Language, Cognition, and Biblical Exegesis

Interpreting Minds

Edited by
Ronit Nikolsky, István Czachesz,
Frederick S. Tappenden, and Tamás Biró

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Contributors

Shelley G. Ashdown is Department Head of the College of International Studies at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (Dallas, Texas). Her research is a broad mix of biblical Hebrew, cognitive anthropology, African traditional religion and worldview. She is the author of numerous articles, including “Cognitive Semantic Approach to Redeemer (Gō’êl) in Deutero-Isaiah” (Acta Theologica, 2015), “Tribal Religions from the Heart: Hebrew Lēb and Torobo Oltau” (Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies, 2013), and “An East African Hermeneutic of Luke 11.5–10” (e-Theologos, 2012).

Tamás Biró is Senior Research Fellow at the Department for Assyriology and Hebrew at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, as well as Associate Professor and Vice-Rector of the Jewish Theological Seminary—University of Jewish Studies, Budapest, Hungary. He obtained his PhD at the University of Groningen, working on computational phonology. His research focuses on formal and cognitive approaches to language and religion, as well as on various aspects of Jewish culture and tradition.

Marilyn Burton gained her PhD from the University of Edinburgh in 2014. She is the author of The Semantics of Glory: A Cognitive, Corpus-Based Approach to Hebrew Word Meaning (2017); her main research focus is the interaction between contemporary linguistics, particularly cognitive methodology, and biblical exegesis.


Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme is Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible Studies at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. Her research focuses on religious ritual in the Hebrew Bible, such as vows, sacrifices, and gifts to the gods, and on ritualized social practices, such as hospitality, gift-giving, and meals. She is co-chair of the “Anthropology and the Bible” research unit with the European Association of Biblical Studies and committee-member of the Society of Biblical Literature’s program unit, “Mind,
Society and Religion: Cognitive Science Approaches to the Biblical World”. She is co-editor of the book *Magic and Divination in the Biblical World* (2013, co-edited with Helen Jacobus and Phillippe Guillaume) and author of *Before the God in This Place for Good Remembrance* (2013) as well as a number of articles on religion and ritual in the Hebrew Bible and cognate literature.


**Ronit Nikolsky** is Senior Lecturer at the chair of Culture and Cognition in the Faculty of Humanities in the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. She completed her doctoral thesis on Early Christian Monasticism at the Hebrew University in the Department of Comparative Religion. She is co-editor of *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia* (Brill, 2014), and a co-chair of the research unit “Evolution and the Biblical World” in the European Association of Biblical Studies. Her area of expertise is Rabbinic Literature, especially the *Midrash Tanchuma*. She works on Rabbinic Literature with a cognitive approach, focusing on emotions and is an author of numerous articles using this approach.

**Rikard Roitto** is University Lecturer of Biblical Studies, New Testament, at Stockholm School of Theology. In his research, he integrates historical-critical methods with social, psychological, and cognitive sciences to understand early Christian texts and communities. His research interests include social identity, norms, rituals of penance and forgiveness, conflict resolution, and baptism in early Christianity. He has written several articles on ritual practices of reproof, repentance, penance, intercession for forgiveness, and reintegration of deviant group members in early Christianity.

**Frederick S. Tappenden** is Principal and Dean, and Professor of Theology, at St. Stephen’s College at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the integration of the cognitive and social sciences in the study of ancient Christian and Jewish writings, particularly the texts and traditions associated with the apostle Paul. Dr. Tappenden's first monograph, *Resurrection in Paul: Cognition, Metaphor, and Transformation* (SBL 2016), was awarded a 2017 Manfred Lautenschläger Award from the University of Heidelberg. He co-chairs (with Catherine Playoust) the “Religious Experience in Antiquity” program unit of the Society of Biblical Literature, and serves on the steering committee of the “Mind, Society, and Religion in the Biblical World” program unit. He is also an editor for the Database of Religious History (based at the Cultural Evolution of Religion Research Consortium, University of British Columbia).
Gerd Theissen is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. He did his habilitation on early Christian miracle stories (1972), and has worked as an assistant at the University of Göttingen, the University of Bonn, University of Copenhagen, and as a secondary school teacher. His main research interests lie in the sociology, psychology, and theory of early Christianity, the Historical Jesus, and Theory of the early Christian religion and theology of the New Testament. He is the author of The Religion of the Earliest Churches (1999) and The Shadow of the Galilean (1987), co-author of The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide (1988) and co-editor of The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels (2001). In 2002, he was awarded the Burkitt Medal by the British Academy. It was granted to him “in recognition of special service to Biblical Studies,” as being one of the pioneers in using sociological methods for the study of the New Testament.
Preface

This volume examines the many ways that the cognitive sciences reorient and challenge our understanding of language and textual interpretation within the context of biblical studies, and the study of early Christianity and early Judaism.

In the past two decades, insights from the study of the human mind (drawing on diverse disciplines, such as cognitive science, cognitive neuroscience, neuroimaging, and experimental psychology) have increasingly received attention in several areas of cultural studies and the humanities. In the study of religion, the cognitive science of religion (CSR) emerged as a movement embracing such methods. This wave of innovation also reached biblical studies.

The emerging discipline of the CSR has particularly focused on religious beliefs and rituals from a cognitive perspective, but there has been less research undertaken on religious texts and narratives in this paradigm. This volume addresses this lacuna.

The papers presented in this collection represent the outputs of two international scholarly meetings: the one is the “First International Workshop on the Cognitive Study of Religious Texts,” held at the University of Groningen in March 2010, organized by the Centre for Religion and Cognition and supported by the Groningen Research School for the Study of Culture (ICOG), The Groningen University Fund (GUF) and the department of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East (TCMO); and papers from the “Mind, Society, and Tradition” program unit of the 2011 international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (ISBL) which took place in London, England. Both scholarly meetings shared the related emphases on cognitive approaches to language and textual interpretation within the CSR as well as the application of this approach to biblical studies.

The aim of the Groningen workshop was to initiate a research program that studies the mental processes behind the creation and use of religious texts, both oral and written. The organizers sought to develop a new method, provisionally termed “cognitive philology,” which combines awareness of cognitive processes with proficiency in working with religious texts. This new approach, therefore, employs insights from recent results in various branches of cognitive science, including the cognitive science of religion, as well as in the fields of religious studies, cultural studies, cultural evolution, philology, and literary theory.

Extending from the Groningen workshop, the 2011 ISBL meeting probed topics of language, cognition, and linguistic theory as they relate to broader issues of textual interpretation and the CSR. The papers from this meeting employ a range of approaches—cognitive linguistics, generative linguistics, ritual theory, and cognitive grammar.
The resulting volume covers a good selection of passages and topics to demonstrate the fruitfulness of cognitive methods in biblical interpretation. We are putting in front of the reader a volume which brings together various methods in the cognitive sciences, linguistics, philology, biblical studies, and religious studies, in a theoretical and textual balance. By this we hope that the volume will contribute to the cognitive approach to the study of the Bible and ancient religion generally, and will prove useful both for the scholarly endeavor and in the classroom.

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Ronit Nikolsky
István Czachesz
Frederick S. Tappenden
Tamás Biró

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