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Preservation and Innovation: The Tracks of the Master Scribe

When we encounter a text, whether ancient or modern, we typically start at the beginning and work our way toward the end. For biblical and Mesopotamian literature, however, this habit can lead to misinterpretation. In the ancient Near East, “master scribes”—those who held the authority to produce and revise texts—regularly introduced changes in the course of transmission.

One of the most effective techniques in the scribal toolbox was what Sara Milstein calls “revision through introduction,” a method that allowed scribes to preserve received material while simultaneously recasting it. Because we are inclined to use stored knowledge to generate predictions about fresh encounters, readers of these texts have historically interpreted them through the lens of their new introductions. First impressions carry weight. Milstein demonstrates what is to be gained when we disentangle the competing voices in a given work, a process that allows us to perceive the text afresh at all stages in its development.

