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Finding Indra, Finding Torah —The Story of Shibamata Taishakuten and Josiah’s Renovation

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The remarkable story (2 Kings 22–23) of Josiah’s renovation of the Jerusalem Temple in 622 BCE, the discovery of the “Scroll of the Torah” among the rubble and the subsequent use of that text as a legitimizing force in Josiah’s reformatory policies is one of the most well-known passages in the Tanakh, and one which has had an almost unfathomable influence on the modern exegetical study of the entire text of the Hebrew Bible. The central passage (2 Kgs 22:3–13) reads (in my translation):

And it happened in the eighteenth year of king Josiah, that the king sent Shaphan, son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of YHWH, with the words: “Go up to Hilkiah, the high priest, and let him sum up the silver which was brought into the temple of YHWH, that which the wardens of the threshold have collected from the people. Let them give it to the overseeing workmen of the temple of YHWH, and they shall give it to the workmen who are in the temple of YHWH, to repair the damages to the temple—to the carpenters, the builders and the masons— [and let them give it] to buy wood and hewn stones to repair the temple. However, no tallying is to be done with them of the silver that was given to them, as they are [trusted to be] dealing faithfully.” Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe: “I have found the Scroll of the Torah in the temple of YHWH!” And Hilkiah gave the Scroll to Shaphan, and he read it aloud. Shaphan the scribe went to the king, and he returned a report to the king, as follows: “Your servants have smelted the silver that was found in the temple, and they have given it to the overseeing workmen of the temple of YHWH.” And Shaphan the scribe told the king as follows: “Hilkiyah the priest has given me a scroll.” Shaphan read it aloud before the king. When the king heard the words of the Scroll of the Torah, he ripped his clothes to shreds. The king gave orders to Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam, son of Shaphan, Achbor, son of Michaiyah, Shaphan the scribe and Asaiah the servant of the king, as follows: “Go and make an oracular inquiry of YHWH for my sake and for the sake of the people and the whole of Judah about the words of this scroll that was discovered—for the wrath of

YHWH which burns against us is great because our forefathers did not obey the words of this scroll and [did not act] according to all that is written therein.”¹

The many tantalizing details of the tale—the “chance” discovery (*māšā ’tī bēbēt YHWH*, “I have found in the temple of YHWH”) of such an important text as the “Scroll of the Torah” (*seper hattôrâ*), the reaction of the king, who rends his clothes in sorrow (*wayyiqra ’et-bēgādāyw*) because the supposedly ancient precepts of the Scroll had not been followed, and the use of the locality of the temple as an implicit device for granting legitimacy to the royal policies—have generated an enormous amount of discussion; indeed, pointing this out may seem a trivial understatement. The story could well be thought of as being rather unique—the account of the miraculous finding of a central and allegedly ancient religious artifact within the confines of the Temple itself appears to be very special indeed—and it is of course quite clear that the Deuteronomist writers of Antiquity saw it as extremely important, more important, in fact, than any other event in the history of the Israelite kingdoms, barring the Babylonian-

¹ The Hebrew text underlying the translation runs: *Wayhî bišmōneh ’esrēh šānâ lammelek yō ’šiyāhû šālāh hammelek ’et-šāpān ben-’āšalyāhû ben-mešullām hassōpēr bēt YHWH lē ’mōr / ’ālēh ’el-ḥilqiyyāhû hakkōhēn haggādōl wēyattēm ’et-hakkesep hammūbā’ bēt YHWH ’āšer ’āsēpū šōmērē hassap mē ’ēt hā ’ām / wēyittēnūhū ’al-yad ’ōšē hammēlā ’kā hammupqādīm bēt YHWH wēyittēnū ’ōtō lē ’ōšē hammēlā ’kā ’āšer bēbēt YHWH lēhazzēq bedeq habbāyit / lehārāšīm wēlabbōnīm wēlaggōdērīm wēliqnōt ’ēšīm wē ’abnē maḥšēb lēhazzēq ’et-habbāyit / ’ak lō -yēhāšēb ’ittām hakkesep hannittān ’al-yādām kī be ’ēmūnā hēm ’ōšīm / wayyō ’mer ḥilqiyyāhû hakkōhēn haggādōl ’al-šāpān hassōpēr sēper hattôrâ māšā ’tī bēbēt YHWH wayyittēn ḥilqiyyā ’et-hassēper ’el-šāpān wayiqrā ’ēhū / wayyābō ’šāpān hassōpēr ’el-hammelek wayyāšeb ’et-hammelek dābār wayyō ’mer hittikū ’ābādēkā ’et-hakkesep hannimšā’ babbayit wayyittēnūhū ’al-yad ’ōšē hammēlā ’kā hammupqādīm bēt YHWH / wayyaggēd šāpān hassōpēr lammelek lē ’mōr sēper nātan lī ḥilqiyyā hakkōhēn wayyiqrā ’ēhū šāpān lipnē hammelek / wayhî kišmōa’ hammelek ’et-dibrē sēper hattôrâ wayyiqra ’et-bēgādāyw / wayšaw hammelek ’et-ḥilqiyyā hakkōhēn wē ’et-’āḥiqām ben-šāpān wē ’et-’akbōr ben-mikāyā wē ’ēt šāpān hassōpēr wē ’ēt ’āšāyā ’ebed-hammelek lē ’mōr / lēkū diršū ’et-YHWH ba ’ādī ūbē ’ad-hā ’ām ūbē ’ad kol-yēhūdā ’al-dibrē hassēper hannimšā’ hazzeh kī-gēdōlā ḥāmat YHWH ’āšer-hī’ niššētā bānū ’al ’āšer lō -šāmē ’ū ’ābōtēnū ’al-dibrē hassēper hazzeh la ’āsōt kēkol-hakkātūb ’ālāyw.*

BHS suggests reading *wēyattēk* for *wēyattēm* (“and let him smelt/pour”), based on the occurrence of that verbal root (*ntk*) later in the text and on ancient versions. The preserved MT text does, however, seem to be the *lectio difficilior*, and I choose to keep it. The word *wēyittēnūhū* follows the *qere* reading, as does the *bēt YHWH* that follows *hammupqādīm* (*ketiv* adds a *bē-*). The reading of the last word in the passage follows suggestion in *BHS*. MT has *’ālēnū* (“concerning us”).

an Exile itself (it is, of course, no coincidence that the discovery of the Scroll of the Torah and the subsequent religious reform and the beginning of the Exile form the highpoints that end the Deuteronomistic history as a whole).

The Josiah/Hilkiah incident is, however, certainly not the only instance of “miraculous textual discoveries” in the greater milieu of the Ancient Near East, but the role of the story as a legitimizing factor for a whole theological tradition is certainly very special indeed. Yet, comparisons with other similar events or descriptions from the Ancient Orient are definitely illuminating as a means of showing the general background of the “rediscovery” motif in the religio-cultural context out of which the Old Testament writings drew their ideological nourishment. In a 2011 article, Nadav Na’aman enumerated a number of parallel cases from the Ancient Near East, in which the rediscovery of texts plays important theological or legitimizing roles.

In this short article, however, I would like to draw attention to another case, in quite a different part of the world, in which a very similar development seems to have taken place. This example is neither one from Assyria nor one from Babylonia, but rather from the Japan of the 18th century CE, one involving that originally most Indo-European of deities, the Vedic storm god Indra.

I am currently in the middle of a research project concerned with the influences from Indo-European religious and poetical motifs on the world of the Hebrew Bible, and in this context I am studying the possibility of influence from the serpent-slaying battles of Indra in the Vedic writings upon the Hebrew and Ugaritic accounts of a similar nature. Indra was once at home in Vedic India, but it is perhaps a somewhat startling and ironic development that his main worship today is centered not in Brahmanic India but in various Buddhist contexts. Indra was adopted in Buddhism under his title Śakra (or Sakka in Pāli), and he is worshiped today as part of both Theravāda and forms of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice. It is the latter that concerns us here: the Mahāyāna version of the deity was involved in a story very similar to the Josiah/Hilkiah one—one very distant indeed from both the Hebrew Bible and Indo-European-speaking India.

I am referring to the tale of the supposed rediscovery of the cult image of Taishakuten, the Japanese Buddhist version of Indra, at the temple Shibamata Taishakuten, on the outskirts of modern Tokyo (a temple also known as Kyōeizan Daikyōji). The temple, which is a stronghold of the

Nichiren school of Japanese Buddhism, possesses a central and in a sense foundational narrative which is, in many ways, quite reminiscent of the one told about Josiah, Hilkiah and their astonishing find in the Jerusalem Temple.

Originally, so the story goes, the temple that is today known as Shibamata Taishakuten (柴又帝釈天) housed an image of Indra/Taishakuten that had supposedly been manufactured by Nichiren, the founder of the sect, himself. However, this important religious object then somehow disappeared, and it was not until a major renovation of the temple was undertaken under the leadership of a certain priest named Nikkyō (日敬) in 1779 CE that the image was rediscovered. The cult object is said to have been adorned with a text, namely the *Daimoku* mantra—the central mantra in the Nichiren school of Buddhism: *Namu Myōhō-renge-kyō* (南無妙法蓮華經), “Hail to the Lotus Sūtra!” Supposedly, Nikkyō later wandered around with the image, using it to help sick people and victims of starvation—i.e., the discovery of the ancient religious artifact resulted in a type of ritual action.²

There are many parts of this story that are remarkably similar to the tale of Josiah and his priest Hilkiah, and I believe that these parallels can help us get another perspective on the points that the Deuteronomist authors wanted to make (and, possibly, on the points that Josiah and Hilkiah wanted to make, assuming that the biblical story has an actual historical background).³ My point is not that the two stories are identical, nor that ancient thinking must always be illustrated by more modern ones (as if modern events were somehow more real than ancient ones), but rather that similar examples from quite different religious and cultural milieux can help us put biblical narratives into perspective, and perhaps a somewhat different one from what exegetes are used to. First, let us look at the parallels between the stories in greater detail.

Both tales of renovation and discovery contain the combining legitimizing functions of place (the temple), time (the supposedly ancient origin of the objects discovered) and original manufacturer

² The story is briefly recounted (in Japanese) in Sugiyama 2004, 46. Another description (in English) can be found in Chaudhuri 2003, 93–94. A (traditional and emic) description of the discovery can be found on the website of the Shibama Taishakuten temple today: <http://www.taishakuten.or.jp/index2.html> (last accessed 27 June 2015).

³ For a recent argument that the descriptions of Josiah’s reformation and the events surrounding it are basically fictional, see Pakkala 2010. Pakkala gives numerous references to earlier literature on the subject, both *pro* and *contra*.

(Nichiren/Moses—the latter presupposing that the classical identification between the Scroll of the Torah and some form of the D text is correct and that this is what the Deuteronomists intended their audience to think of when they spoke of the *seper hattôrâ*). This triad amply illustrates what this type of tale is really trying to do (regardless of its degree of historicity): anchoring the religious authority of the finder in both space and time, the latter being accomplished both through the age of the objects discovered and their supposed origin. Finding a theologically important religious object *in a temple*, an object manufactured *by a religious founder figure*, creates a symbolic connection between the actual “now” situation of the discovery and the mythical past that serves as the mooring post of the religious tradition. That the discoveries are said to have taken place as part of the renovation of temples becomes a central part of the ideological message: when the place that moors the physical and the spiritual worlds together is subjected to physical disruption and renewal, an ancient religious object is found that shows that the “renewal” is actually a return to a more ancient state of things. A possible ideological problem is thereby eliminated. The old is new again.

The similarity between the two accounts shows us that these ways of thinking concerning the finding of important religious artifacts within the precincts of temples are not unique. It also points to one of the clearest functions of such alleged “rediscoveries”—the triad of place, time and person of authority.

One may also note with interest that both discoveries involved religiously authoritative texts in some way or other. In the case of Josiah, the Scroll of the Torah was the discovered object itself. In the Nikkyō case, it was a cult image, but one inscribed with the most central textual entity of Nichiren Buddhism, the *Daimoku* mantra. And in both cases, the respective texts were supposed to derive from the “founder figure” himself. Additionally, the ritualistic carrying around of the rediscovered image has a parallel in the ritual action carried out by Josiah—the celebration of the Passover festival that is described as having been a direct result of the discovery of the Scroll of the Torah (2 Kgs 23:21–23).

The similarity between the tales of Hilkiah’s and Nikkyō’s respective discoveries makes one think of other comparable events or stories as illustrative of what is said to have happened in 622 BCE. One such can be found in the Ancient Near East itself: it does not concern a renovation or a miraculous rediscovery of the sort described in the Josiah and Taishakuten stories; it does, however, involve a similar use of a recovery of a religious

artifact as a legitimizing factor in a religio-political context, and specifically a cult image. I am speaking of the recovery of the statue of Marduk during the reign of Nebukadnessar I of Babylon. The statue had been taken as war-booty from Babylon during an attack by the Elamite invader Kutir-Nahhunte⁴ but was later recovered, which led to a great furor of Babylonian nationalism. It is not uncommon to link the writing of the Babylonian national epic *Enūma eliš* to this event, and if that supposition is true, we find again the combination between the elements “recovery of ancient religious object,” “promulgation of sacred text” and “religio-political legitimization.”⁵ The calamitous disappearance of the Marduk statue into a foreign land was sometimes theologized by Babylonian writers as representing a conscious choice by Marduk, the lord of history, who deliberately left Babylon. The parallel between this type of theologization and the main theme of the Deuteronomistic history is quite apparent. In a way reminiscent of the salvatory proclamations of Deutero-Isaiah, Marduk then decided to return to his longed-for home, Babylon.⁶ This return was, of course, identical with the return of the statue of the god. The reappearance of the object most closely representing the divine presence marks the turning point, and that object was a cult image, both lost and returned.

What the story of Shibamata Taishakuten shows is that these motifs do not necessarily represent a specifically Ancient Near Eastern motif but one that can occur in many different religio-social contexts—although for similar reasons. Anchoring something as seemingly “new” and possibly ideologically problematic as renovating a temple in the very old—say, an ancient divine image or scroll—provides a creative ideological bridge between the modern and the ancient that is very well suited to religious and ideological discourse.

This quest for the “old and pristine in the new” is, of course, especially interesting in the case of Josiah, given the matter of the reform that he supposedly carried out. If something happened around 622 BCE that was at least vaguely similar to the way in which 2 Kings describes the events, then his reform must have represented a truly staggering “cultural revolu-

⁴ See Potts 1999, 188.

⁵ The importance of the events concerning the Marduk statue and the policies of Nebuchadnezzar I as a parallel to the Josiah story has been pointed out in Na’aman 2011, 59.

⁶ The theological interpretations of the Babylonian authors are elucidated in Roberts 1977, and my exposition is based on his.

tion” which must have appeared to be very iconoclastic and as representing a provocative break with age-old religious practices at the *bāmôt*, etc.⁷ To be able to anchor such a radical action in supposedly very ancient traditions derived from Moses himself helps solve this ideological conundrum. In the case of Shibamata Taishakuten, there was no great reform, but the finding of the cult image would probably have provided a link between the old and the new in a similar way.

As noted above, it is especially interesting that the image of Indra/Taishakuten rediscovered by Nikkyō is said to have been inscribed with the *Daimoku* mantra, a textual passage which in itself serves to glorify another *textual* entity—the Lotus Sūtra. The mantra (“Hail to the Lotus Sūtra!”) is, in effect, a form of worship of that piece of Buddhist scripture. Inherent in this fact is the idea that the rediscovery also underscored the religious veneration of a *text* as such.⁸ Compare this with the “textolatry” that lies at the heart of Deuteronomistic theology: the D writing was, after all, the central ideological object of that theological movement.⁹ Also, it is a rather interesting (though probably coincidental) correlation that certain interpretations of Nichiren Buddhism during the 19th and 20th centuries turned wildly nationalistic in a way perhaps reminiscent of the centralizing tendencies of Josiah, providing yet another parallel between the Deuteronomistic movement and the Nichiren one.¹⁰

Nadav Na’aman writes that analogies from other Ancient Near Eastern descriptions of miraculous textual discoveries can serve as “a kind of control for the discussion” concerning the historicity of the Josianic discovery.¹¹ He argues that the existence of similar events in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures suggests that an actual event was further elaborated and turned into a literary structure by using the story of Huldah’s legitimizing activity as a nucleus. This is, of course, a possibility, but the existence of so similar a tale as far away as Japan suggests caution in assuming histo-

⁷ The extreme upheavals that such a reform would entail is, in fact, one of the arguments that makes Juha Pakkala deny the historicity of Josiah’s centralization of the cult (see Pakkala 2010, 207).

⁸ On the *Daimoku* and its central role in Nichiren Buddhism (and later Buddhism), see for example Stone 2003, 197; Williams 2009, 168; McLaughlin 2012, 270.

⁹ This type of point was also made in Weinfeld 1972, 162–63, where it is stated that the “process of canonization of scripture” began in the period of Josiah (p. 163) and that the central role of the “scribal Torah” goes back to that period.

¹⁰ On this (later) development, see, for example, Stone 2003, 200–204.

¹¹ Na’aman 2011, 57.

ricity or a specifically Near Eastern ideological setting for what may, in fact, represent a very broad tendency of anchoring one's religious or ideological ideas in a distant and mythical past. Finding a religious image and a religious text means finding ancient tradition in the present, finding the "old" in the "new." Of course, the existence of this motif does not in itself deny the historicity of Josiah's reform: the general tendency could well have expressed itself in the very circle of the historical Josiah himself. The main question here is not whether or not the discoveries of Josiah/Hilkiah and Nikkyō "actually happened as described" or not, but what ideological role they could play.¹²

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