

Some of the workshop speakers and participants in the garden of Universitätsforum, Bonn.

## **DIVINE AND HUMAN DEPENDENCIES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND THE OLD TESTAMENT**

by Dr. des. Kirsten M. Schäfers/Niklas Wichmann

### **BCDSS WORKSHOP BONN, MAY 13-14, 2022**

In May 2022, the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) hosted the two-day workshop "Divine and Human Dependencies in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament", organized by Prof. Dr. Ulrich Berges and Dr. des. Kirsten M. Schäfers. The aim of the workshop was to explore the various forms of human and divine asymmetrical dependencies in the Ancient Near East (ANE) and the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB) using both textual and material resources, esp. iconographic ones. In order to establish a transdisciplinary perspective on the topic, the workshop brought together scholars from ANE Studies, Egyptology, Iconographic Studies and OT/HB Studies. The program had four focal points of investigation: "Dependency and human relations in the ANE", "Iconographic perspectives on divine and human dependencies", "Specifications of human and divine dependencies in ANE and OT/HB sources", and "Dependency, liberation, and justice in the OT/HB".

**Dr. des. Kirsten M. Schäfers in conversation (in the background: Dr. Sarah Hollaender and David Smith)**

In their introductory address, U. Berges and K.M. Schäfers emphasized the Cluster's ambition to deconstruct the dichotomy of "slavery" vs. "freedom". They cast light on the gradual and dynamic nature of asymmetrical dependency and its constitution in social relationships. Accordingly, they stressed that the challenge lied within being attentive to the in-between spaces on the large range between slavery and freedom and the many forms of asymmetrical dependencies that often occurred in an intersectional way. Against the background of this broader research agenda, they pointed to the importance of analyzing the intermingling of divine and human dependencies in antiquity as these were integrally inscribed into societies.

**Prof. Dr. Ulrich Berges discussing "The difficult relationship of dependency and justice in the Old Testament"**

The first panel focused on dependency and human relations in the ANE. Dr. Vitali Bartash (BCDSS) elaborated on the demography and status of "donated" temple workers in Early Mesopotamia. He located this social group in a state between slavery and freedom and emphasized the special concept of their dependency from humans they worked for and gods they were donated to. Prof. Ludwig Morenz (BCDSS) offered a re-reading of the relations between Egyptian and Canaanites in Middle Bronze Age Sinai by analyzing the origin of the Canaanite alphabetic writing. He showed how the agency of dependent and colonized workers led to the emergence

of cultural development. The guest speakers within the second panel moved to an iconographic perspective on dependency relations in different cultural contexts from the ANE. Their contributions were based on a range of iconographic artefacts such as figures and figurines, sarcophagi and paintings. Here, the focus lied on the pictorial grammar of dependency. The artefacts were analyzed with regard to their depicted roles and gestures, their composition, their historic setting, their ideological function and their relation to social reality and representation. Dr. Thomas Staubli (Fribourg) explored the grammar of strong asymmetrical dependency in Egyptian iconography and its varying and multifaceted impacts on OT traditions and ideology. Dr. Izaak de Hulster (Göttingen) proposed a detailed taxonomy and categories of strong asymmetrical dependencies in iconography distilled from a broad overview of ANE material. Prof. Dr. Katharina Pyschny (Berlin) offered a new typology for a set of woman and child figurines from Persian Period Israel/Palestine. She analyzed the embodied social relations with regard to varying grades of dependency of the depicted children and the idealized female role of caring, while also addressing the unclear human or divine character of these figurines. Dr. Sarah Hollaender (Berlin) complemented the ANE-related results with a Roman Era corpus of Sarcophagi. Her paper stressed that depictions of human wives as the goddess Virtus protecting their husbands as patrons exhibited a complex intermingling of divine-human dependencies that also allowed for a rewriting of wife-husband relationships in terms of interdependency.

**Prof. Dr. Ulrich Berges und Prof. Dr. Jan Dietrich (both BCDSS) in conversation with Dr. Thomas Staubli (Fribourg)**

During the third panel, the (inter-)dependency between humans and gods moved to the center of discussion. Prof. Dr. Jan Dietrich (BCDSS) focused on human dependencies upon gods by presenting a development of the notion of gods being the source of human agency in epic and juridical contexts. Dr. des. Kirsten Schäfers (BCDSS), on the other hand, accentuated the divine part of divine-human relationships of dependency in ANE and HB material. She analyzed how divine needs and divine dependencies upon human beings exert a self-limiting

effect on divine agency. The fourth panel then shifted the spotlight exclusively to the Old Testament. Prof. Dr. Reinhard Achenbach (Münster) argued that a root of a supranational law lied within the prophetic scriptures of the Old Testament thus problematizing the biblical question of a universal ethos deriving from the vision of a Zion-Law community. Prof. Dr. Ulrich Berges (BCDSS) evaluated the discourse of asymmetrical dependencies in the form of slavery in the Old Testament and came to the conclusion that the scripture can rather not be regarded as propelling the abolishment of slavery. While the Old Testament does challenge certain forms of asymmetrical dependencies by advocating for the *personae miserae*, slaves remain a neglected social group.

and situational aspects. Taking up a recent proposal of C. Antweiler (BCDSS), the speakers agreed that it is helpful to differentiate between the terms dependence (singular instances of subjugation, domination, or control) and dependency (overarching, long-term mode of relation or interrelation). From the perspective of methodology, the question arose in how far contemporary scholars almost inevitably read their modern perspectives and beliefs into the textual and material resources at hand thus distorting and misrepresenting their meaning. These concerns were especially addressed with regard to the application of modern notions of freedom and dependency onto the scripture of the Old Testament.

Studying the ANE and the Old Testament is a crucial way to arrive at a profound understanding of how asymmetrical dependencies developed in time and operate until today. It offers possible ways to decenter from modern/post-modern/Eurocentric truth claims about dependency and slavery and can identify certain aspects that are of universal relevance, today as well as 5000 to 2000 years ago. The impulses and insights gained at the conference are important for any future research within the cluster. Here, major tasks would be to "translate" the insights from the sphere of theology or oriental studies into a language that finds its recipients in a secular world of the 21st century.

**PD Dr. Izaak de Hulster (Göttingen, on screen) in conversation with the plenum and Prof. Dr. Christian Frevel (Bochum)**

### THE OUTCOME

The lively and extensive discussions of the subject matters condensed into a set of general insights for future research agendas: With regard to iconographic artefacts, the question of their function needs special attention: Were those artefacts used to exert or deconstruct certain forms of dominance? On the other hand, were they even used as a source of empowerment? Here, the pictorial grammars of dependency are also crucial, esp. with regard to gender and social roles. In all panels, the analysis of textual and material resources highlighted the intersectional ways in which the dependencies occurred. Religious, economic, social, ethnic and gender aspects frequently interfere in social relations, institutions and imperial contexts. At the same time, the interfering of divine/theological and human/practical dependencies is an important focal point that should be approached with special concern for its pragmatics. Further discussions focused on the semantics of certain key terms. How can the notion "strong asymmetrical" be further differentiated? Are there weak asymmetrical dependencies? Again, a more gradual perspective was favored to recognize all different forms of asymmetrical dependencies that might materialize at different times in various degrees, as well as a discrimination of structural

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