Moses among the Idols

Mediators of the Divine in the Ancient Near East

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Contents

Introduction

An Iconic Understanding of Moses

> On the day YHWH spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, YHWH spoke to
> Moses saying, "I am YHWH. Speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, all that I
> speak to you." Moses said before YHWH, "Behold, I am uncircumcised of
> lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?" YHWH said to Moses, "See, I have
> made you God to Pharaoh. Aaron, your brother, will be your prophet."
> (Exodus 6:28–7:1)[1]

The circumcision of Moses's lips is the most pivotal moment of his life, but
because it is so briefly and oddly described, it is often missed among the more
dramatic scenes of the Book of Exodus, including the burning bush, the ten
plagues, and the crossing of the Red Sea. Yet, this circumcision of Moses's
lips is the transformation that grants Moses the status change necessary to
bring the Hebrew people out of Egypt. If Moses is to succeed, he must be-
come no less than "god to Pharaoh." Moses knows this status change requires
that his lips be metaphorically "circumcised," and challenges YHWH with
this requirement, not once, but twice (Exod 6:12, 30).

A host of questions remains: What exactly is Moses arguing and why is
he making his argument with the phrase "uncircumcised of lips"? Why use
language so striking, even disturbing, in its imagery? Surely ancient Israelites
understood circumcision, physically of the penis (e.g., Gen 17) and figura-
tively of the heart (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 9:25 [26]; Ezek 44:7,
9) or even ears (Jer 6:10), but why the application of circumcision language
to the lips or mouth in Exod 6 and Exod 6 alone? Furthermore, why would
the uncircumcised state of Moses's lips affect Pharaoh's ability to listen?
Consider YHWH's response. What change occurs in the negative space
between Moses's question and YHWH's imperative, "see," that Moses is
supposed to witness, consider, and act upon? What is it about this exchange

that suddenly renders Moses more powerful than the most powerful person on earth—Pharaoh, the god-king—where Moses was impotent previously? Why do Moses's attempts to fulfill YHWH's command fail up until this point, but succeed hereafter?

Previously, in Exod 3–4, YHWH speaks to Moses through the burning bush, calling him to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery and giving him signs to perform so that the people will believe Moses is indeed YHWH's messenger. Moses gains the confidence of the people through these signs, but when he approaches Pharaoh, his attempt at mediating between Egypt's god-king and the enslaved Hebrews backfires. Pharaoh refuses to let the slaves go on a three-day journey to avoid the calamity of an unhappy god, and exponentially increases the labor of the Hebrew slaves as punishment for Moses's request. This angers the slaves against Moses, as it is a breech of trust, and also angers Moses against YHWH, whom he accuses of doing evil, lying, and sending Moses in the first place (5:20–23). In response, YHWH reiterates the promise of liberation, but the people will not listen when Moses relays the message "because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery" (6:9).

YHWH commands Moses to return to Pharaoh, and it is at this point in the narrative that Moses's strange argument appears for the first time: "'Behold, the children of Israel have not listened to me. How then will Pharaoh listen to me? I am uncircumcised of lips!' . . . But YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them charge about the people of Israel and about Pharaoh king of Egypt" (6:12–13). YHWH thus ignores Moses's specific challenge by simply repeating himself. After a brief interlude containing Moses's genealogy (Exod 6:14–27), comes the exchange that is at the center of this investigation into and analysis of Moses's status change from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh." Once Moses's mouth is "circumcised," he is able to channel the power of YHWH and act as an effective intermediary on both YHWH's and the Hebrews' behalf. Immediately after the exchange in which he becomes "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:28–7:6), Moses demonstrates his new status through the contest against Pharaoh's magicians (7:10–13), the famous ten plagues (7:14–12:32), and the miraculous exodus from Egypt (12:33–15:21). Then, after three months, Moses alone enters YHWH's Sinai theophany where he receives the Ten Commandments and other regulations in (19–31) in preparation for leading the people through the wilderness.

The Pentateuchal authors describe Moses's forty years of communication with YHWH in ways that convey the exceptional nature of Moses's status and, by extension, the intimacy of his relationship with YHWH. For example, Moses speaks with YHWH "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Num 14:14; Deut 5:4, 34:10) or "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) on a regular basis; Moses also wears a veil in order to hide the brilliant light or horns radiating from his face (Exod

34:29–35), a constant reminder of Moses's special status as the only one who sees the "glory" (*kvd*) of YHWH and survives (Exod 33:12–28). At the end of his peculiar life, at the age of 120 and with "his eye undimmed and his vigor unabated," Moses climbs Mount Nebo and dies in the presence of YHWH. Moses is then buried in the valley, in an unknown location (Deut. 34:1–12).

Sometime during the period of the Babylonian exile, while these traditions about Moses are undergoing compilation, a Babylonian craftsman is fixing the details of a commissioned idol and an *ašipu*-priest is collecting materials in preparation for the next two days.[2] The goal of the impending ritual is for the *ašipu*-priest to successfully induct this idol—the physical manifestation of a particular deity—into its role as mediator between divinity and humanity. The *ašipu*-priest and craftsman meet the next day, perhaps before dawn, when the craftsman places the idol into the care of the *ašipu*, who recites and repeats a few incantations before leaving. From the craftsman's shop, the *ašipu* leads a torch-lit procession to the riverbank, singing and reciting poetry along the way. There, the *ašipu* lays out a reed-mat upon which to set the idol with its gaze toward the west, then constructs reed-huts and a wide variety of offerings for the chief deities of the Babylonian pantheon. All the while, the *ašipu* recites incantations, asking the deities to be present and to cleanse the mouth of the idol, which has yet to fulfill its purpose. The *ašipu* again takes the hand of the idol, this time leading a procession from the riverbank into the orchard, where he seats it on a linen cloth, this time facing the impending sunrise. He spends the rest of the day and well into the night reciting, offering, invoking the gods of Babylon, and purifying the idol, operating by the light of censers, torches, and the stars.

Day two begins in the orchard with one last major cycle of reed items, cloth, offerings, incantations, and invocations. As he moves through the sequence written upon the tablets that outline the itinerary of these two days, the *ašipu* performs two interrelated ceremonies that he learned during his training: the *Mīs Pî*, "Washing" or "Purification of the Mouth," which purifies the idol of human contamination, and the *Pīt Pî*, "Opening of the Mouth," which enables it to serve its designated function as an idol. After he carries out these ceremonies in sequence, multiple times, then comes the climax of the ritual. Into the right ear of the idol, he whispers, "You are counted among your brother gods." In the left ear, "From today, may your destiny be counted as divinity; with your brother gods you are counted; approach the king who knows your voice; approach your temple."[3] The idol is now active in the divine community and may now serve as mediator between divinity and humanity.

In order to confirm the idol's divinity, the craftsman is brought from the city to the orchard, where he ceremonially denies his involvement in the forming and fixing of the idol. The *ašipu* responds with praises from the

incantation tablets he has brought with him. During this particular series of incantations, the *ašipu* proclaims aloud the evidence of the idol's successful transformation from object to deity. The idol is now physically set apart with "an awe-inspiring halo" and brilliant radiance, the symbol of his lordliness and divine origin in both heaven and earth, proof to onlookers that he is indeed filled with divine presence.[4]

Then, hand in hand, the *ašipu* and the luminous idol proceed from the orchard, to the center of the city, where the temple is situated. After an offering at the temple gate, the *ašipu* takes the god's hand and causes it to enter the sanctuary, where it sits in the innermost chamber. The *ašipu* invokes the chief gods one last time, with a simple offering, after which he washes the mouth of the idol once again, in order to ensure that all human contamination is left behind. Finally, the idol sits in its designated space from which he or she will mediate between divinity and humanity for the remainder of his or her life.

Throughout both ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, the ritual most commonly attested by extant sources is this Opening of the Mouth, the means by which something or someone is transformed from an earthly being into a deity.[5] In Mesopotamia, this series of rituals was almost always applied to idols, and transitioned them from seemingly idle objects to active intermediaries. Today, this series of rituals is referred to by scholars as the *Mīs Pî*, "Washing" or "Purification of the Mouth," although it also includes the climactic *Pīt Pî*, "Opening of the Mouth."[6] Historical references for the *Mīs Pî* are few, but extant sources do suggest that Mesopotamians throughout the region practiced it in a variety of forms from at least the 3rd millennium BCE through the Seleucid Period (3rd-2nd centuries BCE), a minimum of 2,000 years.[7] The *Mīs Pî* was also performed to renew idols that had fallen into disrepair or been damaged.[8]

In Egypt, the Opening of the Mouth was initially instituted as the centerpiece of funerary practices and a means to animate the soul (*ka*) of the royal dead, so that the soul may live among the gods in the afterlife. Textual evidence suggests that the Opening of the Mouth was practiced as such from at least the middle of the Old Kingdom (24th century BCE) through the late Greco-Roman period (3rd century CE), a span of 2,700 years. During Egypt's Late Period (7th-4th centuries BCE), the funerary ritual was incorporated into temple liturgies throughout the land and performed annually on images engraved on temple walls in order to enable the gods and goddesses depicted in those images to operate on behalf of the temple and to watch over the rituals performed therein.[9] This latter version of the ritual is most analogous to the Mesopotamian version with respect to its object and purpose, and, perhaps coincidentally, the shift in application from deceased royalty to images of the divine roughly coincides with the dating of the Mesopotamian textual evidence, described below. By the

late Greco-Roman period, the Opening of the Mouth expanded into the domestic sphere, where magicians performed the ritual on miniatures of temples and cultic objects designed for household devotional use.[10]

What is common to the Opening of the Mouth ritual, throughout space and time, is that it symbolizes rebirth into a new, divine nature. The evidence that the essence of the object has indeed been transformed is the completion of the Opening of the Mouth ritual, the physical manifestation of holiness through radiating light, and the subsequent solidarity the object experiences in relation to the divine, all of which legitimate the object in the eye of its beholder as a form of divine presence.

The Opening of the Mouth is suggestive for interpreting Exod 6:28–7:1, as Moses seeks for himself authorization and status like that conferred by this ritual. After Moses twice states "I am uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30), he receives the status "god to Pharaoh" (7:1). Moses is apparently transformed from a powerless person to a god greater than Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian pantheon, finally having the capabilities and credentials necessary to complete the task of leading the people out of Egypt, unto life with YHWH. Furthermore, Moses radiates light (Exod 34:29–35) and speaks with YHWH "face to face" (33:7–11; Deut 34:10) or "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:6–8). These elements of Moses's new way of being speak to the comparability of Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh" to the divine status of those who undergo the Opening of the Mouth.

The version of the Opening of the Mouth most relevant to the status change of Moses is the ancient Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî*, as only the Mesopotamian version of the ritual enables an earthly office, that of mediator. In the ancient Near East, idols were the ones who mediated between divine and human realms, ensuring that the divine word and works manifested *on earth*, before and on behalf of a human audience. In the biblical narrative, Moses, too, acts as an earthly conduit of the divine word and works, who mediates between YHWH and Israel to their mutual benefit. Since the primary subject of this investigation is the change in Moses's status from common man to mediator between YHWH and humankind, whether represented by Pharaoh or the Hebrew people, it then makes sense to illuminate Moses's status change via comparison with the status change effected in other ancient Near Eastern mediators—idols.

DEFINING THE PROJECT

In the defining moment in which he is transformed from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:28–7:1), Moses is best understood as YHWH's idol, undergoing a status change akin to that brought about by

the induction ritual for ancient Mesopotamian idols, one that shapes and informs Moses's life-long role as mediator between divinity and humanity. To make this point, I compare Moses and idols with respect to their status as mediator between divine and human realms. For both Moses and idols, the requirements, nature, and results of their respective status changes are complex, as the office of idol involves the transformation of one's essential nature. In fact, both the *Mīs Pî* and the circumcision of Moses's lips are so transformative that they are constituted as rebirth, the process by which that which already is enters the world, matures, and operates in a new way from that point onward. With their respective status changes, not only are idols and Moses transformed; so too are their relationships to their deities and also to their communities.

The major insights gained in the course of this comparison are made possible through my comparative method, which is tailor-made for this project yet applicable to any number of projects within biblical studies and beyond. The resulting new reading of Moses's status change offered by this method challenges several traditions pertaining to Moses's development from a fugitive shepherd to the hero of the Hebrew people. For example, my analysis of the *Mīs Pî* as a rebirth calls for a decentering of the burning bush episode (Exod 3:1–4:17) as the moment of Moses's transformation, and draws attention to Exod 6:28–7:1 as the locus of Moses's status change. In addition to this shift from the burning bush to the circumcision of Moses's lips, my decision to read Moses in light of the *Mīs Pî* also leads me to put forth a new etymological explanation of the name of Moses, *Mošeh*. Whereas previous religious and scholarly traditions understand *Mošeh* as "he who was drawn out [of water]" (Hebrew) or "a son, he who is born" (Egyptian), here I read *Mošeh* as "he who is washed" or "pure" (Akkadian), an etymology which reflects the Semitic root *m-š/s-weak*, and lends further support to the argument that the figure of Moses is best read through the lens of the *Mīs Pî*, "Washing" or "Purification of the Mouth."[11]

By highlighting the biblical portrayal of Moses as YHWH's idol, I also complicate the traditional understanding of Moses as YHWH's servant, lawgiver, and prophet that has been perpetuated throughout the history of interpretation, even within the non-Pentateuchal books of Hebrew Bible itself (e.g., Josh 8:31–32; Mal 4:4; Ezra 3:2). The category or office of idol explains the uncommon elements of Moses's way of being in the world, including those that are not accounted for by categories such as prophet, priest, or judge. It is through the status of idol and this status alone that Moses is able to be "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1), that is, God to the god-king of Egypt. However, Moses's status is not limited to his encounters with Pharaoh and the exodus out of Egypt, but remains in effect until his death. The life-long

nature of Moses's status as mediator explains the unique features of his character and role within the Hebrew Bible, including the horns or rays of light emanating from his face (Exod 34:29–35) and his unique position with respect to both the tabernacle and Israelite society, including its other leaders (Num 12:1–9).

This line of inquiry and argumentation also challenges historically common interpretations and assumptions about the nature and function of idols. In ancient Mesopotamian thought, an idol is not an object, nor does it serve as a metaphor for the "real" cosmic deity, nor is the deity who embodies the idol limited by or to its physical form. These common notions about the nature and function of idols would likely compromise the status of the deity in the mind of its devotees, let alone its critics.[12] For the Mesopotamians, an idol is never anything other than or less than a god; even before its initiation via the *Mīs Pî*, it is refered to as *ilū*, "god," albeit a particular kind of god uniquely positioned between human communities and cosmic realities. Therefore in performing a close study into the language used to talk about idols in ancient Mesopotamia, this project promotes a new understanding of "idol" not as an *object* but as an *officer*, an active mediator who is integral to the religious systems of which idols are central. To this end, I prefer the designation "idol" over "divine image" because the former term embraces the unique, ambiguous, and paradoxical nature of that which is being described, whereas the latter term suggests that idols are primarily images *of* gods and only secondarily divine. Furthermore, the negative connotations popularly associated with the term "idol" speak to the depth of influence of biblical anti-idol rhetoric on Western (particularly Protestant) religious thought; regardless, the term "idol" is a perfectly apt designation for that which it describes.

In addition to the above contributions to understanding Moses and idols, this comparison also serves a broader purpose as a case study in the role of historical context in the portrayal of religious figures and, relatedly, the formation of religious texts and systems. The ways in which Moses both fits and does not fit the model of mediation represented by idols, particularly those from ancient Mesopotamia, speaks to one of the overarching projects of the biblical authors: to inspire their audience to make the theological and practical move from the more ancient model of idol-centered religion to aniconism. This move became even more desirable against the backdrop of 6th century Babylon, in which the idol of Marduk and the story of Moses were in direct competition. Thus, on my reading, the biblical portrayal of Moses is not only patterned after idols in general, but is especially well-suited for direct historical conversation with one specific Mesopotamian idol, the god Marduk.

In this way, my project also serves as a case study in the tension between "biblical religion" and "popular religion," between a vision of what some believed religion ought to be and what was actually practiced among the people. It is about authors providing audiences with a new paradigm of belief and practice, one that engages common ideas and competing materials, while reworking them to fit within the aniconic religious framework for which the biblical authors argue.[13] It is well attested in the archaeological record, the Book of Kings, and many of the Hebrew prophets that the ancient Israelites, as a whole, did not conform to the model of religion perpetuated by biblical authors and prophets; sometimes they even questioned its legitimacy outright (e.g., Jer 44:15–18). Therefore, one cannot assume that what the authors of the Pentateuch or other biblical texts argue is an accurate reflection of what the average Israelite thought or believed. On the contrary, the biblical authors often try to convince their audiences of what they *ought* to think or believe, and go to great rhetorical and creative lengths to do so, even in their treatments of founding figures.

The Moses-idol comparison is expressed in the overall structure of Moses's life, with strong allusions to the lives of idols, specifically the Opening of the Mouth ritual, at the moment of his status change from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:28–7:1) and in the description of his radiant or horned face (Exod 34:29–35), both of which are attributed to the Priestly Source (P).[14] This new model for understanding Moses's special status also offers a framework for understanding numerous passages (e.g., Num 12:1–9) that express the efficacy, intimacy, and peculiarity of his relationship with YHWH, a relationship that reaches beyond the bounds of other religious offices such as priest or prophet. The goal of P in evoking idol-related concepts and images is to provide a provocative lens for engaging traditions about Moses, one that elicits a particular response from P's audience and convinces them that aniconism is a better choice than the more popular, idol-centered traditions of the day.[15] In the case of P, working in an exilic or post-exilic context, the most pertinent and direct religious competition was the long-established Babylonian cult of Marduk, chief deity of the city of Babylon in the millennia before and after the arrival of the Judean exiles in the 6th century BCE.

Since aniconism constitutes a break with the standard, idol-centered model of religion that was prevalent throughout the ancient world, the burden of arguing a new paradigm lies with the biblical authors. However, this does not require that they start from scratch; in fact, diverging too strongly from the norm may jeopardize the acceptance and longevity of a new paradigm. The reason idol-centered polytheism is the standard model of religion from at least the mid-third millennium BCE, through the early Common Era,

and continues to be practiced in parts of the world today, is that it meets certain needs and expectations that, for many, are essential to the religious experience.

One of these perceived needs is for a mediator to bridge humanity and divinity. Despite the fact that idols were the standard format of divine-human mediator throughout the ancient Near East, that does not entail that mediators could not be conceived of any other way. Comparing idols and Moses with respect to status change illuminates those elements of the office of divine-human mediator that idols and Moses both share and fulfill. At the same time, the differences between idols and Moses point to those characteristics of idols that the biblical authors found problematic and thus nuanced or reconfigured to suit their own religious framework. In the process of arguing an alternative paradigm of divine-human mediation, the biblical authors describe Moses as the most elevated of human beings, in ways deeply symbolic to their ancient audiences and neighbors. This symbolism stands out all the more in comparison with idols, and especially that of Marduk.

OVERVIEW

The remaining sections of this chapter present the texts and method that make this comparison possible. The core chapters are divided into individual treatments of the respective status changes of idols (chap. 1) and Moses (chap. 2), and comparisons between idols and Moses with respect to various aspects of status change (chaps. 3–5). Each of the arguments presented in those chapters comes together in support of my overarching thesis that Moses and idols ought to be compared with respect to their status as mediator between divinity and humanity. In the process of arguing this comparison, I provide insight into the nature and function of both idols and Moses, and a case study of the role historical context plays in the formation of religious traditions, whether the shapers of tradition follow the status quo or whether they break it.

In chapter 1, I begin with the idol induction process in Mesopotamia in order to set up my analysis of Moses's induction into the office of mediator. I argue that an idol's status change is portrayed by ancient Mesopotamian priests and officials as a rebirth from a seemingly idle figure into the divine realm, using the paronomasia idle/idol to guide my discussion. By then turning my attention to the idol of Marduk, chief deity of the city of Babylon, I demonstrate the relevance of 6th century BCE Babylon as a specific historical moment at which the Moses-as-idol paradigm may have been particularly compelling. The pivotal observation around which this analysis of historical

context revolves is that of the annual, twelve-day *akitu*-festival, which centered around the procession of Marduk's idol to and from the city of Babylon, concluded just two days before the ancient springtime festival of Passover, which celebrates and memorializes the exodus from Egypt, brought about through Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh."[16] This juxtaposition of holidays sets the stage for my comparison of Moses and idols, as it illustrates a potential, historical interface between idol-centered polytheism and the relatively new, developing system of aniconic Yahwism.

In chapter 2 I focus exclusively on Moses, arguing that his status change is portrayed as a rebirth from one "uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30) to "god to Pharaoh" (7:1). This rereading challenges past and current scholarship on Moses, because, with this relatively new information on the status change of idols as described in Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts, new insights into the status change of Moses are now possible. Chapter 2 closes with the suggestion that a different reading of Moses's transformation ought to be considered in light of the evidence provided by the *Mīs Pî*. This reading is undertaken in chapters 3 through 5.

Chapter 3 is the crux of my argument. I present the case for rereading Moses's status change, using the insights gained from analyzing the *Mīs Pî* in order to better understand the circumcision of Moses's lips. After demonstrating the symbolism attached to the language of circumcision, *Mīs Pî* ("Washing" or "Purification of the Mouth"), and *Pīt Pî* ("Opening of the Mouth"), I compare idols and Moses with respect to what status change entails at a core level. The result is an understanding of Moses's essential nature as *Mošeh*, "he who is pure," which I argue by proposing an Akkadian etymology of Moses's name, an etymology that comes to the fore in the process of comparison.

Chapters 4 and 5 support the claims of previous chapters by elaborating on those areas that are essential to fully understanding the Moses-idol comparison. In chapter 4, I argue that the language used for Moses's horned radiance (Exod 34:29–35), the sign that his status change is complete, draws two analogies: one between Moses and idols and the other between Moses and the gods in general. This demonstrates more explicitly the tension between aniconism, on the one hand, and idol-centered models of religion, on the other, a theme which carries into chapter 5 and there becomes more prominent.

Chapter 5 argues that the special status of both Moses and idols is performed in their relationships to the deity, sacred space, and the human community he or she serves. This conclusion emphasizes that the mediator is an absolute necessity in bridging divine and human realms. Without a mediator on par with Moses and idols, the connections between deity, sacred space, and human community are moot; the status of mediator is inextricably linked to the presence of the divine on earth and, by extension, the well-being of the community.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter. There, I offer some final thoughts on the significance of the similarities and differences between idols and Moses, then conclude with suggestions for further research and the implications of this project for biblical studies and related fields.

ANCIENT AND MODERN UNDERSTANDINGS OF MOSES AS IDOL

The comparison between Moses and idols has been made briefly on at least four other occasions, three of which are interpretations of Exod 6:28–7:1. The first and most ancient of these comparisons comes from the Book of Exodus itself:

> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Rise up, make a god (*'ĕlōhîm*) for us who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." . . . so he took [gold] from their hand and formed it with a graving tool, and he made it into a cast calf. They said "This is your god (*'ēlleh 'ĕlōhêkā*), Israel, who brought you out from the land of Egypt." (Exodus 32:1, 4)[17]

When the people grow skeptical of whether Moses is coming back, their instinct is not to choose another leader from among them, but to replace Moses with the infamous golden calf. Aaron, Moses's brother and prophet, approves of the idea that Moses may be adequately replaced by an idol, to the point of making the golden calf himself. At the end of this scene, after the calf is destroyed and the people are punished for their indiscretion, YHWH reaffirms Moses as he who "brought the people up out of the land of Egypt" (33:1), rather than the golden calf. Here, YHWH uses the same language that the Israelites use to describe both Moses (32:1, 23) and his golden replacement (32:4, 8). By using the same language, without correcting its usage, YHWH confirms the comparability of "Moses, the man" (32:1) and the "god of gold" (32:4, 8, 31), while simultaneously establishing a strong preference for Moses as the ideal mediator.

The second comparison of Moses and idols comes from Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Ps-Jon), an Aramaic blend of translation and aggadic traditions, dating to the mid-first millennium of the Common Era.[18] Ps-Jon translates YHWH's response to Moses in Exod 7:1, "I have made you god to Pharaoh," as "I have made you an idol (*dḥyl'*) to Pharaoh, just like his god."[19] This noun *dḥyl,* "idol," comes from the Semitic root *dḥl,* "to fear, revere," thus the idol is known as a "fearful thing" or "object of fear, reverence." Ps-Jon does not comment on the reasoning or implications of the choice of *dḥyl'* over *'ĕlōhîm,* "god, gods," but, nonetheless, makes a connection between Moses and idols.

The third comparison of Moses and idols appears in William Propp's commentary on Exod 6:12, and is allotted only two sentences: "Like the polytheist's idol, a prophet's body temporarily houses the divine presence. Thus, just as Mesopotamians animated their icons with a ritual 'opening of the mouth' so must an Israelite prophet possess a pure, unimpeded, 'circumcised' mouth."[20] This brief comparison of the induction processes of Moses and idols, while drawing a comparison that is certainly worthy of exploration, is problematic for reasons addressed in this and later chapters, including Propp's focus on similarity alone.

In addition to the above comparisons of Moses and idols, Gregory Yuri Glazov brings the Opening of the Mouth ritual to bear on the question of what happens in Exod 6:28–7:1. In his chapter "The Opening of the Mouth of Moses" in *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy,* Glazov focuses, not on idols in particular, but on the Opening of the Mouth more broadly.[21] Glazov limits his interpretation to verses in which Moses speaks about his own mouth as impeded (Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30), and to the question of what it is that closes and opens Moses's mouth. As the title of his book suggests, Glazov's overarching project is to better understand prophetic statements about the prophet's own speech; thus, this analysis assumes that Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30 belong to the genre "prophetic call narrative." Glazov performs his analysis using Egyptian sources relating to the Opening of the Mouth, biblical versions, Targumim, and Rabbinic tradition.

My approach and assumptions differ from those of Glazov in various ways. First, I look eastward, toward Mesopotamia, for both the textual evidence and the historical context that is most contemporary with the biblical texts at hand. Second, for reasons spelled out in chapter 2 below, I do not hold the position that Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30 belong to the genre of prophetic call narrative. Therefore, my interpretation is not limited to the pericopes in which these passages are located, nor is my interpretation limited by the categories of prophecy, the office of prophet, or prophetic literature. Finally, whereas Glazov's comparison is carried out with the goal of illuminating the function of speech-statements in biblical prophecy, my comparison focuses on the status change of mediators as represented by both Moses and idols. With this difference in focus comes a difference in the selection of primary texts.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE ON THE TOPIC

The comparison of Moses and idols is based on primary texts from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Mesopotamia that either prescribe, illuminate, or strongly allude to *Mīs Pî* and *Pīt Pî* rituals and other idol practices. These

texts are described here with an eye for the implications of their physical and literary forms upon my treatment of their content, including my method of comparison. Where relevant, other primary texts, such as letters, narratives, prayers, and official decrees are also incorporated into the following chapters, as are elements of material culture, especially images and iconography.

Even though this project is limited to the Hebrew Bible and sources from ancient Mesopotamia, it is important to understand the depth and breadth of the influence of the Opening of the Mouth ritual throughout the ancient Near East. To this end, I have included information about texts relevant to the Egyptian version of the Opening of the Mouth. These texts are more numerous, more informative, and more wide-spread across geography and time-period than those found in the region of Mesopotamia. This abundance of primary source material, although not at the center of the present comparison, communicates just how imbedded and vital was the Opening of the Mouth to ancient Near Eastern religions, and supports the idea that this ritual was widely known and highly regarded as the sole means of induction into the divine realm. Understanding the history and nature of the Egyptian texts, as well as the care with which traditions about the Opening of the Mouth were preserved, adapted, and carried out, helps one maintain this broader perspective, which is easy to lose in the course of comparison.

Biblical Texts

The texts central to the Moses-idol comparison are Exod 6:28–7:1 and Exod 34:29–35, which early source critics assigned to the Priestly Source (P).[22] Modern source critics, Neo-Documentarians in particular, maintain the position that Exod 6–7 belongs to P, while nuancing our understanding of Exod 32–34 as belonging to the Elohist Source (E) but with occasional P additions (most notably in 34:29–35).[23] While I agree with Joel Baden's assessment that the ability to determine the temporal and geographical location of the compilation of the Pentateuch is beyond what Neo-Documentarianism—a fundamentally literary project—and source criticism more generally can accomplish, I agree with the majority of biblical scholarship that the 6th century BCE, coinciding with the Babylonian exile and possibly an early phase of the return to Judea, offers a compelling historical context in which to situate the textual contributions of P and a major, if not the last major, compilation or editing phase of the Pentateuch.[24] As discussed in the next section and chapter, the Mesopotamian textual evidence upon which I draw also supports a 6th century Babylonian context as particularly relevant for understanding Moses as YHWH's idol.

Before discussing the Mesopotamian evidence, I must situate the Moses-as-idol analogy with respect to the work of the Pentateuchal compiler. In *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (2012), Baden balances the division of the Pentateuch into sources with the unifying work of the compiler who brought these literary sources together. For Baden, the compiler is a "master of narrative logic" with the goal of arranging the stories he inherited in as logical and chronological of an order as possible.[25] Sometimes this means interweaving texts, as in the case of Gen 6–9, at other times it means laying down blocks of text side by side, and only rarely does it mean making editorial changes (e.g., Exod 34:29–35). This latter assertion pairs with Baden's stated assumption that the compiler is simply a compiler, not an editor or even a historian, but a person of literature concerned with only one matter—the story told.

In characterizing the compiler in this way, Baden steers scholars away from arguments based on the assumption that the compiler shapes his sources in service to a particular theological or ideological intention; rather, the act of compiling *is* the theological intention.

> By preserving four discrete and distinct documents, each of which relates its own version of the history of Israel and argues for a particular view of Israelite religion, the compiler has made an important theological statement. No one source, no one viewpoint, captures the entirety of the ancient Israelite experience. . . . Only when they are read together is the picture complete. . . . The Pentateuch sends a clear and resounding message about the diversity of ancient Israelite religious thought and the importance of giving equal voice to all of its disparate representations.[26]

The diversity of ancient Israelite religion as expressed in the Pentateuch is also at the center of this project, whether I am discussing the Pentateuchal anxiety about idols, P's portrayal of Moses, or the idol-centered traditions of the ancient Near East. With Baden's statement on the compiler's intention (or lack thereof) in mind, I take the position that P expresses an understanding of Moses as fulfilling the role of an idol *par excellence*, and that P's portrayal of Moses both enriches and complements other sources' descriptions of Moses's special status.

As the compiler presents the Pentateuchal narrative in chronological order, one may read the figure of Moses and his actions subsequent to his transformation from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (6:30–7:1) only through the lens offered by P: Moses is YHWH's idol. In fact, P's lens is quite helpful in interpreting Moses's status throughout the Pentateuch, as each source has its own set of episodes in which the unique nature of Moses's status stands at the center of attention, yet is described in ways that

have puzzled interpreters for millennia. In chapter 5, we turn to Num 12:1–9 (commonly attributed to E) and other thematically related texts. This chapter presents a case study in the utility of P's 6th-century framework for interpreting non-P sources pertaining to Moses's special status and for explaining the interpretive conundrums therein, all of which are brought into conversation and presented by the compiler. As a product of the exilic and post-exilic period, the portrayal of Moses as YHWH's idol not only helps us understand the figure of Moses and his relationship with the deity, it also helps us understand one of the specific ways in which the Pentateuch stands in direct confrontation with its cultural and religious milieu in which the idols of Mesopotamia, especially that of Marduk, figured most prominently.

Mesopotamian Texts

Like so many texts from ancient Mesopotamia, no complete copy of any text related to the *Mīs Pî* ritual has survived. As of today, there are three main sources for the reconstruction of the ritual: the Nineveh Recension (NR; 7th century BCE), the Babylonian Recension (BR; 6th century BCE), and a series of five incantation tablets (8th-5th centuries BCE), the dates of which limit the scope of the following comparison to the 7th-6th centuries. All of these sources have been transcribed and translated in a single volume, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual* (2001).[27] The two recensions reflect different versions of the *Mīs Pî*, each version including different details and a different order of incantations, yet with respect to the macro-structure of the ritual, the overall order of the NR and BR is notably similar.[28]

Both NR and BR fall into the genre "ritual texts" because they describe how to perform a specific series of actions and are written tersely, almost in outline format, as they are part of a larger body of priestly training. For example, the ritual texts tell the initiated officiant to complete certain tasks, such as "offer a sacrifice" or "inspect the altar," but never explain how to do so. This suggests that whoever is reading these texts knows the details of what these prescriptions entail and is intensely familiar with the details of the entire ritual and sacrificial system, including how to prepare for the ritual, what materials to gather, and in what quantities. This speaks to how much knowledge, information, and training was required to carry out the *Mīs Pî* with success.

In antiquity, these ritual texts were accompanied by a series from another genre, incantation texts. These incantations fill out the *Mīs Pî* ritual by providing recitations to be spoken at predetermined moments, which are noted in the ritual text. However, the NR and the incantations found at the same location and belonging to the same time period do not display a clear and consistent

relationship to one another, neither in their nature nor in their order. Therefore, it is not clear if the extant incantation texts relate directly to the NR or BR, or if they relate to another recension (or recensions) altogether.

The Nineveh Recension

Of the extant texts related to *Mīs Pî*, the majority are fragmentary, part of Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh, and date to the 7th century BCE. Ashurbanipal's library contained several copies of the NR of the *Mīs Pî* ritual text, so there are points of overlap between fragments of different copies that have allowed Assyriologists to reconstruct all or part of 204 lines.[29] The exact length of the original text cannot currently be determined and none of the extant fragments contain information regarding their sources or scribal history.[30] Once reassembled, these fragments attest to a particular version of the ritual, hence the designation *NR*. Three additional fragments, found among Neo-Babylonian school texts at Nippur, suggest that this particular version of the *Mīs Pî* was also practiced beyond of the city of Nineveh.[31]

The Babylonian Recension

A single tablet excavated in the city of Babylon and now housed in the British Museum (BM 45749) contains the only known copy of the *Babylonian Recension* (BR) of the *Mīs Pî*. The tablet is broken across its midsection, but since its edges are intact, it is clear that it contains 35 lines on both the obverse and reverse. The Akkadian is characteristic of the Neo-Babylonian or Persian period, which gives it a date somewhere in the 6th century BCE, roughly one century after the NR. Close, personal inspection of the tablet reveals that this particular scribe was highly skilled and his materials are of an equally high quality.[32] His writing is evenly spaced and aligned, and the text fits snugly within the available space and lines. The clay is smooth and without blemish, either from the clay source or the kiln, and contains no visible inclusions except trace amounts of an element that creates a subtle glittering effect. The tablet fits in one hand (13.2 × 9cm) and is convex on the reverse, for a comfortable and practical fit.[33] Such quality and care speak to the high status and importance of the tablet's content.

The colophon on this particular tablet provides a great deal of information regarding its history, and also has significant implications for my method and argumentation. This colophon demonstrates that the fine quality of the tablet is a result of its intended destination, Esagila, the temple of Marduk. The colophon reads:

The initiate may show it to the initiate. The uninitiated may not see it. Taboo (*ikkib*) of the great Enlil, Marduk. According to the wording of the tablet, the

copy of a red-burnt (*ṣirpi sāmi*) tablet of Nabû-etel-ilāni, the son of Dābibi, the incantation-priest (*ašipi*). Iddina-Nabû, the son of Luḥdu-Nabû, the *ašipu*-priest, for the life of his soul and for the prolonging of his days, has written (it) and set it in Esagila.[34]

The scribe's statements that this tablet was intended for deposit in the library of Marduk's temple and that it was Marduk who set the taboo upon "the uninitiated" reading it suggests that this particular copy of the *Mīs Pî* had as its object the idol of Marduk. The full significance of this suggestion is taken up in later chapters; here, I simply draw attention to the connection between Marduk and the BR of the *Mīs Pî*.

In addition to illuminating the occasion of the inscription of this tablet, these lines are packed with information about the priestly and scribal culture surrounding *Mīs Pî* and the professional code by which its texts are to be handled. First, the colophon sets strict parameters regarding who may access the tablet. The dual assertion that an initiate may show an initiate and that the uninitiated may not see it is underscored by referring to the forbidden act as *ikkib*, "taboo" or "anathema" to Marduk.[35]

Secondly, the colophon suggests that this particular tablet may have been inscribed to replace one that was damaged. This is in keeping with a practice connected to the *Mīs Pî* itself, wherein a damaged idol is either disposed of properly and replaced, or physically and ritually restored to its proper use. In the case of the "red-burnt" or "discolored red" tablet mentioned in the colophon, it is possible that this alludes to the practice of replacing damaged ritual objects, though the author does not say explicitly.

Third, the colophon tells the reader the identity, patrilineal descent, and specific occupation of both the scribe and the scribe whom he copied, which also provides the genealogy of the content itself. Although there is no extant record of when these scribes were active, what is clear is that the identity of both the scribe and the scribe he was copying served to validate the content of the tablet. It is also relevant that both the copy and the exemplar were inscribed by initiates—*ašipu*-priests—and not standard scribes.

Ašipu is a designation in professional Akkadian texts for a priest who specializes in magic and incantations, but whose primary role is that of an exorcist.[36] This is the category of priest who carries out *Mīs Pî*. Connecting back to the warning that opens this colophon, references to the *ašipu* suggests two things: that access to knowledge about the specifics of *Mīs Pî* was guarded and reserved for only a certain class of priest, and that only the officiants of *Mīs Pî* were intimately familiar with the ritual tablets that guided their practice. According to this particular colophon, the *ašipu* were the sole producers of *Mīs Pî* texts and the sole practitioners of the ritual in Babylonian tradition.[37] These specifications limit what one may argue about the *Mīs Pî* texts

Incantation Texts

In various places in both NR and BR, the officiant is directed to recite a particular incantation, but the incantation itself is not included in the ritual text. These incantations are on a separate series of tablets, which are keyed into the ritual at the appropriate times with a system of catch-phrases and, sometimes, colophons indicating the number of each tablet within the series. Other tablets containing similar incantations, but no catch-phrases or numbering, are also viable sources for reconstructing these specific texts.[38]

Available evidence suggests that there were five incantation tablets connected to BR and six to eight connected to NR, yet only five can be reconstructed at the present time.[39] The fragments used to reproduce the extant texts come from Nineveh, Assur, Sultantepe, Hama, Babylon, Sippar, Nippur, Nimrud, and Uruk, and are mostly dated from the 8th-5th centuries BCE. The majority of the fragments originate in 7th century library of Ashurbanipal, where the NR was also uncovered; many are designated by their colophons as being copied specifically for this library.[40]

The incantations are written in one of two ways: either in full, or using the catchwords "Incantation for X."[41] Scribes also divided incantations into parts using long draws of the flat edge of a reed, so one recitation is not mistaken as part of another. Taken together, these observations suggest that priesthoods in Mesopotamia worked with the understanding that some knowledge ought to be memorized, and other knowledge is to be accessed through written word. This prioritization of knowledge is crucial for understanding the *Mīs Pî* because it suggests which elements of the ritual were common to priestly practice and which were distinct to the *Mīs Pî*; it also suggests which knowledge was most valuable, as Mesopotamians considered the written word to be more authoritative than the spoken word.[42] Furthermore, religious poetry is loaded with theological concepts and imagery in a way that ritual texts are not. These incantation texts provide insight into the symbolic nature and elements of the *Mīs Pî* that is impossible to obtain with any certainty from the ritual texts alone.

Egyptian Texts and Artifacts

In ancient Egypt, the Opening of the Mouth is arguably the most commonly attested ritual for millennia, which recalls just how prevalent this ritual was in ancient Near Eastern religious systems.[43] The majority of witnesses come from funerary texts, such as the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, the Book of the

Dead, and the Book of the Opening the Mouth, which contain the most extensive materials pertaining to this ritual. Additional sources include papyri from various periods and locations, and in various scripts and dialects.[44] These are supported by inscriptional evidence from temples dating from the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BCE) through the Ptolemaic Era (332–30 BCE), inscriptions and images in Theban tombs from the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) onward, plus numerous stelae and other artifacts excavated throughout the country.[45]

Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts

In the latter half of the Old Kingdom, trained professionals began to inscribe a series of rituals and spells on the corridors and inner chambers of royal pyramids. These inscriptions, known as the Pyramid Texts, are the oldest body of Egyptian religious writing and the oldest representatives of Egyptian literature.[46] The central focus of the Pyramid Texts, written in the tombs of kings and queens at Saqqara (2353–2107 BCE), is the Opening of the Mouth ritual and ensuring that its benefits are received by the royalty who occupies the tomb. For example, the earliest extant version of the Pyramid Texts, from the pyramid of Unis, opens with a series of recitations followed by a libation, then incense offering. The mouth of Unis is then ritually cleansed and opened in preparation for a special feast and successful resurrection into the divine realm.[47]

By the end of the Old Kingdom, it was fashionable among non-royal Egyptians to have passages of Pyramid Texts inscribed on papyri, stelae, canopic chests, coffins, sarcophagi, and funerary monuments, along with newer texts. Scholars refer to the latter as Coffin Texts, because they are most often written on the inside of wooden coffins used for burying wealthy Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom.[48] In regards to the Opening of the Mouth, the Coffin Texts provide both evidence for the continuity of the ritual and information regarding its reception and evolution. Beginning in the New Kingdom (ca.1550 BCE), most of the content of the Pyramid Texts and, to a lesser extent, the Coffin Texts were incorporated into new funerary compositions, such as the Book of the Dead and the Book of the Opening of the Mouth. The Pyramid Texts continued to be copied as a self contained collection and used through the end of the pharaonic age (332 BCE).[49]

Book of the Dead

The Book of the Dead is a funerary text that serves as a general guide to the Otherworld and contains spells and incantations for life after physical death. It first appears at the dawn of the New Kingdom (ca.1550 BCE), a period of

prosperity and growth. Of the 192 spells contained within the book, 113 have a predecessor in either the Coffin Texts or Pyramid Texts.[50] The most widely attested version of the Book of the Dead is the Theban recension, with the longest (78 ft. × 15 in.) and best preserved copy being the Papyrus of Ani, who was a scribe sometime during the 18th Dynasty (1550–1295 BCE).[51]

This papyrus details the scribe's journey into the Otherworld, including his initiation into the afterlife via the opening of his mouth with an iron implement by the god of light and air, Shu (spell 22–23). The function of the Opening of the Mouth ritual in the Book of the Dead is to enliven the soul of the deceased in a way that brings about the best possible afterlife. For the ancient Egyptians, this meant the ability to attain divine attributes, communicate and feast with the gods, and receive divine protection from harm.

Book of the Opening the Mouth

The only English translation of the Egyptian Book of the Opening of the Mouth is E. A. Wallis Budge's eclectic version, published in 1909.[52] It was edited from three different copies dating to the New Kingdom tombs of Seti I (19th Dynasty), Butehai-Àmen (20th Dynasty), and Peṭā-Àmen-àpt (26th Dynasty). Budge considers all three texts to be faithful descriptions of ceremonies dating as early as Neolithic times, despite the texts' relatively modern provenance.[53] Budge also suggests various stages in the evolution of the ritual, which became increasingly complex from Predynastic Egypt through the early centuries of the Common Era.[54]

Budge's version of the Book of the Opening of the Mouth is comprehensive, containing thirty ceremonies as part of the ritual, plus a number of supplementary ceremonies. Accompanying incantations and directions regarding specific organic substances and iron implements are included in these texts. Each of the three copies Budge uses are accompanied by vignettes, which provide visual information regarding what are presumably the most important stages of the ritual.

Artifacts

In addition to texts and vignettes, archaeologists have also discovered what is perhaps the most important tool used in the Opening of the Mouth ritual, the *pesesh-kef*. This is a bi-furcated knife tool, made from a variety of materials, which is often accompanied by small bottles or vases. These artifacts are typically found inside tombs and as a set, along with one or more of the above texts relating to the Opening of the Mouth. The *pesesh-kef* was in use at least as early as the Old Kingdom and remained an element of this ritual for millennia. It was also used to sever the umbilical cords of infants, a dual

usage which emphasizes the idea that the ritual's function is the successful rebirth of the soul into the Otherworld.[55]

METHOD

The method of comparison I apply throughout this analysis is two-fold; on the one hand, I argue for an historical link between the portrayal of Moses and the use of idols in the ancient Near East; on the other hand, this method yields insight independent of any historical overlap. The interpretive toolkit that makes possible this comparison of Moses and idols features the concepts of *third term* (J. Z. Smith) and *thick description* (Clifford Geertz), which come together to form a fruitful and ethical method of comparison. As I elaborate below, both of these tools add value to this study of Moses and idols, even if there were no historical link between them. Before I describe this comparative method in detail, I must first explain what this comparison between Moses and idols assumes about the historical relationship between the biblical authors and the *Mīs Pî* ritual and texts. Then, I am in position to discuss how these assumptions inform my choice of comparative method.

My main assumption with regard to the historical aspect of this comparison is that the biblical authors and their contemporaries had a working knowledge of idols in general, which includes the possibility of familiarity with the *Mīs Pî* specifically. The possible permutations of the level and complexity of this working knowledge are most clearly represented on a spectrum. On the minimum end of this spectrum, those who did not use idols still knew about them because of the widespread use of idols in local temples and neighboring homes, regardless of the exact century or geographical area in which one was located. I envision this working knowledge as a baseline understanding that idols are an available, popular feature of religion throughout the region, from Egypt, to Anatolia, to Mesopotamia, and beyond. On the other end of the spectrum, the maximum amount of knowledge a person could have about idols is represented by the *ašipu*-priest, the specialist responsible for the ritual life of idols and their induction via the *Mīs Pî* in ancient Mesopotamia.

The comparison between Moses and idols works regardless of where the biblical authors and their contemporaries are located on this spectrum. However, as I argue in chapter 1, there are specific historical contexts in which this comparison would have been all the more striking. Here, I assume that the authors of the biblical texts in which Moses is compared to an idol are somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, leaning toward a relatively more complex working knowledge of idols, yet not able to access the deepest permutation of that knowledge.

The decision to locate the biblical authors in the middle of this spectrum is supported by the fact that the biblical authors could *not* have had direct access to texts related to the *Mīs Pî*. This is supported by the strict prohibition contained in the colophon of BR, discussed above, against "the uninitiated" seeing the *Mīs Pî* tablets; even within the Mesopotamian hierarchy of religious officiants, only the highest class of priests could access these texts or perform the ritual. This historical point eliminates the possibility of arguing for textual dependence—the notion that the biblical authors knew the *Mīs Pî* through their own personal reading of the actual ritual tablets. The historical connection between the *Mīs Pî* and the portrayal of Moses that I *do* argue for exists independent of this notion of textual dependence.

While the *Mīs Pî* texts were reserved for only the *ašipu* and much of the ritual was performed in private, all of the extant *Mīs Pî* tablets and tablet fragments suggest that the induction of idols did include public elements, such as oral performance and various processions. In the Babylonian version of the ritual, this included the main street running through the capital city, Processional Way. While only an *ašipu*-priest could access the actual ritual and incantation tablets, the public elements of the ritual included proclamations of theology and symbolic statements about the form and purpose of the *Mīs Pî* ritual, and, most importantly, the idol itself. Anyone who happened to be within earshot had the opportunity to know about such practices, even if only at the level of a commoner.

The biblical authors' portrayal of Moses reflects engagement with idols in general and with the *Mīs Pî* ritual more specifically; in effect, I argue that the authors model Moses's status using a pre-existing framework applied to idols by the author's ancient Mesopotamian neighbors, whether near or far. This perspective aligns with that of Marc Van Der Mieroop when he writes:

> Modern scholarship, which sees the Babylonian core [of textual tradition] as the source of [literary] inspiration and creativity, tends to stress similarities with evidence found there in order to show direct contacts and cultural dependence. However, the evidence shows clearly that people to whom the languages of Babylonian writings and their cultural setting were foreign intensively engaged with Babylonian materials, that they understood the underlying epistemological principles, and that they wanted to apply these within their local cultural contexts.[56]

To restate Van De Mieroop in terms of this project, while the biblical authors do not have direct access to the written form of the *Mīs Pî*, they do intensively engage Babylonian cultural principles and adapt them to their own systems of thought; in this case, the construction of Moses as idol mimics, replaces, and, from a biblical perspective, improves upon the Babylonian concept of idol.

Having described the historical assumptions that inform this project, I now turn to describing its comparative aspect, and in so doing echo social scientists who argue that, "the task of cross-cultural analysis necessitates a more self-conscious use of anthropological or sociological models, made explicit at the outset and tested thoroughly by application to the data mined from historical contexts . . . [and that] new directions in scholarship will emerge more from new questions and perspectives on the part of scholars that from new 'raw' data."[57] Since the goal of my comparison is two-fold—to illuminate the situation in which the biblical authors found themselves, and to produce insight into the status changes of both idols and Moses—my method must help me accomplish both of these tasks. It must also take into consideration the critiques of comparison as it is has been, and generally continues to be, carried out in biblical studies.[58] With these goals in mind, I have engineered a hybrid method of comparison, a combination of interpretive approaches designed to enhance the best features and avoid the possible pitfalls of each of its elements. This combination allows me to redescribe those figures being compared, with or without positing a distinct historical connection.

The comparative method adapted here represents an interdisciplinary approach to comparison, which imports tried and tested elements primarily from anthropology and religious studies into the conversation between Assyriology and biblical studies.[59] Despite all of the nuanced ways one might talk about what makes for a healthy comparison, there is one concept in particular that acts as the linchpin of the entire comparative process. This linchpin is most often referred to as the *third term*, and credited to Jonathan Z. Smith. This third term is the topic of the scholar's choosing under which he or she draws together two texts or items.[60] By analogy, the third term is like the third leg of a tripod. It stabilizes comparison so that the scholar may produce a clear and focused snapshot of that which they set out to analyze and redescribe. Without this third leg, the comparison usually cannot stand, falling before a proper snapshot can be produced.

Although Smith himself struggles to define the third term succinctly, its practical application is fairly straightforward.[61] For example, I compare Moses and idols *with respect to* the process of status change; thus, status change is the third term of my comparison. It is the "with respect to," the question, external variable, or concern that governs the analysis, whether the topic is Moses, idols, or their respective historical contexts. Using the third term of status change guides my comparison by keeping it on a clear and narrow path, which is mapped in advance and marked along the way via sign-posts, keeping the reader attuned to where they are on the journey.[62]

This application of a third term also provides me with a constructive outlet for my own scholarly voice, acknowledging—in addition to and beyond the

historical connection already mentioned—my own position in orchestrating a particular conversation between Moses and idols, and making suggestions about their respective contexts. This allows me to focus on particular areas and, in turn, also allows me to offer analytical insight into the much larger frameworks of ancient Mesopotamian and biblical religious traditions, in addition to the various ways in which those frameworks reflect and are reflected by their respective contexts. Conceptualizing comparison in this way allows me to examine systems of status change, moving beyond the details of texts. Minutiae—such as imagery, grammar, and phrases—remain important and necessary tools for analyzing Moses and idols, but these tools are part of a much larger toolkit that includes other implements and bodies of knowledge, especially cultural context.

It is worth mentioning at this time that, just as no text is ever *written* apart from the cultural context of its authors, so no text is ever *read* apart from the cultural context of its *readers*. As a scholar, I have a responsibility to be aware of my own cultural, personal, and intellectual reading glasses, and this responsibility requires that I be intentional about how and to what end I compare. While the close and problematic nature of the overlap between Moses and idols makes their comparison intriguing, it also serves as a call for a method of comparison that is intentional, cautious, and acknowledges the voice of the scholar.[63]

Furthermore, the analogy of comparison as a conversation reinforces the importance of ethical relations by reminding the scholar that one is dealing with a *human* subject, albeit through texts. The scholar stays an outsider, yet insight and understanding are attainable because the goal of historical investigation and comparison is not to tell *exactly* how things were, but how they may be conceived, envisioned, or redescribed, and thus understood anew.[64] For example, analyzing and comparing Moses and idols with respect to status change allows me to redescribe the symbolic processes by which an ancient Mesopotamian idol became a mediator between humanity and divinity, on one hand, and, on the other hand, to redescribe how the Priestly Source and the Pentateuchal compiler use motifs from the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî* ritual and other idol-centered practices in order to present Moses as YHWH's idol.

Such a wide-reaching, yet concentrated, conception of the comparative endeavor is rooted in what Clifford Geertz, the 20th-century ethnographer, refers to as *thick description*. Smith draws on the work of Geertz because of Geertz's basic tenet that a thorough, complex, and contextualized description of a single object of study leads to a richer understanding of its respective society and the complexities of that society than any large-scale survey.[65] The ultimate goal of thick description is to analyze a narrowly defined phenomenon in a way that enables the researcher to make a suggestion about the

culture at large. This narrow focus makes thick description particularly useful for working with ancient cultures, because it enables one to connect objects, including texts, to their larger cultural environment, in the absence of living members of that culture.[66]

This is where *third term* and *thick description* complement one another. Third term determines the focus of thick description, while thick description provides what Geertz calls "embodied stuff on which to feed," that is, an outsider's redescription of an object.[67] This redescription brings to light a new understanding of both the third term, and the object's historical and cultural context. After I complete the work of thick description for both idols and the Pentateuchal portrayal of Moses—expressly treating them as separate, unrelated figures—I then begin the work of comparison. In what follows, I redescribe Moses and idols in terms of status change, then develop those redescriptions using comparison. These redescriptions not only illuminate processes of status change, but also yield insight into the experiences, challenges, and concerns native to ancient Mesopotamian and Israelite/Judean societies. In short, one comes away from thick description with a better understanding of the ways in which humankind makes meaning out of its experience.[68] These meaning-making experiences may then be placed in comparative perspective.

Comparing the biblical figure of Moses and idols in this way, with the end-goal of understanding the process of meaning-making for their respective and shared societies, helps me avoid the major pitfalls of the comparative endeavor. As the conversation about comparative method in biblical studies stands today, there are four main critiques: that comparison 1) often results in oversimplification, 2) pays attention to similarity but not difference, 3) limits itself to arguments for textual dependence, and 4) fails to contribute to a better understanding of the cultural contexts that give rise to the texts compared.[69] The hybrid nature of my comparative method is what allows it to address all four of these concerns. Thick description prevents oversimplification; it also furthers scholarly conversation about the different ways in which ancient Near Eastern communities made meaning out of their experiences. The attention to difference that this method calls for addresses one of the criticisms of comparison, while expanding the comparison and pushing it deeper into the *third term*.

By defining my methodological task narrowly from the outset—to compare Moses and idols with respect to status change, using *thick description* to redescribe them and their relationship to their contexts—I set myself up for an analysis that produces insight into processes of status change, the office of mediator, and the contextual variables that account for the differences between the biblical figure of Moses and ancient Mesopotamian idols. Furthermore, the

insight gained as a result of this comparison itself constitutes an argument for rethinking how comparison is done in biblical studies.

Comparing with respect to a third term—status change—keeps my comparison narrow and directed, making it possible for me to plunge into the issue of status change more deeply than if I were to compare Moses and idols broadly. Paradoxically, the narrow focus provided by third term comparison allows, even encourages, me to speak about greater, related issues. Such issues include, but are not limited to, the influence of cultural context on the biblical authors, the anxiety of arguing for aniconism while living in the epicenter of idol-centered polytheism, and the tension between attraction and repulsion in the human experience of the numinous—or at least that which is believed to be numinous.

Having provided a basic understanding of my project, primary texts, and method, I now turn to the subject at hand. In the following two chapters, I offer thick descriptions first of the status change of idols, then the status change of Moses. These separate, though related, treatments provide the foundational understanding necessary for the comparison that takes place in chapters 3 through 5. The first step is to analyze what makes an idol an idol, using a wide-variety of primary texts that contribute to a better understanding of the essential nature of ancient Mesopotamian idols, a nature best understood through familiarity with their lifecycle.

NOTES

1. All translations from the Hebrew Bible are the author's own, unless noted otherwise.

2. The following description is adapted from the primary sources for the induction of the idol as published in Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual*, SAALT 1 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2001).

3. Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 65. NR 165–71.

4. Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 150. IT 3, 51–55.

5. The Hittites of Anatolia had similar induction ceremonies for idols, but extant sources do not provide enough information for a thorough comparison. Billie Jean Collins, "A Statue for the Deity: Cult Images in Hittite Anatolia," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Neal H. Walls (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 29. Richard H. Beal, "Dividing a God," Pages 197–208 in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

6. The Akkadian *Mīs Pî* translates as "Washing of the Mouth." This action is one component of the ritual procedure which also includes *Pīt Pî* "Opening of the Mouth." As *Mīs Pî* is the term used in the field of Assyriology to refer to the entire series of rituals, I have adopted it here. Occasionally the ritual was performed on objects other than an idol, including apotropaic figurines, a leather bag used for divination, a river, jewels mounted on the king's chariot for protection, and cult symbols. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 13.

7. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 18–29.

8. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 227–45.

9. Eugene Cruz-Uribe, "Opening of the Mouth as Temple Ritual," Pages 69–74 in *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente*, ed. Emily Teeter and John A. Larson, SAOC 58 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1999).

10. Ian S. Moyer and Jacco Dieleman, "Miniaturization and the Opening of the Mouth in a Greek Magical Text (*PGM* XII.270–350)," *JANER* 3 (2003): 47–72.

11. This etymology takes center-stage in chapter 3, where I discuss the Semitic root *m-š/s-weak* in detail.

12. David H. Aaron argues against understanding idols as metaphors for deities, i.e., idols are not statues or images designed to allude to or draw attention to the *real* deity who is out in the cosmos. Rather, it is an active, divine being. *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 13, 123–55.

13. For a few examples of the biblical authors' arguments against the use of images, see Exod 20:4–6; Lev 26:1; Deut 4:15–31; 5:8–10; 2 Kgs 17:12–23; 21:11; Psa 97:7; 106:19–20; Isa 40:18–20; 41:6–7; 44:9–22; 48:5; Jer 2:28; 10:3–15; 16:20; Hab 2:18–19.

14. The issue of sources is discussed in more depth in the section below, "Textual Evidence on the Topic – Biblical Texts."

15. On the slow development of monotheism in ancient Israel, see Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Nili Fox, "Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism," Pages 326–45 in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence: Brown University, 2006). Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, JSOTSup 241 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

16. I am aware of the debate about the history and date of Passover, but since I am working in Exodus, I read along with Exod 12:18; 23:14–19; 34:18–26, which places the holiday on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan. For the general contours of the debate, see J. Gordon McConville, "Deuteronomy's Unification of Passover and Maṣṣôt: A Response to Bernard M. Levinson," *JBL* 119 (2000): 47–58.

17. Here, I translate the plural *'ĕlōhîm*, "god, God, gods," in the singular, "god," to match the fact that only one golden calf is forged in the ensuing narrative.

18. On the dating of Ps-Jon, see Robert Hayward, "The Date of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Some Comments," Pages 126–54 in *Targums and the Transmission of*

Scripture into Judaism and Christianity, Studies in the Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture 10 (Boston: Brill, 2010).

19. Targum Studies Module of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon of Hebrew Union College: http://cal.huc.edu; See also Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: An English Translation of the Text With Analysis and Commentary* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing, 1990), 87, n. 1.

20. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 274.

21. Gregory Yuri Glazov, *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy*, JSOTSup 311 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). Meyers adopts Glazov's suggestion. Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

22. For a snapshot of how the main schools of thought divided the Pentateuch into sources, prior to the recent resurgence of interest in source critical scholarship, see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 250–55.

23. E.g., Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 103–11, 753–55; Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 28, 99–100, 117, 173, 182–83, 220, 224; Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 61, 65, 179; for a different interpretation of source critical and redactional divisions in Exod 3:1–7:7, see Jaeyoung Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story: A Redactional-Critical Study in Exodus 3–4 and 5–13*, FAT 2, Reihe 60 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 188–89, 199–206, 238.

24. Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 229.

25. Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 225–27. In Baden's treatment of the compiler's practical role, whether the compiler is affiliated with P is beside the point.

26. Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 228.

27. Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual*, SAALT 1 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

28. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 29–30.

29. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 30.

30. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 28, 34–35.

31. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 28.

32. In February 2012, I visited the reading room at the British Museum, where I had the opportunity to handle and photograph BM 45749 and other *Mīs Pî* tablets. High-resolution, black and white photographs may be found on the disc accompanying Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*.

33. These details are not mentioned in any other scholarly treatment of this text to date.

34. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 82.

35. *CAD* I, 55a–57b. For more on the meaning of *ikkub*, "taboo," see M. J. Geller, "Taboo in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JCS* 42 (1990): 105–17.

36. *CAD* A2, 431a–35a.

37. This is not consistent throughout the history of the ritual. See Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 15–16.

38. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 86.

39. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 31.

40. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 27–29. F. N. H. Al-Rawi and A. R. George, "Tablets from the Sippar Library V. An Incantation from Mīs pî." *Iraq* 57 (1995): 225–28. While such designations clarify the intended destination of these tablets, they also complicate the historical question of how texts were used in priestly practice. For example, it is not clear whether these texts were written from oral tradition for the sake of placing them in the library, while the priests continued to operate from memory alone, or if priests used similar tablets as they performed various rituals.

41. X being the action the incantation accompanies.

42. On the authority of the written word over oral tradition, see Marc Van Der Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 16–19.

43. Mariam F. Ayad, "The Selection and Layout of the Opening of the Mouth Scenes in the Chapel of Amenirdis I at Medinet Habu," *JARCE* 41 (2004): 113.

44. Mark Smith, *The Liturgy of the Opening of the Mouth for Breathing* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1993).

45. R. Bjerre Finnestad, "The Meaning and Purpose of Opening the Mouth in Mortuary Contexts," *Numen* 25 (1978): 118. Alan R. Schulman, "The Iconographic Theme 'Opening the Mouth' on Stelae," *JARCE* 21 (1984): 169–96. This abundance of evidence, drawn from such a long period of history and from so many different sites, complicates any attempt to describe the ritual succinctly and in full.

46. James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, WAW 23 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 1.

47. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 17–61.

48. R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, *Vol. 1* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1978), Preface.

49. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 1.

50. Barry Kemp, *How to Read the Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 5.

51. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1960), 26, 217.

52. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Opening of the Mouth* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1909).

53. Budge, *The Book of the Opening of the Mouth*, v, 8.

54. Budge, *The Book of the Opening of the Mouth*, vii–viii, 1–8.

55. W. Benson Harer Jr., "Peseshkef: The First Special-Purpose Surgical Instrument," *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 83 (1994): 1053–55. For an example of the *peseshkef* and accompanying vessels, see BM5526.

56. Van Der Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, 200.

57. Dale Martin, "Social-Scientific Criticism," Pages 125–41 in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application, Revised and Expanded*, eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 129, 137.

58. I deal with these critiques in more detail in the following pages. On the history and current status of comparative method in the field of biblical studies, including a summary of the major criticisms and contributors, see Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 15–38.

59. The negative effects of comparison done poorly are summarized in Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis, "Introduction," Pages xi–xix in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), xii-xiii.

60. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 51, 99. On the role of the scholar in comparison, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," Pages 53–65 in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51–53, 115. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, "Introduction," Pages 1–22 in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, eds. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 17. Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 59, 65.

61. One of the most helpful pieces on Smith's concept of *third term* is David Frankfurter, "Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity," Pages 83–98 in *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques, Controverses et propositions*, eds. Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2012).

62. Robert C. Hunt, *Beyond Relativism: Rethinking Comparability in Cultural Anthropology* (Plymouth, UK: AltaMira Press, 2007), 157.

63. Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," Pages 251–302 in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 253. "The radically 'other' is merely 'other'; the proximate 'other' is problematic."

64. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 52.

65. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Pages 3–32 in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 20.

66. However, one cannot take a single case study as the world in a teacup or simply make observations like a fly on the wall. According to Geertz, these fallacies can be avoided by keeping two things in mind: that the goal is to provide food for thought, rather than a definitive answer, and that the object of study comments on more than just itself. Geertz, "Thick Description," 21–23.

67. Geertz, "Thick Description," 23.

68. Geertz, "Thick Description," 10, 30.

69. For an example of a critique of arguments for textual dependence, see Smith, *Drudgery Divine*. On oversimplification, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996). On lack of attention to context, see Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," Pages 381–419 in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991). On similarity and difference, see William W. Hallo, "Introduction: Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis," Pages xxiii-xxviii in *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, Vol. 1 of *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 1997). "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," Pages 1–30 in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, eds. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990). "Biblical History in its Near Eastern Setting," Pages 1–26 in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method*, eds. Carl D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980). The caution against oversimplification is another reason why I do not engage the Egyptian materials in this comparison. Keeping the list of primary sources short reduces the risk of oversimplifying the texts, the rituals, and the individuals responsible for their form and content.

"Balogh's book is generated by the shift in Moses's status from one who is 'uncircumcised of lips' to one who is 'god to Pharaoh.' She casts her eye eastward, to Mesopotamia, and particularly to the texts about enlivening the cult statue known as the cleansing and opening of the mouth rituals. The resulting investigation is creative and generative on a number of fronts: the understanding of Moses's role as mediator, for example, his radiant face, and his function as 'YHWH's idol.' Even the etymology of the name *Mosheh* is reconsidered in this intriguing study, which concludes—not without some irony—that Moses' comparison to an idol is a way to describe him as 'the most elevated of human beings.'"
—BRENT A. STRAWN, PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT, EMORY UNIVERSITY

IN *MOSES AMONG THE IDOLS: MEDIATORS OF THE DIVINE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST*, AMY L. Balogh simultaneously redefines one of the greatest figures in the history of religion and challenges the historically popular understanding of ancient Mesopotamian idols as the idle objects of antiquated faiths. Drawing on interdisciplinary research and methods of comparison, Balogh not only offers new insight into the lives of idols as active mediators between humanity and divinity, she also makes the case that when it comes to understanding the figure of Moses, Mesopotamian idols are the best analogy that the ancient Near East provides. This new understanding of Moses, idols, and the interplay between the two on the stage of history and within the biblical text has been made possible only with the recent publication of pertinent texts from ancient Mesopotamia.

Drawing from the fields of Assyriology, biblical studies, comparative religion, and archaeology, Balogh identifies a problem with Moses's status, and offers an unexpected solution to that problem. *Moses among the Idols* centers on the question: What is it that transforms Moses from an inadequate representative of YHWH who is "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Exodus 6:28-7:1)? In this moment, Moses undergoes a status change best understood through comparison with the induction ritual for ancient Mesopotamian idols as described in the texts of the *Mīs Pî*, "Washing" or "Purification of the Mouth." This solution to the problem of Moses's status explains not only his status change, but also why Moses radiates light after speaking with YHWH (Exod 34:29-35), and his peculiar relationship with YHWH and people of Israel. The comparative, interdisciplinary perspective provided by Balogh allows one to read these and other millennia-old interpretive issues anew, and to do so in a way that underscores the contribution of in-depth comparison to our understanding of ancient civilizations, texts, and intellectual frameworks.

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