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### **Imprisonment as Historical Process: Examples from Ancient Mesopotamia**

#### Abstract:

In 2008, Joseph C. Miller published the chapter, "Slaving as historical process: examples from the ancient Mediterranean and the modern Atlantic." Miller desired to understand the historical process of slaving and "how and why certain people recurrently resorted to this strategy from time to time and in place after place throughout human history." For Miller, the so-called historical problem of slaving entailed understanding the enslavers and those who were enslaved, as well as the related contexts and goals in which slaving occurred. In the process, Miller criticized the famous definitional approach of Orlando Patterson, who described slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons." For Miller, this approach reduced slaves to making an historical difference only "in rebellion, preferably violent, mass revolt, that is no longer as 'slaves' but rather in asserting themselves outside their would-be masters' assumed control." Miller states, "Historians instead might better identify and appropriate for their analytical purposes the vitality that slaves, ineluctably human beings, possessed." By so doing, Miller was considering not only the identity of slaves as defined strictly by their relationship to their masters, but also the humanity of enslaved persons who formed social relationships and possessed identities as human beings.

Drawing inspiration from Miller's approach, this lecture will consider imprisonment as an historical process with a particular focus on ancient Mesopotamia. Questions such as who imprisoned, to what end, and in what contexts will be asked to understand the historical process of imprisoning. Like slaving, imprisonment took a variety of forms and was recurrent throughout human history. This lecture will seek to elucidate the earliest historical records relating to imprisoning to understand the forms and functions of early imprisonment and to argue for the importance of considering personhood in the study of prisons and prisoners.

#### Bio:

J. Nicholas Reid (DPhil Oxon) is the author of *Prisons in Ancient Mesopotamia: Confinement and Control until the First Fall of Babylon* (Oxford University Press). He is Professor of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Director of the Hybrid MDiv Program at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando. Nicholas is also a research affiliate at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University. His research involves publishing cuneiform texts in various collections around the world, as well as writing on topics of social history, such as slavery, prisons, and labor in ancient Mesopotamia. He is the author of numerous articles in leading journals, including *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, *International Review of Social History*, *Revue d'Assyriologie* and *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete*. Nicholas also coauthored a monograph on *Old Babylonian Letters from Ancient Kish*, which will be published later this year in the historic series *Oxford Edition of Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford University Press).