

“THE LYING PEN OF THE SCRIBES”: OF HOLY BOOKS AND PIOUS FRAUDS

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“Fraud” is not a term commonly used in religious studies. It does not appear in The Encyclopedia of Religion (Eliade 1987); it is absent from Critical Terms for Religious Studies (Taylor 1998); it cannot be found even among the 3,200 articles in The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (Smith 1995). The absence of “fraud” from the disciplinary lexica is more than a little curious, especially since “fraud” is very much a part of religion’s vocabulary, and, from a cynical view of religion’s history, “fraud” might very well be regarded as the modus operandi religiosus. How is it that, within the history of religion, “fraud” can be an instrument of legitimation under one set of circumstances and an altogether illegitimate act under another? The article engages this question through an analysis and redescription of the phenomenon of the “holy book” in Mediterranean antiquity.

One is never simpleminded enough about the condemnation of forgeries. Pious frauds are frauds, for which one must show no piety—and no pity. (Momigliano 1987: 7)

This just in ...

Tomorrow on the *Fox News Channel* you hear the following story: Unnamed sources reveal that President George W. Bush will announce today that Chief Justice William Rehnquist has just made an astonishing discovery. In an unused storage closet of the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C., Justice Rehnquist has found a previously unknown document that purports to be the lost second page of the Constitution of the United States. The signatures of Madison, Hamilton, and the other members of the Constitutional Convention affixed to the document have reportedly been authenticated by Joseph Ellis, a well-known scholar of early American history and, coincidentally, a relative of Karl Rove, White House chief adviser. The same sources are reporting that the newly restored Constitution stipulates that the United States is a Christian nation, mandates prayer in public schools, prohibits a woman’s right to an

abortion, and states unequivocally that lying under oath rises to the level of an impeachable offense. Other passages reportedly contain language outlawing the Democratic party, virtually guaranteeing Mr. Bush another term in office. The same sources are also reporting what may be the most astonishing discovery of all. It appears that the Founding Fathers decided that only descendants of one Thaddeus Reinquist, a rural Pennsylvania turnip farmer and slave holder who died in 1794, are qualified to be Supreme Court justices. By another remarkable coincidence, Chief Justice Reinquist and Justice Clarence Thomas are both direct descendants. The other justices will be asked to submit their resignations by noon tomorrow.

Would you believe a single word of this report if you heard it? Before you answer that question, consider the following *biblical* account from 2 Kings 22-23.

“I have found the Book of the Law in the House of Yahweh”

Near the end of the seventh century B.C.E., a young prince named Josiah, just eight years old but allegedly a direct descendant of King David, ascended to the throne of Judah after his father’s assassination. During a renovation of the temple in the eighteenth year of his reign (621 B.C.E.), a document was discovered that provided the authorization for a sweeping religious and political reformation of the little temple-state of Judah. Called the “Book of the Law” (*sepher hattôrâ*), it had been entirely forgotten prior to its discovery by Hilkiah the chief priest, and it revealed—shockingly—that the traditional practices of the cult of Yahweh, the local god of Jerusalem, had been wrong. After the book’s authenticity was established by a court prophet, Josiah set about correcting these wrongs in obedience to the stipulations contained in the book. As part of this *risorgimento*, Josiah ordered a thorough “purification” of the cult, abolishing from the temple and throughout his little kingdom all deviant forms of religion. The purge even extended northward into parts of the old Northern Kingdom—“Israel”—for the book also seems to have sanctioned territorial conquest and even the “cleansing” of the territory’s inhabitants. Under Josiah’s direction, the reformers declared the now purified temple as the only legitimate religious institution and Yahweh of Jerusalem the only deity whose worship would be permitted. After centuries of wrongdoing, a righteous king had finally arisen