

## ARTICLE REVIEW\*

**CARR, DAVID M., *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv + 330. Hardcover. US\$ 65.00. ISBN 0195172973.

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This exceptionally erudite and readable book examines the educational curriculum in several ancient Near Eastern and Eastern Hellenistic cultures. In the wake of the renewed scholarly interest in the interplay between orality and textuality in pre-modern societies (especially the studies of Susan Niditch on ancient Israelite literature), Carr's study breaks new ground by investigating the ways in which both writing and oral traditions worked in tandem in shaping the social identities of literate elites.

Part I investigates the educational curriculums of two pre-alphabetic cultures, Mesopotamia and Egypt, which are then compared to the alphabetic cultures of early Israel and Greece. In cuneiform cultures the written media of instructional texts have survived in large numbers and provide a wealth of information pertaining to the subsequent revisions of the learning curriculum over the course of more than two thousand years. Though less abundant, the Egyptian educational materials demonstrate even more clearly how textuality was used as part of a broader process of enculturation of literate elites. The emphasis in both educational systems was not so much in preparing the students for everyday scribal tasks, but rather on passing on the basic core of "cultural texts", which, as defined by Jan Assman, were highly authoritative compositions by virtue of their extreme antiquity and numinosity. The Egyptian system differed from its Mesopotamian counterpart by placing a

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stronger emphasis on “wisdom literature” which was attributed to the great sages of earlier times.

Carr’s main assertion is that in both cultures the core texts of the curriculum were not only copied down from older manuscripts, but were also memorized by the students, who were able to cite them by heart and allude to them in new compositions. In this way some literary products of Near Eastern scribes were in fact “*a patchwork of distant and closer echoes of other texts, a product of an educational system where people learn to write new texts by internalizing ancient ones.*” Hittite literature, which is only cursorily mentioned, could add further aspects on the oral-written interplay, although its documentation is much more limited in time.

Intertextuality in ancient Israelite literature is probably the most widely studied topic among ancient Near Eastern literatures. Yet Carr, building on previous outsets, suggests a revolutionary approach. Contrary to the basic assertions of the traditional documentary hypothesis, he argues that biblical intertextuality did not usually rely on the visual consulting and comparing of multiple ancient manuscripts, but rather on the ability of the erudite scribes to recite from memory long passages from the authoritative curriculum and to use them as templates in the composition of new texts. The memorization of a basic educational-enculturational corpus was also a prerequisite for the preservation of tradition in a small nation dominated and exiled by powerful suzerains. It is doubtful, asserts Carr, that during the Babylonian exile the Israelite scribes had access to reference copies of their ancient traditions; rather, they were most likely dependent on “*the texts inscribed on their hearts.*” Similar models of education based on verbatim memorization in a text-supported environment are of course well known from Rabbinic Judaism (and from other religious systems), but Carr seeks their roots in the earliest stages of Israelite literacy.

The shorter chapter on ancient Greece reflects the limited evidence of early textual education, partly attributable to the use of perishable writing materials in a humid climate. This scarcity in early teaching materials is somewhat alleviated by artistic depictions of education on pre-Hellenistic pottery (e.g. on the cover of this book). Significantly, on these scenes women can be seen reading almost as frequently as men, a refreshing departure from ancient Near Eastern practices. Another important innovation of the Greek curriculum was the central focus on the musical accompaniment to the recitation of poetry, which besides its beauty was also a very effective mnemotechnic method. For the first time in history, the aim of education was

no longer the training of a small scribal elite, but rather the formation of an aristocratic class of Greek citizens.

Part II examines the Eastern Hellenistic world, with the lion's share of the study dedicated to the development of Jewish education and textuality. Carr examines the ways in which Greek education became an elitist legitimating tool for Greek overlordship in the East and the reactions of the dominated cultures by redefining their own cultural heritage. In Egypt, after an initial cordiality towards the Macedonian liberators from a hated Persian rule, the locals became disillusioned with the ruling class and soon put up a growing resistance, both active and passive, through cultural means. The temples became the focal points of Egyptian nationalism, where priests revitalized older forms of education and began to write down Egypt's age-old history (Manetho). But the utopian dreams of resuscitating a Pharaonic "golden age" did not curb the inevitable decline of the Egyptian language and culture and their gradual replacement by Greek and Hellenistic educational systems. The influence, however, went both ways and the result was a complex interaction between two great civilizations, epitomized by the cultural competition between the ubiquitous and open Greek libraries of Alexandria and the far more restricted and secretive Egyptian temple collections.

Parallel but longer lasting developments characterize Hellenistic Judaism. The Qumran manuscripts provide unparalleled evidence for the transmission of the sacred literary corpus, and first century authors (Philo, Josephus) testify to the public study of texts in the emergent Jewish synagogue. In contrast to the hybrid Egyptian-Greek blend of Hellenism, Judaism developed its own indigenous educational system which came close to the ideal of achieving a universal (male) education-enculturation system focused first and foremost on the mastery of the Hebrew Bible. As in contemporary Egypt and Mesopotamia, in Hellenistic Israel too this system was centered in the temple and was focused on a priestly personnel, an ongoing feature that lasted in later forms of Jewish education. Besides extensive chapters on Qumran and various aspects of Hellenistic Jewish Scripture, Carr also provides some shorter sketches on later developments in post-Hellenistic Jewish and Christian educational systems. A most useful appendix defines the contribution of this study to earlier research.

This encyclopedic perspective on three millennia of education-enculturation, presented in a lucid and stimulating manner, will arouse the interest of anyone interested in cultural history. Biblical scholars will need to seriously consider this well laid out challenge to the generally accepted theories of documentary sources.