptations of this cultural paradigm have one common characteristic: the addressing of people outside the scribal world who created the canon, in essence becoming ethnic/popular canons. The 1st millennium AD kept the scriptural canons coming, with the Peshitta, the Avesta, the New Testament, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Quran and others all being added to the mixture.

In spite of this long history of the cultural paradigm of canonical writings, it in no way implies that these successive implementations of the paradigm are all the same; rather, each has particular and individual contents, beliefs, practices, social configurations. What is common is the tendency within them all that goes back to the cultural production of the early Levant: a balancing of elite and popular influences in these scriptural paradigms (or the canonical ecologies). First, the users of these scriptures tend to develop individual ownership and very strong emotional bonds to them. They become the basis for individual and collective identities alike, and the integration of the two; and that renders these scriptures to be very powerful political instruments. Second, to control this political potential, the scriptures are never left for the populace to read for themselves; canonical scriptures are consistently curated by religious experts. Third, because these scriptures consistently address the individual and seek to engage the common religious and moral imagination, there is an inherent instability in the system. In other words, the paradigm keeps opening for reformers to say “I have the right reading; follow me!” In conclusion, putting the elite canon into the hands of common people, in order to induce social, ethnic, or religious cohesion generates a popular following, but also unexpected ways of

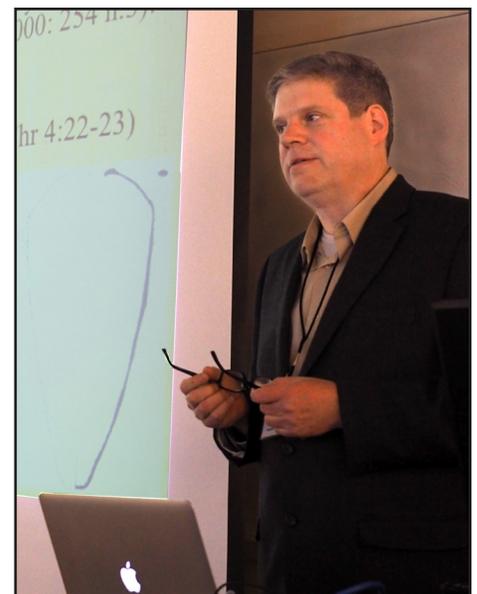
tapping into canonical power and dignity. (Dorian Alexander)



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As a continuation of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Madaba Plains Project (1967/68-2017/18), several papers were presented at the Midwest Region *Society of the Biblical Literature (SBL)*, the Middle West Branch of the *American Oriental Society (AOS)* and the Regional meeting of the *American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR)* on February 2-4, 2018 at Saint Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana.

Papers presented by these Madaba Plains Project members include: Robert Bates (The Roads at Tall Jalul, Jordan and their Implications for Understanding the Scale of Iron Age Occupation); Jeffrey Hudon (Judah and Jordan? A Royal Jar Handle from Tall Jalul); Øystein LaBianca (Biblical Heshbon Fifty Years Later), and Paul Ray (Methodological Changes at Hesban and the Madaba Plains Project), all of Andrews University. (Paul J. Ray, Jr.)



Jeff Hudon.

