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**Book review:**

***Mind, Morality and Magic. Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. I. Czachesz, R. Uro, Durham: Acumen 2013, 320 p.**

The present publication is a part of the BibleWorld Series, along titles such as: L. K. Handy, *Jonah's World: Social Science and the Reading of Prophetic Story* (2008), E. D. Freed, J. F. Roberts, *The Bible Says So!: From Simple Answers to Insightful Understanding* (2009) or T. Romer, P. R. Davies, *Writing the Bible: Scribes, Scribalism and Script* (2013). The series comprising more than 30 books is addressed to a broad section of those interested in the modern academic study of the Bible, though not necessarily biblical scholars themselves. The editors-in-chief of the tome, I. Czachesz and R. Uro are professors of the New Testament who, at a certain moment in their academic careers became interested in cognitive studies. Since then both scholars have applied the methodology of this newly encountered sphere to their own research. The book is therefore a consequence of their and their colleagues' endeavours and presents biblical studies approached from the perspective of the cognitive science of religion. While biblical studies deal with its own specific, culturally and historically anchored subject, the cognitive studies of religion aim at defining the "recurrent patterns in religious thought and behaviour and in cognitive structures that constrain religious phenomena across time and space"<sup>1</sup>. Notwithstanding the attractiveness of such an approach, one has to keep in mind that all the findings can be considered valid only as long as the

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<sup>1</sup> *Mind, Morality and Magic. Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. I. Czachesz, R. Uro, Acumen 2013, p. 2.

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main assumption holds true. In practice, the reader is presented with various, more specific problems such as the search for the cross-cultural cognitive mechanisms standing behind the development of Judaism and Christianity or the “embodied and socially embedded” nature of the human mind. The structure of the book as well as its varied content aptly reflects the condition of the cognitive sciences of religion in general, the latter being marked by a multi-disciplinary approach.

The book is therefore divided into three thematic parts: (1) Memory and the transmission of biblical traditions, (2) Ritual and magic and (3) Altruism, morality and cooperation. The first section introduces the methodological tools typical for the cognitive sciences such as neuropsychology and shows how it adds to the understanding of the existence and transmission of the religious ideas. The second unit revolves around the practical aspect of religion and focuses on the ritual as a special system, alternative to writing, which aims at facilitating the passing of traditions. Finally, the third part concerns the social context of religious transmission. These are preceded by the introduction which lays out the occurrences of the book’s conception, introduces the authors, and provides the reader with a concise summary of modern trends in biblical scholarship.

The general assumption concerning the need for explanatory pluralism in the sphere of biblical studies translates into the structure of the book which groups the chapters according to various methodological perspectives. P. Luomanen (*How Religions Remember: Memory Theories in Biblical Studies and in the Cognitive Studies of Religion*) presents memory as a creative process in which one reconstructs past events and ideas. He also focuses on the contagiousness of particular concepts which translates into their spread and evolutionary success. I. Czachesz’s (*Rethinking Biblical Transmission: Insight from the Cognitive Neuroscience of Memory*) contribution constitutes significant value for newcomers to the cognitive studies. The author reviews the most important neuropsychological experiments and research, explains the basic vocabulary and the principles of memory. He devotes the bulk of the space to an elaboration on the roles of scripts and other cognitive patterns in the transmission of the data and clearly shows that it is easier to adapt the data to the pattern than the other way around. R. Uro (*The Interface of Ritual and Writing in the Transmission of Early Christian Traditions*) challenges the traditional assumptions concerning the “‘original form’, linear growth, and *ipsissima vox*”<sup>2</sup> by transferring the focal point to the social framework of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 64.

memory. The author argues for the central role of the ritual as a tool for constructing memories. As a result, some of the early Christian books do not just contain ritual fragments but actually constitute them themselves. I. Czachesz and A. Lisdorf (*Computer Modeling of Cognitive Processes in Biblical Studies: The Primacy of Urban Christianity as a Test Case*) provide a neat and concise introduction to the application of computers in the study along with pointing out the limitations of this method. The next part of the paper shows how computers along with the findings of epidemiology facilitate the spread of memes in urban and rural areas. G. Levy (*"I Was El Shaddai, But Now I'm Yahweh": God Names and the Informational Dynamics of Biblical Texts*) summarises the most recent findings in the neural processing of names and stresses the special position of the latter as "they tend to strike emotionally relevant chords"<sup>3</sup>. T. Biró (*Is Judaism Boring? On the Lack of Counterintuitive Agents in Jewish Rituals*) examines and flamboyantly explains the definition of the ritual which allows for the provocative question stated in the title of the chapter. J. Jokiranta (*Ritual System in the Qumran Movement: Frequency, Boredom, and Balance*) continues the subject of the preceding part and addresses the hypothetical community of the Qumran settlements. The scholar focuses on rituals such as purifications, sabbaths and study sessions and stresses the problem of the extended intensity of rituals and the danger of the "triviality effect"<sup>4</sup>. R. Uro (*From Corpse Impurity to Relic Veneration: New Light from Cognitive and Psychological Studies*) aptly remarks that the early Christians were obsessed with death and decay and that this very inclination played an important role in differentiating them from the Jews. Moreover, the author cites the works that question the most widely held assumptions concerning the biological dangers evoked by the decomposing corpse. T. Kazen (*Empathy and Ethics: Bodily Emotion as a Basis for Moral Admonition*) bases on the theory of the emotional origins of morality and gathers the evidence that the processes of solving the ethical dilemma involve the same neural structures that are active while experiencing emotions. R. Roitto (*A Socio-Cognitive Perspective on Identity and Behavioral Norms in Ephesians*) analyses the role of the narratives in creating and consolidating the group. According to this author, stories provide the society with the rationale for its existence. J. Bulbulia, Q. Atkinson, R. Gray and S. Greenhill (*Why Do Religious Cultures Evolve Slowly? The Cultural Evolution of Cooperative Calling and the Historical Study of Religions*) furnish some relevant remarks concerning the theory

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

of games in the context of the social exchange whereas C. Shantz (*Emotion, Cognition, and Social Change: A Consideration of Galatians 3:28*) stresses the role of the emotion of disgust in marking social and ritual differences.

To sum up, the topics addressed by the authors revolve around several clusters marked by key-words such as: memory studies, computer modelling, cognitive theories of ritual, social cognition, evolutionary psychology, biology of emotions or religious experience. However, given the broad range of the subjects covered therein, the title of the volume, containing the phrase “Biblical Studies” is in fact misleading – unfortunately for the contents which go far beyond the defined sphere and cover such problems as the socio-history of early Christianity and Judaism, the findings of epidemiology which prove extremely useful in the interpretation of the spread of particular religious ideas or the science of evolution which helps to explain the “reproductive success” of certain concepts. While this might be a nice surprise for some readers, all those interested in particular topics covered by the book might simply miss it on the bookshelves. In addition, there are some minor editorial errors most probably resulting from neglected revision: repetitions (“instead” on p. 98), inappropriate language register (p. 99, where the author suggests that the biblical scholars should be “less uptight”) or mistakes triggered by the alternate use of RTL and LTR text (p. 116 containing table 7.2 with confused examples of digital and hybrid numerals). Yet, apart from these mistakes and slightly mismatched title the editorial side of the book leaves no reservations.

The editors explicitly define the purpose of their work: “our foremost goal is to convince the reader of the importance, validity, and necessity of asking the kinds of questions we are asking, which is even more important than persuading the reader of the truth of the particular answers to those questions offered by the contributors to this volume”<sup>5</sup>. In sum then, whatever the drawbacks, the main purpose has definitely been executed. In fact, whatever the specialisation of the reader there are at least several important lessons to take away. First, every name is meaningful. The importance of the biblical onomastics has been acknowledged not only by the Talmudic rabbis but by scholars as well, yet the findings delivered by the neurosciences provide additional significance. Secondly, the book presents the concept of minimal counter-intuitiveness opposed to boredom as an extremely important factor in consolidating the memory trace and *per extenso* – in transmitting it throughout the generations. As one of the authors puts it: “minimally violated ontologies are attention-grabbing and, consequently, highly memorable and readily trans-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

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mittable while being, at the same time, ordinary enough to be easily accepted and readily understood”<sup>6</sup>. This quality finds its manifestation in the unusual stories which can therefore be treated as a technique to amplify the memory trace. Thirdly, given the fact that the biblical scholar’s workshop has contained the methods such as textual and philological analysis, archeology and anthropology – the cognitive sciences might prove to be an extremely useful tool as well, thus enriching the biblical scholars potential.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 21.