The Old Testament as Political Fiction?

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Abstract

The evidence for assuming that Old Testament 'history' gives a picture of real people and real events should be treated with extreme caution. The process of writing and re-editing ('redaction') is complex with each layer meeting contemporary socio-political needs.

Introduction.

In this talk, I am focusing on aspects of Old Testament narrative which, though presented as fact, actually seem to serve some other purpose. There is a gulf between the time of writing (and reading/listening to the material) and the times that are being described. This gives us a number of questions, such as whether the writers intended to write history, or rather a justification of a contemporary claim (that is, political theology); also whether the audiences involved were knowledgeable enough to be able to check details, or simply accepted the account of the past they were being given. My contention is that we first have to examine biblical books as works of their writers, who had their own motives and purposes, before we make claims of historical accuracy where no supporting evidence exists.

My starting point is the unlikely assumption that tribes were founded by an ancestor of the same name (i.e. an *eponym*). Stories about this founding family were felt to be significant to the writer and necessary evidence for something as yet undisclosed. The only factual historical evidence we have is *that the books were written*, but questions like *when, why* and *by whom* are less clear. The contents are the artefacts of the writers. We need to view the writings generally as theologically and politically useful constructions of the people telling and those hearing or reading the stories. Although this is not to deny that there may have been sources, perhaps even accurate ones, this cannot be assumed as inevitable: my line of argument requires far more scepticism about the historicity of events than was the case 50 years ago. There are those who still maintain that stories are essentially 'true' historically ('maximalists', usually conservative religious Jews or Christians) but since the 1970s the

scholarly consensus has begun to shift the other way, denying ancient historicity ('minimalists'). My own edited book of 1989, *Creating the Old Testament*, took a minimalist standpoint with contributions by 15 members of the Society for Old Testament Study. There are many very recent examples, for example Earnest Nicholson's study of the exilic background of Deuteronomy (in Aitken, Dell and Mastin, 2011).

Uncertainty About the Date of Old Testament Books.

The Old Testament exists through Hebrew manuscripts, and translations into Greek (the Septuagint) and much later Latin. Dates of the original manuscripts (the 'autographs') are uncertain. The standard Hebrew Bible is based on a manuscript from 1008CE (Common Era, the modern way of saying AD) – the Codex Leningradensis. The earlier (10th century CE) Aleppo Codex survived until 1947 (the synagogue where it was kept was burned down, and half of the manuscript was lost, including the Pentateuch). It has not been easily available to scholars. Its sister manuscript the Damascus Keter fills in some gaps, including the Pentateuch. In an age when manuscripts were manually copied, this situation is not unusual – Plato's *Dialogues* only survive through the 'Clarke Plato' dated 895CE, and no one seriously claims that puts his existence in doubt (Hunt, 1975; Bodleian, online). Biblical manuscripts tend to be much earlier than those of classical Greek and Latin texts, some of which would have been entirely lost had they not been translated into Arabic. There are earlier fragmentary manuscripts, notably from the Dead Sea Scrolls (Isaiah and Psalms especially), some dating to BCE (Before Common Era, the current abbreviation for BC) years (see further Lange, on the Pentateuch's final dating in 1st century BCE, in Aitken, Dell and Mastin 2011). Lnage makes the point that there is a fine line between redaction (gradual editing) and scribal corruption, that is that the text was for a long time fluid. These earlier fragments verify that the biblical books existed at an early date, but their text has substantial differences. Scholars use these to work out the most likely original text. The earliest Bible translations are found in 4th century CE codexes, for example Codex Sinaiticus of the Bible in Greek, though again there are earlier fragments.

The Hebrew text was originally consonants only, but a tradition of how it was to be read was studiously followed by the Masoretes, who included vowels through a series of dots and dashes ('diacritical marks'). The standard text we have is difficult and corrupt in places: sometimes traditions about what should be read (Qere) as opposed to what was written (Kethib) are included as marginal notes. The most famous case is where the Kethib reads

YHWH (the unspeakable divine name) and the Qere reads Adonai (The Lord): by putting the vowels of Adonai on to the consonants YHWH the form Jehovah is formed: academic writers assume the correct pronunciation to be Yahweh, as that spelling is found in Greek translations.

The Hebrew text was jealously preserved by the Pharisees/Rabbis; however the establishment of the Greek empire made the Greek Septuagint more commonly used throughout the empire (the Romans did not change this for centuries). There were extra books which the Rabbis did not accept, which today are collected into the Apocrypha. They tended to be later books, except for Daniel which though very late, pretended to be earlier. The Apocrypha has extra Daniel stories.

Precisely when any OT book was written is unknown. We have to work it out from internal clues; and in this process, scholars rarely agree. There is a greater emphasis now in examining the 'final text' (the version we have) as a work with mission and purpose – that is, trying to influence society, religion and politics. The previous emphasis of OT scholars was on sources. The work of the following has been significant to my argument:

> Robert Alter (Professor of Hebrew Literature): *The Art of the Biblical Narrative* and editor (with Frank Kermode on the New Testament) of *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. This emphasised the artistic construction of narrative.
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> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger; Jacob's Tears*; *In the Wilderness* etc. She approached the texts as an anthropologist would her target culture.
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> Frank Kermode's parallel book *The Genesis of Secrecy: the interpretation of narrative* is well worth reading.

My own edited book *Creating the Old Testament* (1989) read the whole Old Testament sceptically through final text analysis.

Genesis, Tribal Genealogies and Ancestor Revulsion

We don't know who wrote Genesis, so we have to look for internal clues. The creation story (Genesis 1) starts, the heavens and earth were without form and void (tohu webohu), with darkness over the face of the deep (tehom). Tehom is related to the Babylonian Tiamat, the chaos sea monster from whom the God Marduk created the world, cleaving the body in two, the top being the sky and the bottom being the land and sea. In Genesis, God creates sea monsters (itself a strange sentence) and brings form to the formless. By demythologising, the

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writer expresses the victory of the Hebrew God against the Babylonian and creates theology rather than myth.

The genealogies divide the Hebrews into tribes which have eponymous (same name) ancestors, twelve brothers in the same family. Within this the status is carefully drawn. Of Jacob's wives and slave wives, only Rachel is called 'wife' in the genealogy of Genesis 46, the others said only to have 'born him children'. Her sons, Joseph and Benjamin, therefore have a special interest to the writer, brought out further in the Joseph story. Leah's sons all disgrace themselves in various ways – Simeon and Levi by slaughtering the inhabitants of Shechem; Reuben the firstborn by sleeping with Bilhah (an attempted coup d'etat); Judah first by involvement in selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites/Midianites, and second by his refusal to honour his levirate marriage responsibilities (i.e. marrying Tamar widow of his oldest son to his youngest son). The 'blessings of Jacob' in Gen. 49 emphasise these, except that the Judah blessing is textually corrupt. Joseph was represented in tribal lists through his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, even once by his grandson Machir. The Genesis writer favoured these tribes over the others, including Judah who was later to lend his name to the Judahites/Judaeans.

Linked with the detailed genealogies for each tribe, produced obsessively in later writers such as Chronicles, this is part of the push towards legitimacy and status. If you could align your own family tree with a tribal family, this declared that you are not foreign. Around about the year 400BCE Ezra instructed the people, during a national ceremony of penitence, to divorce their foreign wives (Ezra 9). Chronicles collected all available genealogies, but that need not mean that their sources were ancient.

The genealogies also appear in previous patriarchal generations. Abraham had a son, Ishmael by Hagar his wife's Egyptian slave. Mother and baby were thrown out by a jealous Sarah, but survived and Abraham included Ishmael in his covenant of circumcision. He was forefather of the Arab nations. After Sarah's death, Abraham married Keturah and had sons, one of them Midian, ancestor of the Midianites. According to Exodus, Yahwism was borrowed from the Midianites). Jacob (later renamed 'Israel') had a twin brother Esau whose family tree shows his ancestor of the Edomites. Abraham's nephew Lot, of Sodom and Gomorrah fame, fathered sons to his two daughters, who became ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites.

Clearly this is a soap-opera version of tribal origins and inter-relationships which emphases the relatedness of a wide range of semitic peoples.

This is part of something quite interesting. Sarah, Abraham's wife, pretends to be Abraham's brother and marries Pharaoh (Gen. 12). The same thing happens with Abimelech, Gen 20, and Rebecca repeats the trick in Gen. 26. This brought curses and consequences, but shows the Patriarchs in a poor light, with little regard for legitimacy of bloodline. The story of the chosen people is one of trickery (Jacob), reneging of responsibilities (Abraham and Hagar, Judah and Tamar), genocide (Simeon and Levi slaughtering Shechem) and attempted fratricide (the fate of Joseph). Join this to Cain murdering Abel his brother, and other ancestral sins (Adam and Eve, Noah's generation, Noah's drunkenness and the consequent curse on Canaan, the tower of Babel representing pride, Hebrew ancestors are nothing to be proud of. Also they were 'sojourners', that is, strangers in Israel/Palestine, but with roots in Haran, in the Damascus area: they were constantly worried of hostility by the local people, so there is no argument here for their right to the land. Mary Douglas may be right in claiming that the writer(s) wished to counteract ancestor worship, which as an anthropologist she saw everywhere else all over the world. The covenant was not granted for merit.

Kenites, Midianites and the religion of Yahweh

Joseph Benkinsopp has recently surveyed discussions from Exodus of the role of Jethro/Reuel in the establishment of the religion of Yahweh. Moses fled into the wilderness and married Zipporah Jethro's daughter. The revelation to Moses at the burning bush comes at this time. Later after the exodus Jethro returned to teach the people and lead worship (Exodus 18).Our question is, why has this characteristic Hebrew style of aniconic religion (i.e without images) been attributed to the Midianites? Let us track the story back. Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt to Ishmaelites who are also called Midianites (much as Jacob is also called Israel). The two peoples are distinct with different mothers in the genealogy. Midianites are shown as guiding divine history. They bring Joseph to where he needs to be; they teach Moses what he needs to know. They are from the wider tribe/people called Kenites, whose ultimate ancestor (despite English spellings) was Cain, who killed Abel. Cain, in the story in Genesis 4, brought farming produce to Yahweh for sacrifice; Abel brought a lamb, which was found more acceptable. Lambs were favoured by the Levitical law (i.e. of the Levites) described in Leviticus and Numbers. Cain was banished to a wandering existence in the land of Nod, the desert areas. He was given a mark (a tattoo? scarification scar?) so that

he would not be killed as a vagrant. It is thus declared that he was not a nomad or enemy. He built a city (Gen 4.17). His descendents included herdsmen who live in tents, and played harp and pipe; and another branch who were metal-workers.

Adam's family tree is continued through Seth the new son and not through Cain, and that line leads to Noah and Abraham. Worshipping Yahweh is said to have begun in Seth's lifetime (Gen 4.26). The story till Moses suggests therefore that it had been forgotten. Like the founding of Rome, Tyre and Sidon, a city results from a fight between brothers – Blenkinsopp is wary of a hard-link but comfortable with a softer one, lest it suggest the Cain story to be late. But which city? It was east of Eden, which is not a great help. Against Blenkinsopp, we should not be too quick to assume and early source to the story.

The Pilegesh (concubine) problem.

Pilegesh, concubine, is not a word from a Semitic language, but is either Greek of a related Indo-European word. Although Greek merchants did land at the seaports, their broader influence was slight on the Hebrews. This rare Greek loanword is therefore significant. Rabin (1974), who completed a full manuscript study in 1974, concluded that it has the Indo-European derivation 'sleep with', like the word 'concubine' itself. The Greek form is *pallakis*, the usual translation of *pilegesh* in the Septuagint. Rabin, in order to retain an early date, makes the unevidenced suggestion that it came from the Philistines (possibly originally seafarers from the Greek islands) whose early language we know nothing about, but know that their god Dagon has a semitic name). If we accept that the word is Greek, we need to look for reasons why the term was used, to deduce a possible date. The ascendency of the Greek Empire came in 330BCE, which gives us a benchmark.

In our Genesis story, Hagar and Keturah are unexpectedly called pilegesh, and their children given no inheritance (sent away with presents, Gen. 25). Bilhah, after Rachel's death, is called pilegesh, so when Reuben sleeps with her, it is not adultery (Absalom did the same with King David's concubines). Gideon had a pilegesh who was mother of Abimelech, pretender to the throne, who is thus declared illegitimate. A Levite had a pilegesh who was raped and killed by Benjaminites, which led to a major war (Judges 19-21). Had she been a wife, it would have been adultery. King David had ten concubines (2 Sam 15.16) alongside his wives. These were exploited by Absalom his son in a coup d'etat. Solomon had a vast harem of concubines (300, I Kings 11.30) in an account which mimicked the Persian court;

his son Rehoboam is said to have had 60 (2 Chron 11.21). The formula of wives and concubines is not used of later kings (their mother is named instead). *There is a pattern. Pilegesh is a device to declare or deny status in some cases, and avoid adultery or incest implications in others.* The word's Greek origin suggests it is part of the latest editorial layer, 300BCE or even later.

Summing up,

Evidence for particular historical periods is best found in archaeology, being very cautious about linking this to biblical narrative whose date we are unsure about. Paula McNutt's *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* clarifies the social organisation implied by the sources century by century. Before that, many writers have tested the evidence and found old assumptions wanting – Hayes and Miller's *Israelite and Judaean History* (1977) and Lemche's *Ancient Israel* (1988), for example. We have to bear in mind that sometimes archaeologists themselves have had an agenda and make identifications too quickly, 'finding' what they are looking for – King Solomon's stables, or David's Zion. There is a rapid move currently to research the interests and motivations of the writers and their period, not instead of studying the sources, but as a way of understanding the whole first before dissecting the books.

In this paper I have been exploring how history writing had a political purpose. Clarifying this is not simple, and different points of view are represented. Genesis establishes a tribal set of relationships, but condemns most of the ancestors as unsatisfactory. Judges continues the chaos. Only the first 'judge' had spiritual motives, and it was downhill from these, through to the end of the monarchy. Judges finishes with a diatribe against the Benjaminites, followed by a negative assessment in I Samuel of Saul the Benjaminite, the first king. The story of King David in II Samuel is mainly a salacious tale about his immoral sex life. Of the monarchs who followed Solomon (who receives a positive assessment) the remainder are mainly mad and bad, even the good ones (Hezekiah and Josiah) ending up in trouble. There may be some justification for seeing this as having been put together by pro-Babylonian or pro-Persian writers wishing to kill the hope of a renewed monarchy. We might be curious also why the 'writing prophets' (Amos, Hosea, Micah etc) do not feature in the chronology of Samuel and Kings.

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We need next, and outside this essay, to account for religious and political life between 600BCE and 400BCE, after the Babylonian and Persian domination. This is the province of the books Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. This was the period that the Hebrew Bible as we know it came into being and entered into a slow process of canonisation (i.e. becoming regarded as scripture). The period of Judahite protectionism (against other groups such as the Samaritans, the residue of the Joseph tribes) had an exclusive period which may be the real beginnings of the Jewish people.

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