

Peter Machinist

1. An Appreciation

Within the broad stream of academic tradition pertaining to ancient Near Eastern studies, the curious scholarly genre known as the *Festschrift* can evoke, even when condign, apprehension among contributors and readers alike. Our determination to add another exemplar to this group originated in our esteem for this volume's honoree, a conviction that only was reinforced over time. For with the arrival of the essays comprising this volume, it became apparent to us that our feelings about our teacher were shared by others, students and colleagues alike, who have come to appreciate our jubilarian, what he stands for, and what he has brought to the field. What also became clear soon enough was the universal appreciation of him as a "qualitative" scholar, for whom those metrics that typically greet the reader of *Festschriften* cannot do justice. For if a common thread could be extricated from the compass of our honoree's work, one celebrated by this volume's contributors, it would surely highlight his insistence to engage ancient Near Eastern studies far more broadly than is nowadays the norm, in a manner that affirms this discipline's seat within the broader currents in the study of history and literature, currents that have defined the study of the humanities since the time of the Renaissance.

The challenge to situate ancient Near Eastern studies in this manner may not be fashionable, with legitimate demands of various subdisciplines—many now fields in their own right—pressing for the undivided attention of even the most able students. A submission to the latter reality, however, is not the way of our honoree, who has been tireless (but frequently tired) in his pursuit of the grand narrative. Typically, this narrative has focused on questions of intellectual history, and has been characterized further by an acute awareness of its setting within broader philosophical contexts, ancient and modern alike.

Whether in the realm of historiography or mythology, in the literature of Mesopotamia or in Israel's self-reflection, Machinist's writings have grappled with questions that many today are only too happy to skirt as outdated. Given the Bible's wider ancient Near Eastern setting, what, if anything, is unique in its conception of history or myth? How should one

understand the rhetoric of kingship within an ancient imperial political framework? Can texts labeled by leading authorities as thoroughly literary—and thus disqualified as sources for “real” historical research—still reveal something of their civilization’s philosophical or theological underpinnings? What elements within the intellectual discourses of Mesopotamia or Israel signal these cultures’ entry into the so-called Axial Age? To what extent do debates concerning that “Fifth Gospel,” the Book of Isaiah, provide a window into all of biblical scholarship? How can we identify, let alone measure, distinctive features in any of the cultures of the ancient Near East, when these intersect at so many junctures of their development? And what, finally, can be made of Israel’s “principal monument”—the Hebrew Bible—when it comes to its incorporation within the ancient Near East?

For Machinist these and similar questions still demand engagement, and not owing to sophistry or feigned reverence. They do so because they are good, timeless, questions—questions that reflect the economy of our collected wisdom and whose abandonment would be, at the very least, rash. More accurately, to evade them for him represents a sophomoric act, one perhaps inspired by new trappings wedged in stone or emboldened by deconstructive liberations (either of these, he might coyly warn his students, are too frequently taken up as new toys that numb the senses with false pretenses of security), but which ultimately render us intellectually impoverished.

The opposite course charted by our honoree has not been an easy one. Few have selected to embark on it; fewer still have done so with the modesty he exudes and the dignity he has displayed towards his teachers, colleagues, and students. Not that he has remained consistently above the fray. On occasion, especially in private conversations, he has registered complaints with alternative ways of doing things. “It is not about poundage,” he has been heard to mutter on occasion, and has warned his students of the dangers in becoming *Fachstudenten*, or in the too-common habit he has summarized as “raiding the dictionaries.”

Far more frequently, however, our honoree has led by a positive example, in a manner displaying a respect towards others that in the final analysis may be said to permeate his innermost parts. For those who have marveled at our honoree’s apparent inability to come to terms with the implications of Qoheleth’s bibliophilia, it is important to recognize that this has not been entirely in vain. For beyond a love of books and a reverence for *choses dites*, he retains a fundamental belief that to dig into this or that volume brings with it the hope of uncovering some perspective that

had previously eluded him. He might well show less patience for fashionable or shoddily construed works, those that violate the parameters of the field he embraces. And yet he reads on, unremitting in his faith that wisdom percolates in unexpected places and that, consequently, it is his duty to search for it, to cull it out when found, and to nurture it where possible.

A related article of faith for Machinist informs this habit: this one strives to connect scholarship to the scholars who produce it, and more broadly to the intellectual context in which a given work appears. Put another way (to employ a favorite phrase of our honoree), *creatio ex nihilo* is for him no more likely in the case of modern writings than with *Enūma Eliš* or Genesis 1. He has insisted, consequently, on charting the intellectual history of biblical and Near Eastern scholarship, and he has produced studies of Wellhausen, Gunkel, and Albright, among others, which have been pedagogically groundbreaking. Those who have sat in his seminar on the history of interpretation of the Bible from the time of the Renaissance (or, for that matter, those who have shared a bowl of soup, Caesar salad, or a ginger ale with him at a conference) will no doubt attest to his unmatched recollection of scholarly biographical detail. And if at times this may be said to spill into the realm of gossip, still all who know him will agree that it flows from a generosity of spirit and humane regard for the community of scholars, the effective modeling of which has often earned him the characterization as a true gentleman.

Yet Machinist can scarcely be labeled a “professor of things in general,” as a brief word on our honoree’s philological skills will indicate. Whether in the recognition of Assyrian rhetoric from the Hebrew prophets, the incipience of Hellenism in Israel’s Wisdom, evidence of a theological dispute embedded in a cuneiform scribal sleight of hand, or the teasing out of the divine kingship metaphor in Assyria and Judah, more than once Machinist has shown his abilities in this craft. The point is perhaps more remarkable in the cases of well-trodden paths, as with his careful and trenchant interpretation of the brief, eight-verse Psalm 82, a model of how careful philology can in the end illumine philosophy. Those of us fortunate to have studied with him have marveled at additional manifestations of his ear picking up seemingly inaudible pitches transmitted by texts, ancient and modern, and of his capacity to translate these to students, who in these instances seemed fixated on the timelessness of questions raised by thoughtful writings.

In his engagement with such texts Machinist has been at times nothing short of mesmerizing. One can scarcely forget his improvisation of God’s response to the satan’s challenge concerning Job’s alleged altruism

(“Does Job fear God for nought?”); in his take on it, Machinist, visibly perplexed and agitated (“I don’t know, I just don’t know...”), rendered a room of some 150 Harvard undergraduates speechless. His enactment of Anzû’s pathetic *kappā ana kappī* cry left several of his graduate students in stitches. And his reading of a parenthetical note concerning Rehoboam’s travel to Shechem in 1 Kgs 12:1 (“the revolution had already begun!”) convinced this volume’s editors that his defamiliarization approach to ancient texts provided the fresh air they had both sought in a teacher.

“I am just reading the text!,” he would exclaim at such junctures, the high-pitched excitement highlighting the sense of liberation these moments yielded him. Yes, Peter, you were just reading the texts, and we are so grateful that you have helped teach us how to read them, how to convey their humanity, and how to do so in a way that transmits your own.

2. Biographical Sketch

Peter Machinist was born on September 3, 1944 in Philadelphia, PA, to Milton and Sylvia P. Machinist. The father, upon returning from active military service in the United States Air Force, worked until the end of the war in the Pentagon, and the young family resided briefly in Washington, DC. Soon after, they returned to Manchester, NH, where Machinist’s father, who had earned an M.B.A. from Harvard, ran a successful department store. It may fairly be said that Peter’s New England roots, in formation and education, took firm hold during the next quarter century.

In 1962, Machinist graduated from Governor Dummer Academy in Byfield, Massachusetts, the faculty of which, he insists, disabused him of any pretensions of pursuing a career in the natural sciences but certainly cultivated a keen interest in the humanities, and ancient history in particular. After his freshman year, the family, including his sister, Linda, visited Europe, where a tour of Pompeii likewise left an indelible impression. His study of ancient history intensified at Harvard College, where Machinist concentrated on the Hebrew Bible, the ancient Near East, and Greek—subjects, of course, that would animate his subsequent professional life. His honors thesis there, written under the tutelage of Frank Moore Cross and entitled “The First Coins of Judah,” dealt with the intersection of numismatics and history. At Harvard he was also strongly influenced by Thomas O. Lambdin and G. Ernest Wright. During these years, Machinist also participated as a field photographer with the excavation teams at Sardis, Turkey (1964) and at Gezer, Israel (1966). It was also at Harvard that he was introduced to his roommate’s sister, Alice (née Rubin), and they would marry in 1974.

Machinist graduated *summa cum laude* with the class of 1966 and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. From Harvard, Machinist turned to New Haven to commence his graduate work in Near Eastern Studies. At Yale, Peter earned an M.Phil. in 1971 and a Ph.D. in 1978, with a dissertation on the Middle Assyrian Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I. The work, commenced under the direction of J. J. Finkelstein but completed, following Finkelstein's untimely death, under William W. Hallo, probed what would become a favorite topic of Machinist: literature in the service of political ends. In addition to these and his other teachers at Yale—including Richard Ellis, Harry Hoffner, Marvin Pope, Franz Rosenthal, and Judah Goldin—Machinist also forged an important relationship with Hayim Tadmor, who had served there as a visiting professor in 1971, and who remained a lifelong friend and sometimes co-author. At Yale, a keen and highly able group of graduate students assembled in those years, and the intellectual ferment generated by that group would remain for Peter an ideal.

While at Yale, Machinist began his teaching career, among other places at Connecticut College (1969), Case Western Reserve University (1971–76), and, from 1977–86, at the University of Arizona, where, with William Dever and a Yale classmate, Norman Yoffee, Machinist contributed to the building of an important program in Near Eastern archaeology. Throughout these years, he taught not only on Assyriological or technically focused ancient Near Eastern topics, but also general courses for undergraduates that opened up wider perspectives. During these years, too, he served, in 1981, as Lady Davis postdoctoral fellow and visiting lecturer in Assyriology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and then, in 1984–85, as a fellow in the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin. Between 1986 and 1990, Peter taught in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan, where he was reunited with another of his Yale student-colleagues, Piotr Michalowski. At Michigan, he also built a relationship with David Noel Freedman, with whom he co-taught a course on Qumran. It was also during these years that Peter and Alice welcomed Edith (1980) and David (1986) into their family.

In 1991, Machinist was invited to join the faculty of Harvard University in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, where he was appointed, in 1992, Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages, succeeding his mentor, Frank Moore Cross, in the third-oldest endowed chair among American universities. He arrived to join a constellation of scholars whose work extended across the spectrum of Near Eastern studies: Piotr Steinkeller, Steven Cole, and Paul-Alain Beau-

lieu in Assyriology; Larry Stager in Archaeology; John Huehnergard in Semitics and Jo Ann Hackett in Hebrew and Northwest Semitic Epigraphy; James Kugel in Hebrew Literature; P. Oktor Skjaervo in Persian and Iranian Studies; Irene Winter in ancient Near Eastern art history; as well as Paul Hanson and Gary Anderson in Old Testament, and Jon Levenson, in Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies, at the Harvard Divinity School.

Machinist began quickly to mentor a series of doctoral students at Harvard, continuing to the present, who would embrace his approach to Near Eastern civilizations. The rigor and depth of his commentary on the written work submitted by students, time-consuming as that is, has become legendary. Meanwhile, he has shown incredible dedication to his many students in other ways, including by attending innumerable scholarly conference papers. When once he darted into the back of a full conference room to hear a student, he leaned against the wall and inadvertently dimmed the lights. The speaker, not aware of the culprit, suggested, “perhaps this is the work of God.” An audience member retorted, “no, just Peter Machinist,” to which the speaker responded, “same difference.” Machinist also fostered the scholarship of students and junior colleagues in his role as editor of *Harvard Semitic Monographs*.

In 2003, he returned to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as Lady Davis Visiting Professor of Biblical History in the departments of Jewish History and Bible. In 2008–9 he was Victor and Sylvia Blank Fellow and Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. In the spring of 2009, he was awarded the degree of Doctor *honoris causa* by the *Theologische Fakultät* of the University of Zurich. Machinist will spend the 2013–14 academic year as *Gastprofessor für Kulturgeschichte des Altertums* at the *Ludwig Maximilians Universität* in Munich, in the *Münchner Zentrum für Antike Welten* and *Fakultät der Kulturwissenschaften*.

Throughout the span of our honoree’s professional life, the Machinist home has often served as a venue in which colleagues, students, and friends have enjoyed fine conversation or have stopped by to peruse or borrow an obscure volume. Alice, among other things an avid student of the state science curriculum and a passionate observer of contemporary politics, has participated in and helped foster those conversations in ways large and small. We extend our thanks to Alice in particular for her humor and generosity.

The production of this volume would not have been possible without the assistance of a host of people. Foremost among these were a group of Peter’s students who conferred in many ways throughout the process: Pamela Barmash, Cindy Chapman, Martien Halvorson-Taylor, and Mark

Hamilton. They offered sage advice, editorial assistance, and camaraderie. John Kutsko, who began his graduate studies with Peter in Michigan, was a source of superb counsel and assistance. At Notre Dame, Michael Cover, Mary Davenport Davis, Andrew Geist, and Michael Stahl provided support in the editing of this volume, along with Richard Beal, Foy Scalf, and Andréas and Julie Stauder at the University of Chicago. At Boston College, John R. Barker, OFM, and Patrick Angiolillo provided important assistance, as did the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, David Quigley, and the Interim Provost and Dean of Faculties, Joseph Quinn. At Eisenbrauns, where Peter has earned a status of “most favored nation,” Jim Eisenbraun eagerly took on the project and guided us, while Andrew Knapp provided careful and timely editorial assistance. To all we extend our warm thanks.

— David Vanderhooft and Abraham Winitzer

