What Difference Does Time Make?

Papers from the Ancient and Islamic Middle East and China in Honor of the 100th anniversary of the Midwest Branch of the American Oriental Society

edited by

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Introduction

What Difference Does Time Make?

JoAnn Scurlock

This volume is the publication of a conference designed to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Midwest branch of the American Oriental Society. We begin with Wayne Pitard's paper: 'The Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society at 100' that outlines the history of the organization from its founding in January 1917 to the present day. Among other tidbits and outrages, we learn that universities even then were stingy and that, as result of the fact that meetings of the main society were invariably held on the east coast, very few orientalists in the Midwest actually bothered to join the society. This in turn resulted in a situation in which the main society's general AOS meeting rarely drew more than forty attendees.

The theme for our session was correspondingly: 'What Difference Does Time Make? We gratifyingly received papers reflecting the wide scope of the American Oriental Society in both time and space, with participation by Archaeologists (Battini, Hudon), Assyriologists (Pitard, Pryke, Scurlock), Biblicists (Feinman), Islamicists (Haug, Laher) and Sinologists (Carrai, Qin, Yang).

Our theme is divided into four sections. The first section 'Time as a Concept' grapples with the question of what time is anyway. In Amelia Ying Qin's article: 'From Beyond Time and Space: Master Zhuang's Cosmogony and Modern Physics' we are introduced to Master Zhuang, a 4th century BCE Daoist philosopher whose conceptualization of time and space bears comparison with the time-space continuum and Big Bang theory of modern physics. Throughout the paper, a Classically informed person will hear intriguing echoes of pre-Socratic philosophy, in particular Anaximander and Zeno. For an Assyriologist like myself, the most interesting part of the discussion is in the concept of a 'point' in space or time. This is an entity that 'has a location in space but takes up zero space' or is a 'zero-length moment that can be located on the time line but has no duration in itself'. Master Zuang packages Creation as there 'suddenly' being Being and Nonbeing which, in the absence of time of however short a duration, can not be distinguished from one another.

In what is known to scholarship as the Babylonian Creation Epic, the primordial gods are imagined as just such 'points' that appear suddenly by spontaneous generation, creatures neither living nor exactly dead but more or less both at the same time and located, if that is the word for it, somewhere and nowhere in infinite time and space. After the god Marduk gets through with them, however, they are points on a line moving along tracks laid out for them, being killed and brought back to life in a yearly cycle that produces and maintains the flow of time.

The second section 'Measuring Time' deals with issues of calendric ritual. Competing cultic calendars can provide real headaches for an imperial system. In his article: 'The Gifts of Mihragān: Muslim Governors and Gift Giving During Non-Muslim Holidays', Robert Haug tells a fascinating story of accommodation between the Zoroastrian population of Balkh and their Muslim Arab conquerors that involved an adaption of the Zoroastrian festival of Mihragān. This festival was a hard pill indeed to swallow, since it involved the giving of gold and silver

vessels from which Muslims were not supposed to eat and silk garments which Muslims were not supposed to wear and, worst of all, getting drunk on an alcoholic beverage that was not legal even by the most liberal interpretation of Islamic law.

The difficulties experienced by Muslim rulers of Zoroastrian subjects are, to some extent, to be laid at the door of monotheistic salvation religions. When polytheism was the only kid on the block, it was possible, through creative syncretism, to combine cultic calendars for key festivals. My article: 'Feasting in the Garden of God: Ramet Rahel and the Origins of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.' traces the history of an imperial composite calendric ritual from its first attestation in the Second Millennium BCE Amorite kingdom of Mari via Assyria to Judah in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods.

This article pairs with Haug's article since the Mihragān festival that he describes is the final end point in Persia of the history of the ritual whose origins I have attempted to trace in my own article. From this vantage point, I believe that I can weigh in on a few issues raised in Haug's paper. The association of the Autumnal Equinox, the original date of Mihragān, with 'equity and equilibrium' and its role as a time for decision making is universal in the Ancient Near East, but never under the aegis of a solar divinity. Ninurta and Nabû, the gods who supervise pacts, contracts and covenants in ancient Mesopotamia, are the children of heads of pantheon; they are associated with the planet Mercury and, although fully involved at the Vernal Equinox, they are off the playing field in the Autumnal Equinox.

What this means is that whether you imagine Mithra as originally a son of Ahuramazda and a Ninurta and Nabû analogue or as originally a Sungod, the association with the Autumnal Equinox will have had to be purposeful rather than happenstance, if the Ancient Near Eastern evidence is any guide. Also, the association of the Autumnal Equinox with the harvest festival will have been original, with Mithra added later, perhaps as an earlier Zoroastrian accommodation to the local customs of its non-Zoroastrian subjects. I would add also, that the harvest in question is of grapes and that the special royal wine drunk at the festival will have been select vessels of new wine, as in the Ugaritic version. The placement of the festival on the 16th rather than at the beginning of the month, as is the case with Nowrūz, will have given the grape juice enough time to ferment.

The third section 'Travels through Time' deals with changes brought about by the slow but steady progress of time. Two of the papers in this section deal with changes in the life of individuals. In Louise Pryke's delightfully written article: 'Time Travel and the Homesick Hero' we hear of the way in which the homesickness that can result from extended journeys abroad 'involves more than geographical and temporal displacement, but is deeply connected to issues of humanity, morality, identity, religion and community.' Heroes whose epic journeys produce such transformations include not only the more familiar Gilgamesh, but also Adapa, Etana and especially the usually ignored Enkidu and the ultimate homesick hero, Lugalbanda.

In Xiaoshan Yang's 'The Older the Better: The Critical Conception of Lateness in Song China' we decide if there is some virtue to getting old. At my age, I am rather skeptical of this. but we can all take consolation in the canonization of Du Fu (712-770 CE) as the greatest of all Chinese poets. This process, which did not begin until four decades after his death, was accompanied with much roaring and screaming and reams of poetry about what exactly it was that was so special about Du Fu or even if he deserved canonization at all. In the end, it was decided

that not only Du Fu's 'heroic abandon and plaintive cadence', but the work of later poets and even some prose writers were fine wines that only improved with advancing age and/or life experiences. I would not, however, advise mature scholars to follow the lead of Su Xun (1009-1066) and all too many others in burning their 'juvenile' works in favor of more mature pieces that aspire to be 'heroically archaic' or fashionably modern. As we hear in the conclusion, in the West as in the East, merit in a work of literature or, in the West art and music as well, is in the eye of the beholding critic.

The remaining papers in this section address the issue of gradual change within a community. In her article, 'The Evolution of Terracottas From the First to the Second Half of the II Millennium BC,' Laura Battini studies changes over time in the production of terracottas of the type ordinary folk kept in their houses. Inter alia, the later examples represent gods not as human figures but through symbols. There are also some very curious female figures with their hands over their eyes that we would love to know what that was all about.

Finally for this section, we have Suheil Laher's discussion of the effects of a perhaps inevitable 'decay of knowledge over time' among a different community of scholars: 'Through a Glass, Darkly?: Sea-Water, Bequests, and the Textualism-Tradition Tension in Islamic Law.' Not to spoil a peek into the twists and turns of argument of our scholarly ancestors from the 9th to 11th centuries of the so-called common era desperate to base their legal rulings on written sources of proven reliability, to know is that the issues addressed were whether sea-water could or could not be used for ablutions and whether you could bequeath something additional to someone who was already an heir under Islamic law.

The last section 'Wrinkles in Time' deals with dramatic political developments that bring major changes in their wake in which time seems to be speeded up and even is imagined as ending altogether. The first two papers deal with history-changing events, real or imagined and of local or more extended significance. Jeffrey P. Hudon's paper: 'Converging Lines of Evidence: Archaeological and Chronological Data Supporting a 792 BCE Date for the Iron IIA-IIB Transition in the Southern Levant' begins with a charming Ode to a Chronological Chart but then tells the sad story of the city of Lachish in Judah, a key administrative center 'surpassed in significance and size only by Jerusalem ... (that) perhaps even functioned as Judah's second capital.'

What this, of course, meant was that every passing army had to put a hole or two in its fortifications, and the final destruction by the Babylonian army marked the beginning of the exile. Before this Level II destruction, there was the damage done to Level III by Sennacherib and there were two recognizable destructions before that, one each for Level V and Level IV, the interest of this article. So who is to claim responsibility? Hazael of Damascus? Jehoash of Israel? Those who led the revolt against Amaziah? Uzziah's earthquake? This last possibility 'rests on unstable foundations' and conspirators are not in the habit of destroying the fortresses of places they intend to govern. As for Hazael, 1Kings 2.18-19 clearly indicates that he was bought off without doing any substantial damage. This leaves Johoash of Israel and both archaeological and textual evidence is mustered in favor of this interpretation. It would seem that the 'thistle of Lebanon' (1Kings 14.9) was indeed even more thoroughly trampled than we knew.

In Peter Feinman's 'The Hyksos and the Exodus: Two 400-year Stories,' we hear the tale of two historically transformative events. The expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt is probably real, if heavily fictionalized in the versions we have of it; of the historicity of the Exodus, there has

been a great deal of debate. What is curious is that both stories share a common element, the figure of 400 years for the duration of the time spent in Egypt. So what is so special about the number four? 'The number four, representing our ability to see forward, behind, to the left and to the right encompasses everything.' There is also special significance attached to forty, of which fifteen examples are cited by Feinman, and this only from the Hebrew Bible. Feinman argues, and I would agree, that this number 'represents the completion or fulfillment of a measure of time.' The appearance of this magic number in the Mesha stela raises interesting questions about cultural influences. The number of 400 or thereabouts has also had many takers, nine examples, cited by Feinman, as does 4,000 or thereabouts with seven.

All in all, the 4 series would seem to be firmly rooted in the West Semitic world. So why, we ask, does Ramses employ this 400 year figure and, just for good measure top it off with month 4 and day 4? And if the expulsion of the Hyksos was actually the inspiration for the Exodus story, did the Israelites cite the number from Ramses rather than the other way round?

The plot thickens as we examine the context of the 400 year stela more closely and compare it with the inscriptions of Ramses' father Seti I, who boasts of being at the beginning of a new era in Egyptian history and Ramses' son Merneptah, the putative author of the Quarrel Story that tells the tale of expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt. I will not spoil the story by giving away the ending, but suffice it to say that our conceptualization of Egypt as at all times and under all conditions essentially racist on the subject of foreignors may require some modification.

The last articles are about revolutionary change. Maria Adele Carrai's article: 'Chinese sovereign revolution: temporal acceleration toward a better future?' is a fascinating study of changes in the meaning of the word revolution in both West and East to refer not to a cycle, which is of course what the word actually means, but to an endless forward motion towards a new and supposedly better future that requires an entire rejection of the past as well, one might add, in both the French Revolution and the Cultural Revolution of China that was modelled on it, an ISIS/Daeš-style destruction of the monuments of that past. In my article that finishes the volume, 'Nippur's Galileo Problem', I examine the revolution that, in ancient Mesopotamian thought, ensured the beginning and maintenance of time.

Front Cover: The photograph was taken by JoAnn Scurlock at Persepolis, Iran. The relief is located on one of the stairways to the main audience hall of the Palace of Darius I and Xerxes I below rows of tribute bearers. The scene depicts the Vernal Equinox, symbolically representing Nowrūz (Persian New Year), when the 'gifts of Nowrūz' were to be presented.
Back Cover: The photograph, also taken by JoAnn Scurlock, shows a water clock consisting of two bowls set on a tray. There is a large bowl filled with water and a small bowl that floats in it. A small hole in the bottom of the little bowl allows it to gradually fill with water, thus telling the time.