

2000

# William Robertson Smith, Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Second and Third Series, edited by John Day

Steven W. Holloway

James Madison University, hollowsw@jmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/letfspubs>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Holloway, Steven W., "William Robertson Smith, Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Second and Third Series, edited by John Day" (2000). *Libraries*. 122.

<http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/letfspubs/122>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries & Educational Technologies at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Libraries by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Second and Third Series by William Robertson Smith and John Day

Review by: Steven W. Holloway

Source: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Apr., 2000), pp. 137-140

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/545625>

Accessed: 05-01-2018 18:58 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The University of Chicago Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*

that it was the ancient interpreters, and their assumptions outlined in chap. 1, that made the Bible "biblical." As a criticism of modern reconstructions of the history of the Bible, the point is well taken. But it should also be acknowledged that for many modern critics, it is precisely the traditional notion of the Bible, and the "biblical," that needs to be deconstructed. One senses in Kugel's book a wistful nostalgia for a kind of interpretation in which he clearly delights. The question remains whether that kind of interpretation is compatible with modern criticism, which he also respects, except as a subject for historical study.

The modern viability of traditional interpretation is also at issue in Kugel's avowal of ecumenical intentions in writing this book (p. 47). He shows admirably how much traditional Judaism and traditional Christianity have in common in their approach to scripture. But, as he quips on p. 48, the two faiths are also divided by a common scripture, or more precisely, as he would surely agree, by traditional interpretation. An interpretation that sees a prefiguration of Christ in the rock in the wilderness, or in the bronze serpent, may be formally similar to interpretations offered by Philo, but it is materially incompatible with them. Traditional interpretation ruled both Judaism and Christianity uncontested for some 1,500 years. It was not, in that time, conspicuous for its ecumenism. The reason for this is that the very assumptions that Kugel so brilliantly identifies are not conducive to the arbitration of disputes. However destructive modern criticism has been of traditional faith, it must surely be given greater credit for advancing the cause of ecumenism.

The value of Kugel's book, however, is in no way dependent on its implications for biblical theology. It is not a polemical book. It is a thoroughly positive retrieval of traditional exegesis, whose greatest attraction is the author's obvious love of his material. It is a book that is not only instructive, but charming, a delight to read. One can hardly imagine a more attractive presentation of the traditional Bible.

JOHN J. COLLINS

*The University of Chicago*

*Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Second and Third Series.* By WILLIAM ROBERTSON SMITH. Edited by JOHN DAY. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 183. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995. Pp. 149. \$40.

Announcing the publication of William Robertson Smith's latest book, the Second and Third Burnett Lectures of 1890–1891: *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*—no, this is not an extreme case of submission-to-publication lag time. John Day's discovery of the manuscripts of the lectures in the Cambridge University Library, the transcription of Smith's daunting handwriting, in some cases working from multiple manuscript revisions, and the creation of full citations from Smith's cryptic notes has resulted in an eminently serviceable edition of these hitherto unpublished lectures given three years before the author's death in 1894.<sup>1</sup>

Continuing with the comparative methodology of the classic first lecture series devoted to sacrifice, the second series deals with aspects of the Semitic cultus. "Feasts" (second series, lecture 1) concentrates on various ancient calendars, focusing on the spring or autumnal dating of the new year, with discussions on new moon feasts, the Jewish Sabbath, and harvest feasts. "Priests and the Priestly Oracle" (2/2) and "Priests (contd), Diviners, Prophets" (2/3) deal cursorily with a variety of issues drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, with relatively little comparative material. Included are discussions of the historical de-laicization of Israelite sacrifice, the status of Israelite/Judahite kings vis-à-vis priesthood, Urim and Thummim and the Tabernacle, the Canaanite background of the Israelite priesthood, with an interesting discussion of the cultural background of priestly attire, forbidden modes of revelation, and finally a frankly Christian apologetic for the superiority of biblical prophets over Muhammad (received with considerable applause, pp. 124, 126).

<sup>1</sup> In the controversial life of W. Robertson Smith, see the remarkable collection of essays in the conference volume William Johnstone, ed., *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 189 (Sheffield, 1995).

The third and final lecture series deals with polytheism and cosmogonies. The first lecture, "Semitic Polytheism (1)" canvasses the geographical sphere of influence exerted by "Semitic gods." Robertson Smith believed that the physical connection between a god and his/her local sanctuary was fundamental, resisting the development of national pantheons such as the (Neo-)Assyrian state pantheon. Inevitably, he brings us to the point dictated by his conception of Christian supercessionism: "... the religion of Israel failed to detach itself completely from the physical substratum that underlies all Semitic heathenism" (p. 68). Babylonian astral religion only made serious inroads in Israel during the Assyrian period, while the phenomenon of portable shrines and portable "idols" had more to do with the exigencies of warfare among the more developed polities than nomadic religion. The second lecture (3/2) considers the ways and means of pantheon syncretism and the extent of polytheism among the Semites. For Robertson Smith, the culturally evolutionary-minded Victorian, primitive Semitic religion meant "... simple worship of a local god or goddess (or more commonly of a divine pair, the local Baal and his partner) to whom all sacrifices and vows were addressed and by whose name all oaths were taken" (p. 77). Such *numen loci* and *numen gens* became augmented through trade relations (Phoenician cultus), political alliances (Solomonic diplomacy), and geographical absorption (Assyrian state pantheon). While he demurs that true monotheism was normative only among the Israelites, Semitic pantheons tended towards simplicity, swelling in numbers usually under the duress of imperial takeover. The job descriptions of Semitic gods, he believes, exhibit a tendency to be less specific and differentiated than Greek deities. Tellingly, Robertson Smith experienced the same difficulty in distinguishing the attributes of Semitic goddesses as have his scholarly descendants (p. 91).

The final lecture, "The Gods and the World: Cosmogony" (3/3) contrasts the *Enūma eliš* with the Genesis creation narrative and explores Phoenician cosmogonies and theogonies by way of Philo of Byblos and Damaskios. The former topic, written before Gunkel's *Schöpfung und*

*Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, as Day observes, finds far less in common between the Babylonian and Genesis accounts than other writers on the subject. The order of events is incompatible and, most damning, "the Babylonian story is closely akin to the myths of savage nations, which make heaven and earth to be animated creatures originally locked together in a firm embrace, so that their children are crushed down in darkness" (pp. 103–4). The concluding section, written forty years prior to the discovery of the Ugaritic text corpus, deals instructively with Phoenician craft-gods and relates the imagery of Ezekiel 28 with the symbolism of Phoenician temples.

This book is more than a mere snapshot of Victorian biblical scholarship at its height. Robertson Smith's encyclopedic command of Classical, Phoenician, Syriac, and Arabic sources, together with his unstated essentialist belief in the survival of Semitic religion across the centuries, has the combined effect of shifting the comparative perspective forward into the Hellenistic period—and beyond. As an instance of the value of this breadth of erudition, his fruitful observations regarding the correlation between the biblical dates of Noah's flood and various feasts in ancient and medieval Edessa, Harran, and Hierapolis have not appeared in the secondary literature, as Day correctly observes (p. 19).

The puzzling lack of use by the author of Assyro-Babylonian sources in his other major publications is compensated for in these lectures. Working from translations, secondary studies, and iconographic sources, Robertson Smith, for example, is cognizant of the Assyrian practice of deporting the divine images of defeated enemies.<sup>2</sup> He recognizes the importance of seven-day intervals in the Babylonian calendar and clearly had some knowledge of an Akkadian

<sup>2</sup>P. 34 (unspecific); p. 76 cites the annals of Tiglath-pileser I [not Tiglath-pileser III, *pace* Day, p. 29] in Wilhelm Lotz, *Die Inschriften Tiglath-pileser's I* (Leipzig, 1880), p. 37 IV §19 = Eberhard Schrader, ed., *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek: Sammlung von assyrischen und babylonischen Texten in Umschrift und Übersetzung* (Berlin, 1889–90), I: 29 IV 32–39 = RIMA 2, A.0.87.1 IV 32–39. Robertson Smith also refers the hapless reader to Assurbanipal's annals *passim*.

hemerology.<sup>3</sup> Writing during the formative years of the Pan-Babylonism controversy, he emphatically rejects P. Jensen's claim that all "North" (read Northwest) Semites had astral gods at the summit of their pantheons.<sup>4</sup> He can illustrate an argument about portable divine images by pointing to Assyrian battle standards in the palace reliefs of Sargon II at Khorsabad.<sup>5</sup> Correctly, if on the basis of specious reasoning, he asserts that the Assyrian state pantheon (an invocatory list drawn from the annals of Assurbanipal) was worshiped in its entirety only by the king and his court.<sup>6</sup> He is aware of theories of an ancient non-

<sup>3</sup> P. 39. Robertson Smith's arguments are based entirely upon Eberhard Schrader, *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, 2d ed. (Giessen, 1883), pp. 19–20, evidently extracts from *Enbu bēl arḫi* (IV R, 32–33 = K. 4231 +), in which he misconstrues Schrader's own faulty interpretation of Akkadian "šabbatuv" (*šapattu*, 15th day, not "day of rest").

<sup>4</sup> P. 71. Peter Christian Albrecht Jensen, *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier* (Strasbourg, 1890), p. 454. Later publications by Jensen will reveal his severely reductionistic attempt to collapse world mythology into the Gilgamesh Epic: *Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Weltliteratur*, vol. 1: *Die Ursprünge der alttestamentlichen Patriarchen-, Propheten- und Befreier-Sage und der neutestamentlichen Jesus-Sage* (Strasbourg, 1906); idem, *Moses, Jesus, Paulus; Drei Varianten des babylonischen gottmenschlichen Gilgamesch: Eine Anklage wider die Theologen, ein Appell auch an die Laien*, 2d ed. (Frankfurt am Main, 1909). On the history of the Pan-Babylonism movement, see Klaus Johanning, *Der Bibel-Babel-Streit: Eine forschungsgeschichtliche Studie*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, Series 23, Theologie 343 (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), pp. 265–90, and Reinhard G. Lehmann, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Bibel-Bibel-Streit*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 133 (Fribourg, Switzerland and Göttingen, 1994), pp. 38–49.

<sup>5</sup> P. 74. The relief Robertson Smith refers to was probably from Room 14, slabs 10–11, a stylized scene of an Assyrian siege camp, an engraving of which was first published in Paul-Emile Botta and Eugène Flandin, *Monument de Ninive découvert et décrit* (Paris, 1849–50), vol. 2, pl. 146 = Pauline Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon King of Assyria: Monumental Wall Reliefs at Dur-Sharrukin, from Original Drawings Made at the Time of Their Original Discovery in 1843–1844 by Botta and Flandin*, trans. Annie Caubet, "Synthèse" no. 22 (Paris, 1886), pl. 137, reproduced in many nineteenth-century publications.

<sup>6</sup> P. 80, citing the edition of the Rassam Cylinder in Schrader, ed., *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek*, II: 157 I 41–43 (Robertson Smith inserts "Bilit" the paredros of Aššur) = Rykle Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals: Die Prismenklassen A, B, C = K,*

Semitic cultus behind the Assyro-Babylonian religion.<sup>7</sup> An inscribed Moabite seal, with a winged solar disk, "is the general Assyrian symbol of deity and proves nothing except that the seal was cut in the period of Assyrian influence."<sup>8</sup> Finally, in his analysis of the *Enūma eliš*, he recognizes that guardian figures erected in a temple gateway in an inscription of Nabonidus correspond to the "army of Tiamat."<sup>9</sup>

A very interesting appendix (pp. 113–42) consists of unabridged press reports of the lectures published in *The Daily Free Press* and the *Aberdeen Journal*, by which we may ponder how far the journalistic profession has declined in its engagement with sustained intellectual discourse. With Day's judicious summary of the lectures, representative facsimiles from two pages of the

*D, E, F, G, H, J und T sowie andere Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1996), A I 41–43.

<sup>7</sup> P. 81. In 1852 Edward Hincks suggested a non-Semitic origin for the cuneiform syllabary; "Sumerian" was first used by Jules Oppert in 1869 to designate the non-Semitic language behind the Akkadian ideograms. Virulent racist controversies waged during the 1870s and 1880s regarding the extent to which Mesopotamian civilization was a product of Semitic or non-Semitic genius may have prompted Robertson Smith to keep an open mind; see Jerrold S. Cooper, "Posing the Sumerian Question: Race and Scholarship in the Early History of Assyriology," *Aula Orientalis* 9 (1991): 47–66.

<sup>8</sup> P. 86. Eugène Marie Melchior de Vogüé, *Mélanges d'archéologie orientale* (Paris, 1868), p. 89 = Pierre Bordreuil, *Catalogue des sceaux ouest-sémitiques inscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale, du Musée du Louvre et du Musée Biblique de Bible et Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1986), p. 61, no. 66 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles Collection de Clercq-Boisgelin, Paris No. 2515).

<sup>9</sup> P. 100, n. 10. The ambiguous reference "Schrader (ed.), *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek*, p. 101," is to vol. 3, pt. 2 (published in 1890), specifically, F. E. Peiser's transliteration and translation of selected Nabonidus building inscriptions. Robertson Smith's comparison of *Enūma eliš* with the Genesis creation story, together with his interpretation of Damaskios, is heavily dependent on Schrader, *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, pp. 1–14. Several translations of *Enūma eliš* were available to Robertson Smith, including "The Assyrian Story of Creation," in Archibald H. Sayce, ed., *Records of the Past: Being English Translations of the Ancient Monuments of Egypt and Western Asia*, 2d ed. (London and New York, 1888), vol. 1, pp. 133–46, translated by Sayce himself.

manuscripts, a full bibliography, and author and scripture indexes, the Second and Third Burnett Lectures of W. Robertson Smith have become fully accessible to modern scholarship. Students of comparative anthropology and ancient Near Eastern and biblical studies stand indebted to John Day and Sheffield Academic Press for resurrecting this astonishing voice from the oblivion of the recent past.

STEVEN W. HOLLOWAY

*American Theological Library Association*  
Evanston, Illinois

*Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament.* 2d ed. By WILLIAM SANFORD LASOR, DAVID ALLAN HUBBARD, and FREDERIC WILLIAM BUSH. 1982. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996. Pp. xvii + 860. \$40.

What's a professor to do? Increasingly, holding the attention of college and graduate students seems to be getting more difficult. How can one sustain interest among MTV generations weaned on highly stimulating second-long visuals and great sound? How does one hope to develop an *enjoyment* for sitting down with a good textbook as one way of learning? One answer seems to be to reedit an older textbook into one that is more aesthetically engaging—not a bad idea. “[Through] simpler style, gender-sensitive language, shorter sentences, a more congenial look to the pages, additional charts, illustrations, and maps,” write the authors of *Survey*, “. . . [o]ur hope is that the revisions will enhance the use of the book for its intended readership: college and seminary students and their teachers, as well as pastors, Bible students, and interested laypersons” (p. x).

Indeed, this second edition is a visual makeover from its predecessor. Blue boxes are inserted throughout the text to highlight information. Maps are now printed in blue and black, though still utilitarian. The first edition's footnotes are now endnotes, which means in practice that they are buried for all but the most motivated of readers. Thankfully, the photograph of the Nash papyrus (p. 601) now no longer suffers the indignity of being upside down.

The publisher, however, has left me holding what I feel is a cheaply made book. This almost 900-page textbook is held together with glue (the 700-page first edition was sewn), and the areas of blue ink are patchy in my copy. The quality of the photographs is generally poor, with the Siloam tunnel inscription on p. 277 looking like a partially eaten, black, moldy hunk of bread.

But what of the substance? It must first be noted that only Bush has survived to see the publication of the second edition—LaSor died in 1991 and Hubbard in 1996—and that six additional contributors have added their respective expertise. *Survey* is a textbook of balance. It introduces quite thoroughly the more substantive issues of the Hebrew Bible and does this evenhandedly. Guiding the reader through the range of scholarly positions, it eventually offers its own conclusions, generally at a more conservative end. Though it raises objections against positions that one may regard as more liberal than its own, *Survey* also levels criticism toward conservative views. If the goal is to stimulate the mind of the reader and to offer reasoned guidance, *Survey* accomplishes this well, though many understandably will be put off by recurring expressions that remind them that the authors are people of faith.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the substance is similar to the first edition, though throughout the book the authors have reworked the prose to offer better style and readability—one can find changes on most every page. They have expanded some discussions (for example, Pentateuchal sources, p. 12; the golden calf, pp. 76–79), while cutting back others (the chapter on “Revelation and Inspiration”). A new chapter on archaeology, written by James R. Battenfield, is most welcome, giving a balanced perspective on archaeology vis-à-vis biblical studies. He echoes those who wish for a nonpolemical, nonapologetic, truly *informed* dialogue between text and artifact.<sup>2</sup> The chapter offers un-

<sup>1</sup> For example, p. 9: “Faith affirms that this development [of the Pentateuch] was superintended by the same Spirit of God that prompted Moses to act and write in the first place”; p. 13: the Pentateuch is produced by “[God-]inspired authors, editors . . .”; p. 44: “writing under divine inspiration.”

<sup>2</sup> William Dever, on the cover jacket of Philip J. King's *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion*