in conversation

© BERG PUBLISHERS
E-Print

locating the textual gaze
then and now

terje stordalen

Current knowledge of ancient Near Eastern religion was to a large degree produced by using written sources. If there were no Mesopotamian clay tablets, no Egyptian papyri, no ostraca, scrolls, or codices, our perception of the religious life of ancient Near Eastern people would be very poor. However, it must be noted that the available sources force us to see the ancient world largely through its imprints in textual media. Historical happenstance renders the textual gaze as the most available perspective upon a world where some 5 percent or less was literate.

But is it really happenstance that the textual gaze should dominate both the source material and contemporary research? As for the sources, it is a fact that one Mesopotamian textual medium, the clay tablet, was among the most durable ever produced. Thousands of clay tablets are still intact after 4,000–5,000 years. In addition there is the technological option that writing in any medium may be copied verbatim from a worn out copy onto a new one, making the impression of changeless transition. Compared to communicative media like speech, music, dance, body language, etc., writing is extraordinarily durable. The ancient people who wrote were aware of this durability. More than a few authors indicate they put their mind to writing in order to exercise influence beyond their lifetime.

Second, the durability of one's historical footprint is always socially conditioned. Elite palaces and parks remain through centuries, while mundane huts and plantations quickly reintegrate into the ecological cycle. And, of course, writing books was an elite phenomenon. In short, technological, social, and political dynamics contributed to forming the currently available records, which privileges the medium of the text and gives a profiled and uneven reflection of life and religion in the ancient world.

The privileging of textual media in the ancient record was further enhanced through modern research, for reasons we cannot explore here. Let me just point to the genealogy of the relevant academic disciplines. On the one hand there is theology and biblical studies, which emerged out of a rupture that generated modernity in the eighteenth century. Premodern thought had been a millennium and a half in the making under the canopy of Christian theology and had been thoroughly influenced by the textual gaze in the Bible and in patristic literature. This gaze was not questioned by the modern turn, and so exploration of the religious past still promoted views of religious thought and practice that were textually oriented. On the other hand, Orientalist or ancient Near Eastern studies developed from classical philological and biblical studies a little later. They have a fair share of that same conceptual inheritance. Moreover, European critical philosophy was heavily influential upon all intellectual practice. In its conceptual world and its medial practices it too evidently privileged a textual gaze.

So, the written sources of ancient religion and the time-honored academic trade jointly promote perspectives that were not representative for the world out of which the sources emerged. Recently it is becoming evident that non-written sources of the era are in fact telling a different story. An example might illustrate. The so-called Deuteronomic layers of the Hebrew Bible consistently apply a textual gaze: the Book is the medium of revelation in that religion. The Deuteronomists banned all figurative representations of deity. They also defied local shrines and argued for a centralized national cult. Numerous passages depict what they saw as the normal state of affairs around the country: "'Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image …' All the people shall respond, saying, 'Amen!'"[1] "Judah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; they

Terje Stordalen is professor (biblical studies) at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo. He is also the former director of the research initiative *Religion in Pluralist Societies* and the coordinator of the project *Local Dynamics of Globalization in the Pre-Modern Levant*.

Material Religion volume 8, issue 4, pp. 521–524
DOI: 10.2752/175183412X13522006994890

© BERG Print PUBLISHERS

… built for themselves high places, pillars, and sacred poles on every high hill and under every green tree …"[2] The archaeological record of that same area and period related in the Book of Kings tells a different story. The material imprint is replete with male and female figurines, some of which were certainly used for cultic purposes and with images of adorants under trees (cf. Keel and Uehlinger 1992). There are also local shrines and altars etc. Among the more salient items are the so-called Judean Pillar Figurines (see Figure 1). They are so richly represented in the biblical period that Ian D. Wilson (2012) recently suggested to see them as representing a Judean attempt at maintaining local identity against the cultural pressure of the Neo-Assyrian empire in late Iron Age Israel. Evidently, the religious outlook of the pillar figurines is different from that of the male, monotheistic, aniconic deity of Deuteronomic biblical literature.

FIG 1
Judean pillar figurine, typical in biblical lands during Iron Age IIB-C, *c*.750–620 BCE. Fired clay, height 16 cm, traces of paint. © Bible + Orient Museum, University of Fribourg.

How should scholars make sense of this apparent dichotomy? A first interpretive strategy is devised in the biblical text: "… you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places."[3] For a long time the dominant view in biblical scholarship was that remains of "illegal" religion in the archaeological record were "Canaanite" footprints. There is, however, no way of safely making ethnic distinctions in the available archaeological record, so this strategy must be abandoned.

A second strategy emerged along with the general re-evaluation of "popular religion" in religious studies: idols and local shrines belonged to the spheres of popular religion and personal piety (an early example is Albertz 1978). Continuing this argument, it is now common to refer to ancient Hebrew religions in the plural, to emphasize diversity as their characteristic, and to portray the religious vision of the biblical sources as pointedly ideological (see Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010).

While there is good reason to find religious diversity in the sources and to recognize an ideological profile in much biblical literature, certain aspects of the total picture are not well explained in the second model above. There are indications of cohesion across the field of ancient Hebrew religion. First, while people in the land of Israel did also serve deities well known in neighboring areas, veneration of the specifically biblical deity appears to have been very widely spread in the land. No group outside of Israel seems to have served that deity (Grabbe 2010). Second, the Deuteronomists (and other biblical editors) did indeed harmonize the biblical record. They were, however, not the ones to start collecting these geographically, socially, and religiously diverse traditions. Earlier and less ideological editors also apparently thought these faiths belonged together. Finally, if Deuteronomic literature were an elite project, would it not have been intended to serve political purposes such as creating national identity? And would it be possible to generate national identity simply by decreeing a number of religious convictions that anyone at the time would recognize as partisan or false?

In short, the challenge for current scholarship on ancient Hebrew and Near Eastern religion is to develop an analytical

Proof Print BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHERS

perspective that is capable of weighing textual and non-textual sources respectively. We need to produce a better-integrated interpretation, recognizing cohesion as well as diversity in religious practices and in their accompanying objects, thoughts, feelings, and words.

Now, it would seem evident that certain objects and media related in the example above were produced and consumed in colloquial discourses. This applies for instance to mass-produced molded clay figurines (many of which are less elaborate than the one pictured here). It also applies to many local shrines and standing stone altars. In the language of Pierre Bourdieu, one would say these and similar cultural products had a "market" that was defined by corresponding "social fields," such as the fields of household or township (e.g. Bourdieu 1991, 1993). Other products, like Deuteronomic literature, took form in specialized discourse and fields dominated by royal or imperial political, cultural, and symbolical power.

As would be clear, I assume social fields in the ancient world took form under other dynamics than those described by Bourdieu in his contemporary studies. Definitional features of ancient social fields would be that agents should be bound together in recognizable economical cycles, structures of social power, material style, habit, or moral; and there should be some social body responsible for cultural propagation. In compartmentalized societies like premodern tribal and secondary state formations, discourses on religious matters emerging in different social fields would not necessarily relate to each other—although many individuals obviously would be capable of navigating more than one social field. Rather, cultural products that took form under particular technological, economic, and social conditions would presumably keep circulating mostly within these specific spaces in society. To a modern view of religion, produced under the textual gaze, this compartmentalization might seem strange. To an ancient audience practicing multi-medial faiths prior to the emergence of the very concept of religion, it probably did not. Hence, it would seem entirely possible that a practice of aniconic monolatric cult in some elite discourse would not necessarily be perceived to challenge iconic ancestor cult in the social field of households.

So, a first step in forming a better-integrated interpretation of textual and non-textual records of ancient Near Eastern religion would be to locate various textual and non-textual gazes in their respective historical discourses and social fields. The second step would be to ask which, if any, of these discourses contributed to shaping regional, tribal, or even national identities? And what, more precisely, could have been the mutual influence between cultural products generated in distinct discourses and social fields? Did religious practices transform from one social field into another, and if so: when and how? What impact, more specifically, did royal and imperial discourses have in people's mundane practices? And how, more specifically, were local agents involved in such overarching discourses? Did local discourse ever feed back into royal and imperial discourse, and if so: how?

These and similar questions lay at the heart of the project *Local Dynamics of Globalization in the Pre-Modern Levant.* This project, for which I am the coordinator, was recently selected to be promoted by the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters for the year 2014–15. In the years to come we hope to be able to provide not only some provisional answers to the above questions, but also to rework the questions themselves.[4]

As scholars of our time we can hardly avoid using modern concepts when trying to understand the premodern world, including the ever-difficult concept of religion. Starting to locate ancient religious discourses in medial and discursive settings along the lines sketched above might be one way to start coping with the situation. I truly believe that locating the textual gaze—then, and also now—and letting matter and things speak for themselves without silencing the texts, would be a move in the right direction.

notes and references

[1] Deuteronomy 27:15, as rendered in the American New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

[2] 1 Kings 14:22f (NRSV).

[3] Numbers 33:52 (NRSV).

[4] For further information on the project, see http://www.stordalen.info/LDG/Home.html.

Albertz, R. 1978. *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion*. Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag.

© BERGHAHN PUBLISHERS

Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. 1993 *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity.

Grabbe, L. 2010. “Many Nations Will Be Joined to YHWH in That Day”: The Question of YHWH outside Judah. In *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, ed. F. Stavrakopoulou and J. Barton. London: T&T Clark International, 175–87.

Keel, O. and Uehlinger, C. 1992. *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole*. Freiburg: Herder.

Stavrakopoulou, F. and Barton, J. (eds.). 2010. *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*. London: T&T Clark International.

Wilson, I. D. 2012. Judean Pillar Figurines and Ethnic Identity in the Shadow of Assyria. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36(3): 259–78.

© BERG PUBLISHERS
E-Print

religion in the ancient levant

confronting gazes now and then

christoph uehlinger

It is a pleasure to interact with Stordalen's "Locating the Textual Gaze," not least because many of its challenging questions and programmatic statements call for critical reservation and the exploration of alternative options as much as for agreement.[1] Within the limits of this short note, I shall address only three aspects: (1) Stordalen's epistemological starting-point, which is based on a certain view of (or narrative about) the history of (mainly "Western") critical knowledge on ancient Near Eastern cultures; (2) the textual gaze's "availability" for studies on ancient Levantine religion; and (3) a few reflections on what increasing attention to the material and visual cultures of ancient Levantine societies might imply.

(1) While it is certainly true that "current knowledge of ancient Near Eastern religion was to a large degree produced by written sources," one may point out that this has not always been the case. As a matter of fact, before ancient Near Eastern writing systems were decoded and languages understood in the nineteenth century, serious knowledge about ancient Near Eastern civilizations had already been produced and mediated through material and visual culture. Of course, the case of Egypt, for which Napoléon Bonaparte's *Description de l'Égypte* (1798–1801) provides the most notorious example, cannot be generalized for other parts of the Middle East, where monumental ruins remained essentially buried in the ground until their discovery by Paul-Émile Botta, Austen Henry Layard, and others (Larsen 1996). Still, early interaction of learned Westerners with the ancient Near Eastern past was usually mediated first by monuments, artifacts, and images. Whether carved in sculptures or on minute cylinder seals, they allowed their early observers to gain insights through images—insights which were only forgotten or relegated once philologists had taken control over ancient Near Eastern studies and tied them closer to biblical studies. That they could do so was due to the rules and conventions that governed the organization of knowledge in nineteenth-century European universities and learned societies, which had installed philology-oriented history to the detriment of previous antiquarian (and ethnographic) approaches.[2] Going back to (and beyond) the writings and drawings of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers and accompanying artists is thus more than an anecdotal exercise, or a pastime of students of nineteenth-century Orientalism (Bohrer 2003; Larsen 2009). It can provide actual opportunities of genuine learning from people whose education had prepared them to more systematic and careful ways of looking than those of our contemporaries. While everyone agrees that learning ancient scripts and languages is instrumental to (religio-)historical research, it is time to rehabilitate (or rather, reinvent) timely ways and methods of learning how to look at images and other artifacts beyond any single "school."

(2) As it happens, textual information on ancient Near Eastern civilizations and societies, including the field of religion, has never simply been "the most available perspective upon a world where some 5 percent or less was literate." Much more material, whether artifactual or pictorial "evidence" (and hence perspectives or at least means for various perspectives), not to speak of other data, is theoretically available for scientific scrutiny, but it remains relatively underexplored among historians (including historians of religion). "Availability," hence, is socially produced, and it is quite obvious that the ways in which we organize availability do affect knowledge and scholarship on religion in the ancient Levant to a large extent.

Christoph Uehlinger is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Working on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the history of ancient Near Eastern religions, he started his career with the University of Fribourg and took part in establishing the field of systematic study of iconography and ancient religion.

Material Religion volume 8, issue 4, pp. 525–527
DOI: 10.2752/175183412X13522006994935

© BERG PUBLISHERS E-Print

Stordalen is right to note that "technological, social, and political dynamics contributed to forming the currently available records, which privileges the medium of the text and gives a profiled and uneven reflection of life and religion in the ancient world." Incidentally, however, this does not only pertain to processes of archive-keeping, historiography, and canonization in antiquity; it is also true when applied to the modern study of the ancient Near East and the past of Levantine religion.

(3) Religion and its histories (whether of first-millennium Levant or of other times and regions) will be conceptualized differently once we opt for systematically including archaeological evidence, both material and pictorial, in the study of ancient societies. When patiently looked at and critically analyzed, images allow us to reconstruct ancient gazes, gazes that were obviously embedded in cultural conventions on what to look at, how to look and represent it, etc. Hence the necessity to consider images as sources in their own right, whether within a "media studies" (Uehlinger 2005), a "visible religion" (Uehlinger 2006a), or other approaches. Since selection by definition implies the privileging of certain perspectives, one crucial issue in this regard will be how to identify and classify the pertinent source material. It is therefore essential that a scholar's starting-point should always be the broadest possible documentation; hence the essential function of establishing *corpuses* of artifact-classes for all ensuing research, such as Othmar Keel's *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel*.[3] Other biases will catch you before long.

With the hindsight of twenty years since its initial publication, I freely acknowledge a number of conceptual and methodological problems and pitfalls involved in our *Gods and Goddesses* (Keel and Uehlinger 1992). To name but one major issue: to what extent is it legitimate and useful to consider images above all for their "pictorial contents," so to speak, as if detached from their material support? To be sure, we often proceed that way when reading texts, whether epigraphical or literary and particularly so when dealing with "canonical" texts; and I would argue that this can make sense in certain circumstances, since a text (or an image, for that matter) is not necessarily confined to any one material realization. I would also argue, however, that we might probably get closer to ancient social realities when giving equal attention to the strictly material dimensions of ancient images (and other artifacts), once we go "down" to process-based questions such as the availability of raw materials at certain places, the processing skills required by craftsmen (and hence issues of workshop organization), the networks in which artifacts were produced, distributed and consumed, the *habitus* (plural) of making use and sense of objects within certain habitats, etc. That is, aspects of methodic attention which, incidentally, might as well be applied to ancient texts, whether inscriptional or literary.

It remains to be tested whether ancient material artifacts, including images and texts, will positively respond to Stordalen's five-tiered matrix of levels of social communication (from family to empire). It seems to me the model as such has much to commend itself, as it promises to overcome simplistic dichotomies of "official" vs. "popular" in the study of ancient Levantine religion.[4]

notes and references

[1] I especially welcome Stordalen's theoretical background in French critics such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault—big names of course but who, beyond any *effet de mode*, would deserve more substantial reception among historians of ancient Levantine societies and religion, including biblical scholars.

[2] It would take some decades before the social sciences would "strike back," and even longer before their arrival in the study of Levantine history and archaeology.

[3] This conviction continues to be a driving principle for the *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* series.

[4] On the condition that we avoid the traps of ethnicity-based taxonomies, see Uehlinger (2006b).

Bohrer, Frederick N. 2003. *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Larsen, Mogens Trolle, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land, 1840–1860*. London: Routledge.

Larsen, Timothy 2009. Austen Henry Layard's Nineveh: The Bible and Archaeology in Victorian Britain. *Journal of Religious History* 33: 66–81.

Keel, Othmar and Uehlinger, Christoph. 1992. *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* (Quaestiones disputatae 134), Freiburg i. Br.–Basel–Wien: Herder; 6th edn, 2010, Freiburg Schweiz: Bibel+Orient Museum & Academic Press Fribourg; English trans., 1998, *Gods, Goddesses,*

© BERG PUBLISHERS
Offprint

and Images of God in Ancient Israel, Minneapolis: Fortress Press & Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Uehlinger, Christoph. 2005. “Medien” in der Lebenswelt des antiken Palästina? In *Medien im antiken Palästina. Materielle Kommunikation und Medialität als Thema der Palästinaarchäologie* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, II/10), ed. Ch. Frevel. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 31–61.

Uehlinger, Christoph. 2006a. *Visible Religion* und die Sichtbarkeit von Religion(en). Voraussetzungen, Anknüpfungsprobleme, Wiederaufnahme eines religionswissenschaftlichen Forschungsprogramms. *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 23 (H. 2006: “Das öffentliche Gesicht der Religion/en”): 165–84.

Uehlinger, Christoph, 2006b. Arad, Qiṭmit—Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult? Questioning the Evidence. In *Texts, Artifacts and Images: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (Brown Judaic Studies, 346), ed. G. Beckman and T. J. Lewis. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 80–112.

© BERG PUBLISHERS E-Print

integrating texts and material culture

methodological approaches to the study of premodern religions

abhishek s. amar

Terje Stordalen's article raises a very pertinent issue: the undue emphasis on the textual gaze for the study of premodern religions and continued reliance on such sources to interpret material culture. Biblical studies have shaped the scholarship in the last two centuries, which continues to privilege textual interpretation without critical examination of the limitations of such sources. Stordalen questions the durability of textual sources which generates a false impression of timeless transition, and points out how the durability of textual sources is conditioned by technological, social, and political dynamics of the time. Similarly, the coherent discourse of a text has often been understood and presented as an "authentic" account of historical development of premodern religions, which tends to obscure the role of the agent in the textual formation. This furthermore obfuscates the multiple layers, some of which were not consistent or in tune with the predominant ideology of the agent, who harmonized the "incoherent" body of literature into a coherent one.

The privileging of textual sources over archaeological ones has been a major problem in the historiography of premodern South Asian religions. In his pioneering study of Buddhist monasticism in premodern South Asia, Gregory Schopen has questioned this emphasis on textual sources. Like Stordalen, he has analyzed the historiography of Buddhist studies to indicate the tension between interpretations derived from textual and archaeological/inscriptional sources. A classic example of this tension, as Schopen points out, is the response of scholar-archaeologists of the early twentieth century who often treated material cultural sources as corroborative evidence (Schopen 1997: 6). Whenever they found an example contrary to textual interpretations, such as Buddhist monks' ownership of money and property, they either expressed surprise or treated it as an aberration since it was not supported by the textual gaze. At times, they attributed it to popular, non-ideological practices which were said to be invented by laity for acquiring merit, thereby creating a divide between monastic and lay practices. This created an impression of Buddhism as a diverse religion, but this diversity did not acknowledge the internal dynamism within Buddhist traditions. Instead it was meant to support the textual contention.

Over the last three decades, scholars have questioned this primacy of textual interpretations and have engaged increasingly with material culture as an independent source. Moving away from the approach of treating material culture as corroborative evidence, this emphasis has raised several important questions, the most important of which is the role played by material culture in the formation of texts. This interaction between these two distinct sets of sources has raised important questions about the different social worlds in which they were produced, utilized, and interpreted. How did these two worlds affect and influence each other? A classic example of this phenomenon is the popularity of Hindu temple worship in South Asia, which emerged and expanded primarily because of the imperial (empire-building) program and patronage. Often these Hindu temples emphasized a royal message by centering on the royal deity such as Vishnu (in his boar form) by the Gupta kings in early India, but the royal deity of the central shrine was surrounded by local and regional gods, goddesses, minor deities, who were accommodated within the temple in surrounding shrines as minor figures. At

Abhishek S. Amar is an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Hamilton College. He did his PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 2009 and a post-doc at the Kate Hamburger Project at the Ruhr University, Bochum. Amar is currently researching on interreligious interactions between Buddhism and Hinduism through a study of material culture and texts in early India.

Material Religion volume 8, issue 4, pp. 528–529
DOI: 10.2752/175183412X13522006994971

© BERG Print PUBLISHERS

times, the royal deity himself was a local regional figure who was redefined as the imperial deity. This interaction between local and imperial figures or the incorporation and subsequent redefining process of the local as imperial (Vishnu's boar form was a local figure who was incorporated and subsequently presented as the royal deity at Udaygiri shrine) was hardly discussed in the textual sources, since they were produced to propagate a certain coherent message of empire-building (Willis 2008: 122). This limitation needs to be acknowledged in the scholarship to emphasize a more critical engagement with the material culture, in which it is no longer treated as supplementary evidence to confirm textual contention.

Lastly, Stordalen also raises the issue of better integration of textual and material cultural sources to develop a more nuanced understanding of premodern religious cultures across regions including Asia Minor. Current studies on the history of religions have increasingly advocated an interdisciplinary approach to examine this interaction and integration of multiple sets of sources (Amar 2009: 38). Along with questioning the overreliance on texts, it is also pertinent to examine the context and local agents, who played an important role in the formation of these sources and their subsequent transmission (Inden 2000: 41). The critical questions raised in the project *Local Dynamics of Globalization in the Pre-Modern Levant* and the proposed methodology in this article will hopefully inform modern scholarship on the study of premodern religions not just in Asia Minor but across different regions.

references

Amar, Abhishek S. 2009. Contextualizing the Navel of the Earth: The Emergence, Sustenance and Transformation of the Buddhism in the Bodh Gaya Region (*c*. 300 BCE–1200 CE). PhD dissertation, University of London.

Inden, Ronald. 2000. Imperial Puranas Kashmir as Vaishnava Center of the World. In *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia,* ed. R. Inden, J. W. Walters, and Daud Ali. New York: Oxford University Press, 29–98.

Schopen, Gregory. 1997. *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Willis, Michael. 2008. *The Archaeology of Early Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

© BERG PUBLISHERS
E-Print

unexpected synergies

birgit meyer

One might assume that the sophisticated philological and exegetical commentary on biblical texts characteristic of biblical studies would stand worlds apart from current debates about material religion as they take place within and outside of this journal. And yet, biblical studies itself is a complex field hosting scholars with different modes of working and divergent attitudes towards the status of texts. Terje Stordalen's compelling essay offers intriguing, and in my view unexpected, interfaces for further conversation across disciplines. Before fleshing out two issues that I deem particularly important, let me briefly sketch the position from which I join this conversation.

In my work over the past twenty years I have explored the use, appropriation, and interpretation of the Bible and Christian discourse by African Christians (especially in my book on the emergence of a Christian vocabulary among the Ewe in Ghana, Meyer 1999), as well as broader religious practices and bodily sensations evolving around material forms such as architecture, dress, religious pictures, movies, and objects at large in missionary Protestantism and Pentecostalism (e.g. Meyer 2010). In a way, I moved from an emphasis on text and translation towards foregrounding the body and material objects. Inspired by my ethnographic and historical investigations that alerted me ever more to the level of "lived religion" as the anchor point of my analysis, together with colleagues I have sought to contribute to developing a material approach of Christianity, asking how religion "happens" on the ground, on the level of everyday practice (e.g. Meyer, Morgan, Plate, and Paine 2010). Posing this question is not a mere empirical issue. It also implies a critical interrogation of modern concepts of religion that, as I sought to point out in previous publications, are indebted to a particular "Protestant" theological legacy that narrows religion down to text, meaning, and interior beliefs and tends to neglect—or dismiss as problematic or irrelevant—other religious forms. The challenge I see for the study of religion today is to critically engage with and move beyond this legacy. We need to develop more suitable methodologies and concepts that help us grasp how and why "religion" mattered and still matters to people in past and present in a concrete sense. Materiality and media are key terms in this endeavor, and Stordalen raises issues that are right at the heart of it.

The first issue that I would like to address concerns the juxtaposition of textual and non-textual sources in a social-religious field. The fact that transmission across time and space to a large extent depends on writing does not, as Stordalen points out, imply that scholars of ancient Hebrew religion can afford to rely on texts alone. Tellingly, archaeological records spotlight the importance of figurines and other items that suggest a far more materially oriented religious practice than modern scholars' sole reliance on textual sources and their explicit condemnation of idolatry might suggest. As Stordalen points out, there is a cleavage between what the text says about the use of objects, and what the archaeological record seems to imply about their actual use in ancient Hebrew religiosity. This remarkable dissonance calls for "a better-integrated interpretation, recognizing cohesion as well as diversity in religious practices and in their accompanying objects, thoughts, feelings, and words." While biblical scholars face the difficult question how to make transmitted textual and non-textual sources "speak" *together* in a way that is "representative for the world out of which the sources emerged," scholars like myself who work on the present and recent past have far easier access to complex worlds of everyday lived religious experience. Nonetheless, the question of how to grasp the role, position, and value of, as well as the relations between, various religious forms—including texts, figurines, pictures, and other objects—poses

Birgit Meyer is professor of religious studies at Utrecht University and one of the editors of *Material Religion*. She works on African Christianity; Pentecostal churches; religion, media, and the public sphere; and (audio-)visual culture, aesthetics, and the senses.

Material Religion volume 8, issue 4, pp. 530–531
DOI: 10.2752/175183412X13522006995015

© Berg Print Berg Publishers

itself also in more recent settings. Especially in studying Protestantism and Pentecostalism (as I experienced in my own research), researchers may easily be misled to neglect or even overlook non-textual items, and to overestimate the authoritative power of texts and the spoken word. This may partly reflect self-representational statements made by practitioners themselves, and partly echo a longstanding textual bias in the study of religion (that was accentuated also through the "literary turn" that approached cultures and religions as "texts"). Asking how different, coexisting religious forms are authorized, valued, and used differently by different players in a given discursive and medial setting is a fruitful starting point for understanding everyday religious practice as embedded in structures of power. In other words, taking text as a material medium that exists next to other religious material media opens up a fresh perspective that allows us to relativize texts without silencing them, and to even make them "speak" in surprising ways. The point here is to work towards an intermedial approach that teases out how diverse media relate and speak to each other.

The second issue concerns Stordalen's critique of the "textual gaze" for unduly fashioning text as the key "medium of revelation." The privileging of textual media pertains not only to an insider's perspective within the Christian tradition (and for that matter, other so-called book religions). As he points out, it also stems from an academic appraisal, grafted upon a longstanding textual fixation and sustained by modern philosophical ideas about epistemology, of sacred books as being central to the modern study of religion. This raises not only the question, addressed above, of how to avoid being blindfolded with regard to other non-textual religious media in actual research, but also invokes fundamental conceptual issues in the study of religion at large. How far does the transmission of a religious tradition, such as Christianity, across time and space through the medium of text depend on excluding vital aspects of religious everyday practice? How does one get at the "little traditions" that are prone to be neglected and forgotten because text is privileged as the prime medium of transmission and (self-)representation, and controlled by those in power? How might shifts in the availability of media—such as current ICT—impinge on these processes (cf. Meyer 2009)?

What I find most intriguing about Stordalen's essay is that it makes me realize that the agenda that comes with modern research on religion does not only receive critique from scholars in anthropology and religious studies, as mentioned above, but also from scholars in biblical studies whom I had, albeit mistakenly, taken as occupying the high ground of textual study. The modern way of doing research on religion—and one could add: the reframing of religion as a modern category, as Talal Asad put it—appears to be limiting with regard to the study of both ancient and contemporary religion. Stordalen's essay alerts us to the fact that across disciplinary divides, there is a shared interest to retrieve other media next to text, to analyze religious practices as embedded in social structures of power, to critically examine authorized modes of transmission, self-presentation, and remembrance, as well as to constantly interrogate the disciplinary terms that shape the modern study of religion. As he points out, the solution to the critique of modern religion as being biased towards texts is not to abandon the use of modern concepts, let alone turn away from texts altogether, but to raise new questions. Clearly, this approach makes room for new synergies to evolve from a conversation among scholars across disciplinary fields such as anthropology of religion and biblical studies which so far, at least in my scholarly experience, have been more or less unrelated. It is promising to note, and fitting for this journal, that a shared focus on religious material media appears to bring about new connections.

references

Meyer, Birgit. 1999. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. IAL-Series. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Meyer, Birgit (ed.). 2009. *Aesthetic Formations. Media, Religion and the Senses*. New York: Palgrave.

Meyer, Birgit. 2010. "There is a Spirit in that Image": Mass Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant Pentecostal Animation in Ghana. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52(1): 100–30.

Meyer, Birgit, Morgan, David, Paine, Crispin, and Plate, S. Brent. 2010. The Origin and Mission of Material Religion. *Religion* 30: 1–5.

© BERG Print PUBLISHERS