

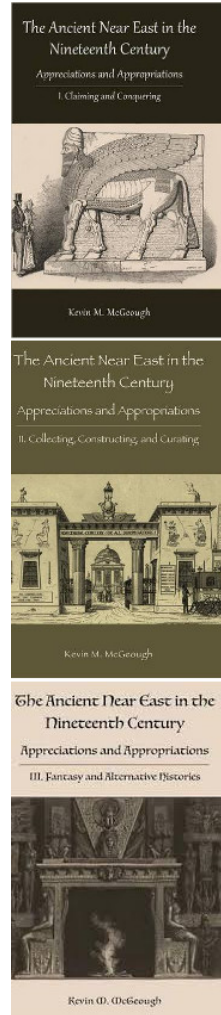
*The Ancient Near East in the Nineteenth Century:
Appreciations and Appropriations*
I. Claiming and Conquering
II. Collecting, Constructing, and Curating
III. Fantasy and Alternative Histories
by Kevin McGeough

Hebrew Bible Monographs 67, 68, and 69 | Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015 | xix + 457; xxv + 423; xxix + 431 pages | ISBN: 978-1-909697-65-2 (hardcover) £70.00; 978-1-909697-66-9 (hardcover) £60.00; 978-1-909697-67-6 (hardcover) £70.00

University of Lethbridge professor Kevin McGeough presents a meticulous and thorough three-volume series on the reception of Near Eastern culture, history, and art in nineteenth-century Europe and America. Both in the introduction to the first volume and throughout the series, McGeough makes clear the fascination held by Western entities such as England, France, and the United States in relation to the geographically and temporally distant lands of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. McGeough summarizes the goals of this broad study in his introduction:

This study shall explore some of the ways that the ancient Near East, which at the outset of the nineteenth century was best understood as a manifestation of elite culture, was adopted and revised in popular culture, how the scholarly significance of the ancient Near East was understood and adapted by producers and consumers of popular culture and how the growing popularity of this subject among the middle classes created new commercial prospects involving mummies, pyramids and biblical history. (I.8)

As he notes, the nineteenth century contains a plethora of catalysts for both elite and popular interactions with the ancient Near East, which have



led to contemporary divisions between the interests of academic Egyptologists and Egypt in pop culture. In this study, the burgeoning middle class and influential elite, with their access to leisure time and general romanticizing of antiquity, stand at the core of nineteenth-century interest in the Near East.

Befitting the theme of the first volume, *Claiming and Conquering*, McGeough carefully presents the problem of Orientalism and exoticism, including (following Frederick Bohrer) exoticism's creation of "our" paradoxical proximity to the distant "other" in the ancient Near East. The growth of archaeological studies in the nineteenth century, as he notes, "brings a physical proximity to the exotic by removing artifacts from an original geographic and temporal setting and resituating them in a new context of the museum or, more abstractly, the academic study" (I.14). McGeough carefully builds upon this framework of archaeology as recontextualization: that the removal and replacement of ancient Near Eastern artifacts might reveal more about the culture involved in the objects' acquisitions than it does about the ancient culture itself. In preparation for the study, McGeough also notes in the introduction that travel literature was an inescapable medium of Near Eastern knowledge in the nineteenth century, due to its ability to display the "other" during the "heroic" European journey for transformative experience in exotic lands. McGeough, throughout this volume and subsequent ones, judiciously balances the realities of imperialism in Victorian-era Europe with the modern imperative to condemn such actions (via Edward Said and Rana Kabbani).

As one might expect for a study of nineteenth-century European interaction with the Near East, McGeough begins with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and the rapid appropriation of Egyptian culture in France (ch. 1)—at least, Egyptian culture as perceived by French artists and travelers. At the opening of this first chapter, McGeough notes an important feature of this Orientalizing treatment of the Near East that continues throughout the entire study: the objectification of Egyptian (and other Near Eastern) culture relies on fixing said culture in space and time, so that it can be easily examined and treated as timeless (I.36). McGeough makes clear that Napoleon and his "scientific team" established the standard for later Near Eastern travel literature and geographical studies of Egypt, primarily through the publication of Vivant Denon's *Description de l'Égypte* and *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* (I.32). With Denon's creation of the "nearly universal (and empirically based) 'ancient Egyptian' visual culture" (I.32), French elite quickly

began to portray themselves as aesthetically and technologically competing with ancient Egypt—in many ways, Paris was portrayed as the heir to Egyptian monumental grandeur. As McGeough notes, Denon was also involved in the removal of Egyptian antiquities and their transfer to France, a quickly standardized practice that would plague museum ethics until the twenty-first century.

Outside of France's rapid appropriation of Egyptian aesthetic culture at the turn of the nineteenth century, McGeough also turns to the standard popular conception of the ancient Near East in Europe (ch. 2), which itself was primarily fueled by reading and interpretation of the Bible and other Greco-Roman texts. He presents the classical European image of Mesopotamia and Egypt as read through the literalized "Moses to Solomon" Old Testament narratives, Josephus, Herodotus, Manetho, Diodorus Siculus, and Plutarch. The discovery and deciphering of the Rosetta stone added to McGeough's discussion of European portrayals of ancient Near Eastern culture, as specialist Europeans were beginning to gain confidence in their ability to uncover and prove connections between the archaeology and geography of the Near East and their own classical/biblical conceptions of such locations.

McGeough's first volume continues with examinations of European travelogues of the Near East, especially those recorded by Giovanni Belzoni (1779–1824), Edward Robinson (1794–1863), and Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894). As noted in the previous chapter, many of these early European explorers desired to prove the literal nature of the Bible through the discovery of biblical towns (I.109)—yet, this was primarily a Protestant project that avoided common Catholic pilgrimage sites and Jerusalem's thriving ecclesial traditions (I.114). Perhaps most importantly, Layard discovered the biblical city of Nineveh during his travels and thereby founded the field of Assyriology in the 1840s. As McGeough notes, this moment shifts the course of Near Eastern studies because "the political ramifications of Layard's books should be considered as this is one of the earliest loci where formal imperialist governance and archaeological practice are institutionalized" (I.129). The appropriation of Near Eastern archaeology for larger imperialist projects remains a major theme that goes far beyond McGeough's study of the nineteenth century to current excavations in the Middle East.

In tandem with imperialist projects, McGeough relates other Victorian impulses for understanding *how* previous empires have fallen in order to conceptualize further human "progress" and the potentiality of returning to a "Golden Age." He notes that the birth of ancient Near Eastern studies

was often used as evidence that humans were not primordial savages, but rather were made by God to thrive in society (I.143); this “discovery” arose contemporaneously with the development of positivist thought and Hegel’s goal-oriented progression of history, the *Weltgeist* (144). Knowledge of the Near East in the nineteenth century leads to, as McGeough argues, the further subjection of African slaves as sub-human and the partition of human history into periods of savagery, barbarism, and civilization (cf. Spencer and Henry Morgan; Marx; Engels; John Stuart Mill). Even religion is seen as “evolving” in the developing *Bibel-und-Babel* discourses that emerged due to blatant similarities between biblical literature and Near Eastern mythological cycles. McGeough makes clear that appropriation and interpretation of the Near East in the nineteenth century reified contemporary modes of oppression, linear viewpoints of the progression of history and humanity, and religious justification for the supremacy of Christianity. These issues are quite relevant for contemporary European and American historical and religious discourses.

On a more popular level, McGeough treats Victorian periodicals, the beginnings of archaeological journals, and satire as interest in the Near East spreads throughout other European classes. As he understands it, these types of media functioned well for popular crowds due to their relatively cheap production and distribution prices, the ability to provide a visual experience, as well as the ability to read these media quickly (I.186). As one might expect from previous chapters, the general reader was expected to have a fair amount of biblical knowledge in order to interact with Near Eastern findings. McGeough also notes the continued emphasis on the linear progression of history, specifically in art history; interest in Assyrian and Egyptian art grew through these media due to the belief that they may have influenced Greco-Roman (and thereby later neoclassical) art forms (I.203). Especially after the fiasco surrounding the transportation, disappearance, and debates for “Cleopatra’s Needle” in London, McGeough sees a surge in European satire focusing on the Near East, such as *Mrs. Brown on Cleopatra’s Needle*, *The Egyptian Red Book*, and in the weekly magazine *Punch*. Common themes included the mocking of contemporary British sports, politics, and cultural values through the images of sphinxes, mummies, and the famous Nineveh bull (I.230–57). As authors such as William Thackeray of *Punch* made clear with their blatant satire, it had become difficult to distinguish between “traveler” and “tourist” during nineteenth-century expeditions to the Near East. As is a theme throughout McGeough’s volumes, the ambiguity be-

tween traveler and tourist places one in an equally ambiguous space between active participant and passive observer. How much is a traveler/tourist truly exploring, and how much is such a person shaping (or being shaped) by their Near Eastern surroundings?

Overall, volume one uncovers the monumental role of “non-specialists and non-professionals” in the development of nineteenth-century interest in the ancient Near East, as well as the subsequent professionalization of such endeavors by pseudo-academic travelers and state-sanctioned treks to Egypt (428). McGeough distinguishes the role of the professional and amateur by the end of this volume in order to lay foundations for the next two volumes, which survey amateur encounters with the Near East.

Volume two, with the subtitle *Collecting, Constructing, and Curating*, focuses primarily on the construction of the “Near East” within the contexts of museums, architecture, and art. This volume especially emphasizes the role of Egypt—or, at least, European conceptions of Egypt—in various forms of material culture. From the introduction, McGeough is clear that Western constructions are not true reconstructions of Near Eastern art and culture, but are utilized within new historical and political contexts:

Egypt is both full and empty as a signifier. That is to say, it seems to be evocative of so much but what it evokes is extremely flexible and subjective.... The “fact” of Egypt does not preclude the multiple “Egypts” that are imagined, exhibited, and manufactured, and despite the fact that this was a real, historical culture, its meanings for later interpreters are unstable. (II.3–4)

McGeough especially makes use of the methodologies and scholarship of “thing theory,” a field of study that conceptualizes the appeal of “things” and “collections,” particularly by what means people demonstrate wealth and selfhood through ownership of objects. McGeough questions whether a “thing” can transfer ownership intrinsically and instead follows Nicholas Thomas in suggesting that objects must be manipulated and placed in new contexts. This proposition is foundational for McGeough’s study of nineteenth-century museums and their (re)presentations of the Near East, since, borrowing from Anthony Shelton, he suggests that “the museum institutionalizes and legitimizes a specific gaze. It teaches visitors how to view artifacts (and by extension the cultures that they stand for)” (II.7). For brevity, I will only highlight a few chapters from the second volume.

In chapter 1, McGeough again reminds his readers that twenty-first-century Near Eastern scholarship is the culmination of three centuries of professionalization within the field. Nineteenth-century archaeologists, collectors, and scholars did not hold the same standards or viewpoints concerning the study of history. “Artifacts could ... be examined in isolation or in relationship to other objects of the same type, but not within an archaeological context as had been the typical approach since the Enlightenment” (II.11). McGeough notes that, as professionalization of the field emerges during the nineteenth century, ownership of artifacts shifted depending on the “uniqueness” of the object, so that the scholarly community gained control over more artifacts and Victorian museums became a “sacred space” for “sacred objects” (II.19). McGeough’s first chapter also wrestles with the burgeoning area of museum ethics, using the example of collector Sir John Soane and his questions concerning artifacts: should antiquities be owned by the government who discovered them, or by the discoverers themselves? What is the role of the country in which they are found? Most European collectors and travelers (e.g., Rifaud, Belzoni), as McGeough reveals, denied any claim of ownership to local governments or communities, often supposing that locals were xenophobic and overly possessive. McGeough helpfully uncovers the rhetoric of such collectors, as he notes that European and Ottoman authorities attempted to “stake claims” in foreign countries with almost total disregard for the role of local communities in ownership stakes. Finally, chapter 1 tackles the growing production of forged antiquities, especially after the discovery and display of the Moabite/Mesha Stele at the Louvre. McGeough’s contribution to the definition of “authenticity” and “forgery” is helpful, since he expands upon Baudrillard’s claims concerning the falsity of all artifacts (II.45). The Near Eastern artifact, in his expansion, is not “real” due to its role as an “object of fetish” in early modern European culture. Although the object is “false” due to its separation from its historical context, archaeological artifacts are given a new “realness” because of the relationship between object and owner. In McGeough’s explanation of the Mesha Stele, he notes how copies—although equally as “fake” as the real Mesha Stele in some ways—are seen as intrinsically inferior by collectors and viewers due to the supposedly inferior relationship the owner/viewer might have with antiquity through the copy. McGeough’s second chapter notes a similar desire for breaching the liminality between Europe and the ancient Near East through human remains (i.e., mummies; II.57).

In chapter 3, McGeough furthers the important discussion of museum

ethics and institutionalized history, beginning with the observation that “to control a museum is to control a representation of a community and its highest values and truths” (II.106). McGeough notes that, whether the nineteenth or twenty-first century, museum-goers usually fail to understand the mastery and control that comes about through the museum’s depictions of Near Eastern artifacts. A major example used in this chapter includes Canning and Layard’s excavation of Nimrud for the British Museum. McGeough notes the questions that arose in the nineteenth century concerning the efficacy of Near Eastern displays at the British Museum: how much do these displays positively benefit British culture? This interest in the formulation of culture and public identity through museums causes McGeough to focus on a hotly debated question for these types of museums: are they a location for displaying “gentlemanly status” or national identity (II.121–122)? Following Bourdieu and Habermas, McGeough argues that museums reveal who is elite and “in the know” within a culture, which is quite noticeable in the restricted attendance of the British Museum before 1810. McGeough argues further that the popularization and accessibility of museums in the nineteenth century prompted a method of control through museums. Working-class citizens could now interact with elite museum culture, but (following Foucault and Bourdieu), the museum became a medium of education on “proper” culture. The institutionalization of Eurocentrism and elite control of museum culture is a significant conclusion from McGeough’s study of Near Eastern collections at the British Museum.

In the third and final volume, McGeough tackles two topics: “conscious fantasies” of Near Eastern culture in popular media (e.g., art, fiction, theater, music, opera) and non-academic or esoteric revivals of Near Eastern culture (e.g., Rosicrucians, The Hermetic Order, Mormons, Freemasons). In his introduction, McGeough furthers Said’s discussion on orientalism by noting that “othering” simultaneously creates “selfing.” In nineteenth-century biblical and Near Eastern art, this is evident in the blending of artificial images with lived experience, such that one’s artistic imagination is limited to the imagined historical scene (III.4–6). Just as McGeough noted European and early American attempts to breach the temporal, geographical, and cultural differences between themselves and the ancient Near East in previous volumes (e.g., through mummies, archaeological artifacts, travel), he continues this discussion in the third volume through the development of esoteric approaches to the Near East. These religious and quasi-religious attempts to connect directly with the ancient world appear to be, as McGeough notes, “a

response to the growing mechanistic view of the universe. For if there truly is no greater spiritual meaning to life, and religious traditions are just cultural constructs, why not just make up one's own? Or, one could pick and choose elements of various traditions and follow those that were most appealing" (III.10). As is later claimed by Freud, the ancient Near East is utilized in modern European culture as a tool by which one may discuss taboo subjects.

For the sake of space, I will focus briefly on the first chapter of this volume and its implications for reception history of the Near East. McGeough begins this chapter with artistic depictions of biblical scenes by William Blake as one example of the nineteenth-century goal of *veritas* in art—as an attempt to “signal the real” (III.17–18). McGeough, however, is quick to note the modern European construction of progress and civilization through these media, which coincides with orientalist tendencies in artistic depictions of the “timeless East.” Through the apocalyptic biblical scenes of John Martin, he reveals how the artistic destruction of Mesopotamia impacted later biblical and historical scholarship, which sought to (re)construct further accurate visuals of ancient cultures. Other artists of this period (e.g., Turner, Roberts, Delacroix), McGeough notes, are similarly interested in Near Eastern themes of destruction and hyperreal illustration of biblical scenes. As with the previous volumes, McGeough continually touches upon the orientalizing of such artists, asking whether there is actually a distinction between the use of “ideal” illustrations for fantasy art and “real” illustrations for biblical art (III.43). McGeough also returns to his earlier discussion of the Near East and European taboo topics, since Victorian orientalist art depicts fantasies surrounding race, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Ernest Normand, Edwin Long, George Rochegrosse). He again argues that the imagined “distance” with the Near Eastern world made it an artistic space for exploration of unorthodox questions (III.75–80).

McGeough's meticulous three-volume study of Near Eastern appreciations and appropriations in nineteenth-century Europe should encourage students and scholars alike to consider the role of the Near East, both in the classroom and in contemporary society. McGeough urges his readers to recognize that we, just like many nineteenth-century Europeans, desire to connect with ancient people through their artifacts. Because of this desire, scholars ought to reexamine the nature of ownership and colonial consequences on the economies and cultures of modern inhabitants: “the past still exerts a powerful influence on the present, and, as in gothic literature, the sins of the father are visited upon the son” (III.389). Perhaps most im-

portantly, McGeough argues for deeper recognition and further study of the intertwined nature of mass entertainment and professional archaeology. His three-volume series elucidates the relation between orientalizing travels, acquisition of Near Eastern artifacts, the creation of archaeology, and the growth in popular interest and esoteric interpretations of Near Eastern culture. From the multitude of relations between popular culture and Near Eastern studies starting in the nineteenth century, McGeough offers a challenge to scholars:

By trying to understand the needs that alternative histories fill for people, rather than just discounting this kind of pseudo-scholarship outright, we can perhaps do a better job of exciting interest in our field without recourse to aliens, curses, or imagined mysticism. (III.390–91)

McGeough thoughtfully urges scholarship to be more self-aware of the types of values that we encourage through our creation and contextualization of Near Eastern history. McGeough seeks innovative modes of Near Eastern scholarship that take seriously the desires of the non-professional and non-elite, so that scholars and students might further this field in an ethical and relevant direction.

Chance Bonar
Yale Divinity School