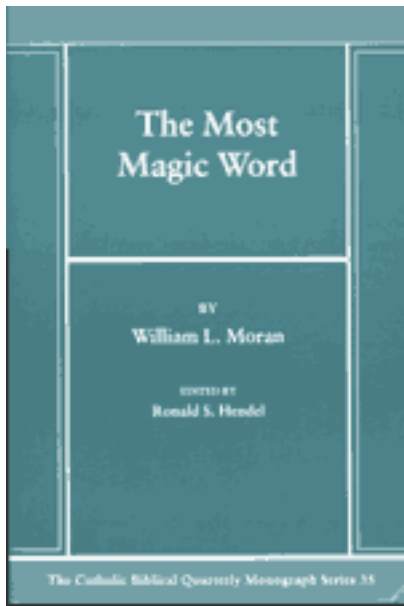


RBL 01/2004



Moran, William L.

The Most Magic Word: Essays on Babylonian and Biblical Literature

Edited by Ronald S. Hendel

Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 35

Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2002. Pp. x + 212. Paper. \$11.50. ISBN 0915170345.

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In a distinguished academic career extending over half a century, the late William L. Moran, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, authored nearly seventy articles, a hundred critical reviews, and a volume of translations of the Amarna letters (produced in French and translated into English). He also edited the *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, 7 (I/J), a volume known for its particular excellence. The current collection containing fifteen articles, two in print for the first time, samples but a small, tantalizing taste of the author's scholarly legacy. Missing are examples of Moran's numerous contributions concerning the Amarna letters (a career-long occupation and arguably his major field of endeavor),¹ Northwest Semitic philology, Assyriology proper, and certain major Mesopotamian myths such as *Enuma Elish* and *Anzu*. The works in this volume, selected apparently for their "biblical" import, epitomize nonetheless the evaluation in the introduction to his Festschrift: "But his work has also always had a special appeal.

¹ These have been published in a separate collection. See *William L. Moran, Amarna Studies: Collected Writings* (ed. John Huehnergard and Shlomo Izre'el; Harvard Semitic Museum publications; HSS 54; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003).

Regardless of the topic, there is in his approach a humane quality, a concern for broader issues that expresses the intellectual and vital excitement that he brings to the text.”²

The title of this volume is borrowed from Rainer Maria Rilke’s impression of the Gilgamesh Epic (read in Ungnad’s German translation) as “das zaubernde Wort zu irgendeiner Zeit.” Its use testifies to Moran’s conviction³ that ancient Mesopotamian literature was not an arcane corpus of interest only to a handful of scholars conversant in dead languages but of highest humanistic value of concern to people of culture even in modern times. Moran’s commitment to human culture in general even while studying the ancient Near East finds expression in his frequent citations in foreign languages, abundant use of Latin expressions, and, most significantly, comparative use of classical literature to explain Mesopotamian writings. In the same vein, of the essays selected for publication, one discusses Gilgamesh’s coming to grips with his own humanity, another focuses (through the lens of Ovid and other classical authors) on the humanization (by lovemaking) of his companion Enkidu, and yet a third discusses the creation of mankind according to Atrahasis. In this essay, published here for the first time, Moran relates the use of the remnants of a slain god in the newly formed man to “man’s religious impulse, the inner urging he experienced to submit to the yoke of the gods and satisfy their needs.” The divine is at the center of Moran’s interest mostly in the last essay on the role of Marduk in the “Babylonian Job” (see below), but even there at issue is not theology but the divine in its relationship to humankind.

The collection hosts three components. The first half as well as the concluding chapter highlight Babylonian literature and contain four items on the Gilgamesh Epic (one is not an article per se but a translation of Gilgamesh’s famous lament over his fallen friend Enkidu and Siduri’s words of consolation), an equal number of pioneering articles on Atrahasis (the Babylonian story of the flood and antediluvian history, which is more essential than Gilgamesh XI for background to Gen 5–6), and a never-before-published study of *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the so-called Babylonian Job, which eschews a bibliifying reading of the poem in favor of one concentrating on the theology of Marduk. In this chapter Moran suggests that the righteous-sufferer motif, long considered the dominant theme of the text, is quantitatively minor and structurally off center, and in fact the work is meant to proclaim a new religion in which Marduk has supplanted the so-called

² T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard, P. Steinkeller, eds., *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (HSS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), x. The title of the Festschrift echoes a letter of Schiller to Goethe in which he wrote: “The purpose of the epic poet is present at every point of his movement. Hence we do not hasten impatiently to an end, but linger with love [*mit Liebe verweilen*] at every step” (cited in the present volume, p. 59).

³ We are told in the preface that Moran gave his blessing to the idea and plan of this volume, permitting us to assume that the Moran reflected in its pages is an image he would agree with.

personal deities who cannot offer salvation to their devotees.⁴ These compositions are, of course, major works of world literature as well as of overwhelming importance for the background of the Hebrew Bible. Moran's sensitive and penetrating studies analyze the overall literary structures of the compositions as well as certain central themes, individual crucial passages or words, and even specific rhetorical devices illustrating his ability to span and integrate the entire range of problems in reading a text from the most minute to the final message. Although Moran is too good a philologist to be accused of postmodernism, he fully realizes the importance of self-awareness and the perils of personal perspective in literary analysis and presents his interpretations of both works as "my Gilgamesh" and "my Ludlul."

These are followed by three studies of Old Babylonian letters. One tracks a proverb ("The hasty bitch brings forth blind whelps") found in a Mari letter that subsequently appears throughout the world down through the Hellenistic period and on into modern times. Another presents editions of and philological commentaries on the (then) newly published Mari letters mentioning prophecy. A third offers a rhetorical analysis of a report (not actually a letter, according to Moran) of a prophecy found at Nerebtum.

The book concludes with three essays on a range of biblical topics including YHWH's saving acts (Deut 2:14–16 and the relationship between Deut 2–3 and Exod 15), a quiet miracle of salvation performed by a Gentile woman (Rahab), and the covenantal love of God in the context of ancient Near Eastern treaties.

Much water has flown in the Euphrates since some of these articles were penned, and plentiful new primary sources and scholarly literature relating to the subjects covered in this book have appeared. These include Andrew George's volume of translations of all known Gilgamesh stories;⁵ a new recension of Atrahasis from the Neo-Babylonian library found at Sippar;⁶ and a re-edition of the Mari letters relating to prophecy and other mantic activities.⁷ The last decade has also been marked by a revolutionary sea-change in the study of the Bible and ancient Israel that, in its most extreme expression, would uproot the writings of the Bible from the Late Bronze and Iron Age and replant them in

⁴ Proper appreciation of Ludlul's structure became possible only after publication by Donald Wiseman of the opening passage that laid out the full extent of the panegyric to Marduk. This passage merited an independent study by Moran in "Notes on the Hymn to Marduk in *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi*," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 255–60.

⁵ A. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (London: Penguin, 1999).

⁶ A. R. George and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, "Tablets from the Sippar Library VI. Atra-has," *Iraq* 58 (1996): 147–90.

⁷ J.-M. Durand, D. Charpin, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* I\1[1–2] (ARM 26; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988).

the late Persian and even early Hellenistic periods. One might expect such developments to make any reproduction of articles produced over a full half century sorely out of date, and one certainly regrets that Moran is no longer with us to consider the new sources and scholarly perspectives and integrate them into his writings. All this notwithstanding, Moran's works, based on sound philology, sensitive reading, and a regard for theology and ideas not bound by historical circumstances, stand the test of time retaining their vitality and validity.

Although Professor Moran was fully at home in both biblical and Mesopotamian literature and qualified like few others to draw comparisons, he respects the cultural and conceptual autonomy of the two civilizations. Most of the articles are pertinent to biblical studies, but the relevance is not always investigated explicitly (the major survey of prophecy in the Mari letters is silent about biblical prophecy), allowing the Mesopotamian texts to speak for themselves out of their original contexts and leaving the biblical scholar to apply them independently according to his or her own inclinations.

The readers of *RBL* are indebted to Ronald S. Hendel for producing this gem of a monument to an outstanding scholar, humanist (and Celtics fan), and hope for sequels containing Professor Moran's remaining studies.