
**EXPECTATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES:
BEYOND BEING A SOUTH AMERICAN WOMAN AT THE
SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE**

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When I was invited to participate in this inspiring and unique project of the Society of Biblical Literature, I thought about what would be the main expectations, challenges, and opportunities for a woman from South America who became part of such a great and worldwide institution. More than twelve years after my first encounter with the Society of Biblical Literature, and after being involved in different projects and initiatives since then, I recognize that I have only positive things to express. It doesn't mean that I haven't gone through different challenges, but I gained plenty of experience by overcoming them.

Being a woman in academics and living and working in Argentina—that is my home country—is a challenge of its own. I am lucky enough to live in a big and modern city—Buenos Aires—and work at a university willing to face new challenges and to be involved in worldwide networks. Thus, my experience related to the Society of Biblical Literature is also the history of the academic center I created at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina in 2002, of the people who joined it, and of the network of relationships built in these last sixteen years.

During the 1990s, Argentina had a well-established tradition of research centers devoted to the study of ancient Near Eastern societies; most of these centers were located in Buenos Aires. One of them was based in a public national university: the Institute of History of the

I wrote this essay with the support of my home institution, Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina CONICE. I am grateful also to Nicole L. Tilford for inviting me to be part of this initiative and for editing and improving my contribution.

Ancient East/Instituto de Historia Antigua Oriental (IHAO), founded in 1958 at the University of Buenos Aires. Another was the Program of Egyptological Studies/Programa de Estudios de Egiptología (PREDE), founded in 1990 by the National Council for Scientific Research (CONICET), the main agency that fosters science and technology in Argentina. These two research units, which have significantly developed over the years, were the main centers of research during that decade. Unfortunately, in my country there is not a strong tradition of creating positions for researchers in the field at public or private museums; that is the reason why most of us developed our activities in universities and/or the CONICET. The economic history of the country, with its ups and downs, cyclical inflation, and political crisis created a difficult context to establish long term goals.

Nevertheless, with the turn of the twenty-first century, several new trends appeared that showed that the situation is slowly starting to change. From that time onwards, many public and private national universities began to gather researchers into new academic units, and with time, many of them have been linked to the CONICET, through a mixed administrative program that acknowledged the quality of a diverse set of research activities.

I have been working at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina since 1993. It is a private national university, founded in 1958, which nowadays has four campus in different cities: Buenos Aires (Puerto Madero Campus), Rosario, Paraná, and Mendoza. Puerto Madero Campus was inaugurated in 1998, gathering together various faculties, which at that time were spread out in different buildings throughout Buenos Aires. Since then, the university has continued to grow, with a new building being built even as late as two years ago.

Not only has the university built new and modern buildings, but it has also introduced many changes in its institutional life. In 2002, the Department of History, based at that time at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, decided to encourage the creation of research centers related to the field of humanities. Thus, the academic research center named Centro de Estudios de Historia del Antiguo Oriente (CEHAO), was founded with the aim of gathering together senior and junior researchers as well as undergraduate and graduate students. Our main goals were fostering the academic study of the ancient Near East—including biblical studies—and establishing a strong relation with academics in other related fields by hosting meetings and conferences. Since its creation, the CEHAO had welcomed many

relevant scholars: Marcel Sigrist, Israel Finkelstein, Émile Puech, David Ussishkin, Ze'ev Herzog, and Rita Lucarelli, among many others.

Once the CEHAO was firmly established, my main goal was to publish an academic journal with the idea of reaching a wide international audience. The journal would publish articles in Spanish, French, and English in order to improve the relationships with other academic institutions and to spread the work of local academics across the world. A secondary but related goal was starting a specialized library at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina focused mainly on the ancient Near East by exchanging printed publications—journals as well as books—with well-established institutions. With those ideas in mind, *Antiguo Oriente—Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios de Historia del Antiguo Oriente* was first published in 2003, and the news soon spread.

Among many encouraging and positive messages, we received one from Ehud Ben Zvi, editor of an open-access online journal: the *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*. We have had a fruitful exchange between both journals ever since. Coincidentally, this initial exchange soon led to my incorporation into the Society of Biblical Literature. As I was reaching out, the Society was reaching in, seeking ways to foster scholarship in other parts of the world. I had many exchanges with Ehud with regard to this aim, and these conversations gradually drew me into a closer relationship with the Society.

Around the same time, I was invited to prepare a survey about the state of biblical studies in South America, and this challenge allowed me to meet someone who was of extreme relevance to the new relationship with the Society: Leigh Andersen, the managing editor of the Society's publications at the time and International Cooperation Initiative (ICI) staff liaison, an outstanding professional and a nice, understanding, and caring human being. Undoubtedly, she played a key role in implementing the joint projects that we proposed. Now, I have the opportunity to make a public acknowledgment to her commitment and support of our initiatives.

In 2007 an invitation to foster biblical studies through the Society's ICI Task Force arrived, and a new challenge began. The ICI had, and still has, as one of its main goals to make "scholarship available to scholars and students in underresourced countries" as Alan Lenzi (n.d.) expressed in his valuable post "Why You Should Submit Your Manuscript or Proposal to the Online, Open-Access Ancient Near East Monograph Series." I was invited to participate on the committee, and we created a database to promote the availability of academics who were able to travel in order to give

classes in different countries. At the same time, the idea of starting a new academic series was raised.

Central to the latter initiative was a young scholar, Juan Manuel Tebes, who had joined the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina and the CEHAO by this time. Juan gave a fresh impetus to the center. He suggested issuing a new series, named in Spanish the “CEHAO Monographs,” devoted to publishing undergraduate and graduate monographs, and individual or collective volumes focused on topics related to the ancient Near East from a historical and archaeological basis. Our goal was to spread research works written in Spanish, through an online, open-access platform provided by the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina. The first two volumes were published in 2007.

Then, we received a new proposal from the Society of Biblical Literature (coincidence again?): to start a series together, in order to publish monographs in Spanish and English with the aim of spreading academic research through an online open access platform. The works would be mirrored on the CEHAO’s and the Society’s websites.

A year later (2008), the Ancient Near East Monographs/Monografías sobre el Antiguo Cercano Oriente—nowadays the well-established and renowned ANEM/MACO Series—became a reality. The two Spanish volumes from CEHAO were integrated as the first two volumes of the joint series. Until 2015, I had the honor of sharing with Ehud the general editorship; after seven years of a fruitful relationship it was time to be succeeded in office by our colleagues Alan Lenzi and Juan Manuel Tebes. People who worked with us during those years—Alan Lenzi, Martti Nissinen, Steven Holloway, Santiago Rostom Maderna, José Manuel Galán, and many others who served in the board through the years—also played an important role in developing ANEM/MACO and were part of its success.

However, the beginning of ANEM/MACO was not as easy as we thought it would be. One of the challenges we faced was to adapt our way of institutional management to that of Society of Biblical Literature. In the Spanish-speaking academic world, it is very common that people keep an academic position for a very long time; but the Society promoted the rotation of members after serving one or two terms. This is in part because the two institutions (CEHAO and the Society) were extremely different in size: the Society of Biblical Literature was a huge and well-established institution while our center was incipient and modest. Nevertheless, we gave our series our full effort, and the amazing development of this initiative is a testimony to the positive engagement of those who believed

that international cooperation was not only possible but also could endure through time.

As I have already mentioned, the beginning was not as easy as it would seem at first sight. It was highly frustrating that for a very long time, only the two former volumes in Spanish remained in the publication list. Despite our efforts, no proposals arrived. But we kept working, contacting colleagues and promoting the new series. We firmly believed in the series' potential: we were convinced that researchers wanted to be read, while we wished to spread their work. We had a strong consciousness about the relevance of our academic research and the need to distribute it through a means that would be able to reach as many audiences as we could get.

Another strong point of our series was that we committed ourselves to making the process of reception, evaluation, and publication as quick as possible. We kept working hard, and, one day, something started to change. After three years of continuous efforts, the English counterpart started to grow more and more. Ehud's determination led him to succeed.

But it was not the same for the Spanish section. This fact made me realize that I had different challenges to face than Ehud. Alan Lenzi's "Why You Should Submit..." was translated and distributed across the Spanish-speaking academic world, while several personal messages were sent to researchers and institutions. However, I soon realized that it was not so easy to convince Spanish-speaking academics to publish their work in their mother tongue. English is nowadays an academic *lingua franca*, and I have to recognize that many scholars were reluctant to submit their work in a language that would be read just by a few interested people. On the contrary, publishing in English guaranteed an extended audience. To this prejudice, it has to be added that, as mentioned above, many Spanish-speaking authors were unenthusiastic to publish the results of their investigations in an online, open-access new series, despite having a university and a well-known institution behind the project ensuring the quality of the work published. It was a challenge to convince people that our initiative deserved to be supported and sustained. Ten years ago, open-access online academic publications had just started to appear and authors were cautious about publishing their work in that way.

Nevertheless, despite the frustrating situation, Ehud and the other members of the editorial board understood the challenges I faced. It took time, but my successor as cogeneral editor, Juan Manuel Tebes, would see the reversal of the situation. A new Spanish-language book was recently published, and several proposals are on their way.

I have already mentioned the expectations and challenges I have had to face in the different positions I held at the Society of Biblical Literature, but now let's talk about the opportunities. As I mentioned at the beginning, I started the relationship with the Society without great expectations. This is probably because I am an Egyptologist, and I believed that my field of expertise was to a certain point far from the Society's main academic interests.

Soon after encountering the Society, however, I changed my mind. I began to participate in the Annual Meeting, where I met more colleagues and had the opportunity to interact with people from all over the world. This allowed me to get to know the different realities, situations, and expectations that people had faced in academia; many of them we had in common; others were far from my own reality. Academic life is alive at the Society of Biblical Literature, and I have always felt the importance the leaders of the Society give to those engaged in projects who live abroad. Every year the Society's president sends a letter to the rector of our university expressing acknowledgment of our commitment to joint projects.

If you have been reading up to this point, you probably realized that I did not mention my experience as a *woman*. Precisely, I have not made any mention of my gender because being a woman was never a reason for being discriminated in any sense, neither at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina nor at the Society of Biblical Literature. I am aware that this is not the situation of many women around the world, and discrimination exists everywhere and not only because of gender. This is my personal experience, and as such, I consider myself very fortunate. I always felt I was respected and my opinions taken into account. Being from South America probably made the difference. People coming from different cultural backgrounds working together in a joint project need mutual adjustment, and it was certainly a challenge for us. But as you can see above, our willingness to rise to this challenge resulted in a successful bond that lasts until this day.

As I mentioned at the beginning, my relationship with the Society of Biblical Literature began many years ago with few expectations. But it grew and gave me the opportunity to face big challenges as coeditor of the ANEM series and a member of the ICI's board. These were amazing opportunities, and I feel extremely grateful for all these opportunities throughout the years, because they allowed me to grow as an entire human being—not just a woman from South America—who works in academia.

Bibliography

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