

Book Reviews

RGG Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 3-89853-412-X, Euro 135,00
Taschenlexikon Religion und Theologie, 3-89853-473-1, Euro 30
Philosophie von Platon bis Nietzsche, 3-89853-402-2, Euro 45
Marx, Engels, Ausgewählte Werke, Vol. 11, 3-89853-411-1, Euro 45,00
Friedrich Nietzsche, 3-89853-431-6, Euro, 45
Max Weber - Gesammelte Werke, 3-89853-458-8, Euro 45.00
Martin Luther: Gesammelte Werke, 3-89853-463-4, Euro 45
Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte, 3-89853-435-9, Euro 45

Available form:

DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH
Möckernstraße 68, D-10965 Berlin, Germany.
Website: <http://www.digitale-bibliothek.de/scripts/ts.dll?mp=/pi/0/>
E-mail: info@directmedia.de

Or:

Steven Wolfe Books
151 Spiers Rd., Newton Centre
MA, 02459, Telefon 617-739-3438
E-Mail: swolfe6999@aol.com

For anyone who reads German the Digitale Bibliothek which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year is a treasure trove of absolutely wonderful texts available on CDs at very reasonable prices. Even better, anyone who visits their website regularly soon learns that they have some excellent sales that make the already relatively inexpensive works even more affordable.

Using their own text reader with a very user friendly interface these programs are excellent value. Where else can one buy the complete works of Marx or Nietzsche for around \$60 depending on the exchange rate? What is more, the contents of these CDs very easily load onto the hard drive of a computer to make access even easier.

Although most people, like the present reviewer, will refrain from

reading all of these excellent works on their computer screen, what these CDs do is provide a truly helpful resource that allows fast searches and easy access to reference materials. Actually, they function as an ever expanding index to the works of key theological and philosophical writers.

Although the most expensive of these tools is the third edition of RGG Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart it is well worth the price for anyone serious about research using German language tools. By comparison English language texts, like Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* and the CD version of Martin Luther's Works are far more expensive and offer much less value for money.

The collection of key texts found in *Philosophie von Platon bis Nietzsche* provides scholars with an excellent selection major philosophical and often theological texts that is exceptionally thorough in its scope. Here, in addition to ancient and medieval philosophers one finds the key works of writers like Schleiermacher and Feuerbach to name but two key figures in the study of religion. Although a new volume of Protestant texts was recently released this reviewer has yet to obtain a copy.

This series, which now includes 141 separate CDs, needs to be better known, patronized, and supported. A quick visit to the publisher's website at: <http://www.digitale-bibliothek.de/scripts/ts.dll?mp=/pi/0/> will soon confirm the ambitious scope of these texts which also include an impressive series of CDs dealing with art and architecture. What is more, these CDs are remarkably easy to use and very reliable. These CDs ought to be in all theological and philosophical libraries as well as the hard drives of serious scholars.

Irving Hexham

University of Calgary

Pamela Barmash. *Homicide in the Biblical World*. xvi + 253 pages. Cambridge University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0-521-83468-6 \$25.99.

Barmash's *Homicide in the Biblical World* is a comparative study of biblical and cuneiform texts relating to homicide. Mostly this involves an analysis of legal materials (law codes and accounts of court transactions) and biblical narratives involving homicide (but not Mesopotamian narratives). As a compilation of cuneiform legal material pertaining to homicide, this is a valuable contribution since Barmash has combed through the diverse textual record and compiled a list of the germane sources. This is especially helpful with regards to the cuneiform material, which is published in diverse and non-uniform settings; this volume serves as a reference source for anyone wishing to deal with the subject of murder in the cuneiform record. Unfortunately, specialists in the field will be disappointed in her general presentation and analysis of the materials.

Indeed, Barmash's presentation of the material is not ideal. What will be striking for cuneiform specialists is her inconsistency in presenting transliterated cuneiform texts or merely presenting English translations. She explains this as a concession to space (11) since the interested reader can easily track down the material on their own. This is truly unfortunate since many of her arguments are based on close interpretations of these texts, so the fact that no lexical analysis has been provided means that her interpretations cannot be given due consideration. For example, we are given translations of multiple laws dealing with homicide from Mesopotamian legal codes. What Akkadian word has been translated as "homicide"? Is this different from the words used for "killing" in general? Since many of her arguments depend on semantics, reference must be made to the original language, and are invalid if based on English translations. More problematic are her evaluations of scribal dependency. How is it possible to determine if one text was copied from another if this is not shown in the original languages? Certainly a different relationship is implied when one text is directly copied from another than when two texts reflect the same idea using different language.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2006

Perhaps most problematic in this work is Barmash's general application of the comparative method in biblical studies. While I disagree with some of her textual readings and conclusions (which is typical of cuneiform studies), it is her methodology that I feel is problematic. She has followed the methodological mistakes of many of the earliest Bible and Cuneiform scholars. Barmash simply shops through the cuneiform record looking for evidence to support her a priori conception of the biblical material. In this case, she presumes that the biblical conception of homicide was unique, even given her own demonstration of the textual dependence of some of the biblical legal material on the cuneiform legal tradition. When Barmash does provide her own lexical analyses, her conclusions seem suspect (for example, her comparison of *haddam* and *go'el* (90) leading one to wonder about the steps in her analysis that she has omitted.

To my mind, there are other significant methodological problems in Barmash's comparative approach. In this work, she seems to monolithize Mesopotamia. The texts that are brought forward in her discussion are dissociated from their historical context and no attempt is made to allow for any sort of diachronic development. Mesopotamia appears as an unchanging 'other' in this work. Often her categorizations of Mesopotamia are arguable, for example her statement that "Mesopotamia was urban and centralized, with the disintegration of extensive family ties and the rigid control of bureaucracy" (202). Perhaps a statement like this could be made for the Ur III Period, but not as a general statement of Mesopotamian civilization. To use these kinds of conceptions as the basis for a larger argument is even more problematic. Her treatment of Israel could also be strengthened by more interaction with critical theory and critical historical work.

Barmash's treatment of genre is also problematic. It is not always clear that she is comparing material that is justifiably comparable. Her inconsistent application of source and textual criticism complicates her presentation. Why should suggestions given to Nehemiah in the Persian Period be in any way comparable to proscriptions in the Covenant Code (73-74)? Likewise, the reader unfamiliar with cuneiform literature would have no way of knowing that the "legal codes" she refers to

(such as the Code of Hammurabi) are actually sections of larger historical inscriptions. Considerations of genre are absolute musts in any utilization of the comparative method, since genre acts as a constraint on what one would expect to find in a given text.

I have misgivings about recommending this book to the specialist or the non-specialist in the field. Although Barmash has usefully collected many disparate texts relating to the subject, the presentation and methodological problems discussed above limit the usefulness of the work.

Kevin McGeough

University of Lethbridge

Pamela Barmash. *Homicide in the Biblical World*. xvi + 253 pages. Cambridge University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0-521-83468-6 \$25.99.

This highly concise work is more a comparison of texts on homicide than a study of homicide in any broader way. Pamela Barmash sets Old Testament passages beside homicide texts of surrounding states and peoples in order to comment on the similarities and differences among the attitudes to the various biblical and cuneiform legal traditions. In so doing, she attempts to explain not only particular legal tendencies and attitudes, but also the question of what such comparisons can reveal about the evidence for cultural interactions, influences and origins in Ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts.

Barmash carries on the debate about the interfertility between cuneiform and Israelite law and establishes what she deems to have been unique interrelated characteristics of the latter: the importance of blood as “both a purifier and a contaminant” (96), which could stain or absolve the entire nation; the normality of blood feud as the legal solution to intentional homicide; the overriding spirit of *lex talionis* in Israelite considerations of homicide; and the development of places of refuge where the slayer could avoid premature or unjust execution by the relations of the slain. These traditions are presented as features

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2006

consistent with the clan-based, moral, theologically influenced and lightly governed society in which they developed. Cuneiform texts, by contrast, are the cultural products of more urbanized and administratively centralized societies. While the Ancient Near Eastern regimes share some features of Israelite law and practice, their executions are not truly talionic but rather they are harsh punishments considered necessary for serious crimes. Moreover, it is argued, the variety of Ancient Near Eastern solutions to homicide bespeaks a greater legal recognition of the more complex social strata characteristic of the urban societies, with various penalties depending on the status and gender of victims. Biblical law makes few judicial distinctions of this sort other than between slaves and free persons. Human beings are not fungible (a favourite word in this book) in Israel, whereas in cuneiform texts homicide victims can sometimes be compensated for by money or even by the deaths of persons related to the slayer, but not involved in the original crime. Blood is not a pollutant and does not therefore need to be expunged, in Israelite fashion, by the blood of the slayer.

Even to the non-specialist, some of the author's assertions are troubling. The combined notions of predominantly urban societies in the ancient Near East and the implied absence of blood feuds outside Israel seem highly unlikely, given the geographical and economically dictated necessity of a substantial rural population in the broader historical context of widespread blood vengeance. In order to support her thesis of what we might call 'Israelite exceptionalists' she needs to move outside her main text and provide more convincing contexts. It is never clear, for example, just how likely it was that any of the penalties and procedures she describes were thought to have been actually applied in a region so often under the sway of powerful foreigners. In other words, there is a disjuncture here between history and evidence.

To suggest such a title Barmash needs to proceed by inference from her texts and from additional evidence to show the reader the likely place, meaning and weight of the texts she so diligently compares. When making the attempt at deriving a general principle by which scholars can decide on the provenance of particular customs or legal phenomena, the author produces a statement that can only disturb the

reader further:

An element that is very general, we must assume, was independently invented, but something unusual calls attention to itself as something parallel (204).

Given the spread of trade, religions, technology and written characters, it is difficult to agree that “we must assume,” as the author suggests.

Malcolm Greenshields

University of Lethbridge

