

Why the Bible Began 5

- Issues to Expand Upon from the last class:

1) Did the scribes themselves believe in the National Narrative? As the scribes worked on revising the Tanach over several centuries, and had themselves received stories and texts from previous generations, **there was material that they may very well have been raised believing**, even as they provided additional material and variations from other sources.

2) Are there similarities between Dante's Divine Comedy and the Tanach (the Jewish Bible)? Unlike the Tanach, which does not focus on the Afterlife, the Divine Comedy focuses on it, also, unlike the Tanach, Dante's Divine Comedy is the work of ONE man, who is NOT anonymous, written in the first person, and refers to Classical characters mythological and historical [Ulysses and Vergil], to the New Testament as well as to Thomas Aquinas' interpretations of the Bible. Furthermore, Erich Auerbach in his great book of literary criticism "Mimesis" recognizes Dante [b. 1265] as an early realist considers this work as by the first Western author of note to portray realistically actual historical people and near contemporaries [such as the lovers Paolo and Francesca di Rimini] in his story. Nevertheless, concern with ethical practice, and the importance of love or its absence & the developments of a sense of national identity, [Dante being a source for the origins of the modern Italian language, from his Florentine dialect], as well as his writing large parts of the magnum opus from a position of exile, are points of connection with themes in the Tanach.

3) When did b'rit milah (circumcision) and kashrut (including dietary laws such as forbidding food from a pig, etc.) become instituted in Judaism?

Circumcision of adolescent boys as a right of passage, is attested to in Egyptian relief sculptures predating any evidence of the existence of Ancient Israel. Abraham is attested in the Torah to be the first of his people to circumcise his son Isaac, as a sign of the covenantal relationship between God and his family [clan, people]. However, Wright points out that **the People's Narrative, including the story of Israel's early ancestors, starting with Abraham, became included in the edited text that became the Tanach (at least as part of the Biblical National Narrative), considerably AFTER the story of King David, etc.)... Once this became part of the sacred text of the Tanach [sacred because it was said to be God's word], only circumcised males could take part in the Pascal (Passover) sacrifice (Exodus 12:44,48).**

- **The Book of Tobit [from 2nd or 3rd c. BCE, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and included in the Apocrypha, a post-Biblical Collection] states that the dietary laws were specifically designed to set the children of Israel apart from their neighbors: "All my brethren, and those that were of my kindred, did eat of the bread of gentiles, but I kept myself from eating of the bread of the gentiles (Tobit 1:10-11).**
- **Many peoples in the Levant ate animals forbidden by the laws of kashrut—dogs, pigs, horses, shellfish, etc. One way of keeping Jews from mixing and assimilating is their not being allowed to partake of commonly eaten foods of other people.**

Part III, A New Narrative

- “The National Narrative, which stretches from the creation of the world in Genesis to the destruction of Jerusalem in the book of Kings, reflects how generations of scribes, from both North and South, asked and answered [such] fundamental questions as ‘who are we?’...***The communities that inhabited Judah after its conquest could have easily forgotten the past and started all over again. Yet, instead of recreating themselves ex nihilo, they understood their work as rebuilding the ruins—similar to the creation ex profundis in Genesis I***
- ...The nation first had to take possession of the Promised Land, and then lose it, and finally return to it and attempt to build a new society under very different circumstances, before the words of [the] Torah could come to life. Without loss, there is little learning....[237-238]

Jeremiah and Baruch: A monument to defeat

- “...Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah’s dictation...And many similar words were added to them.’ (Jeremiah 30:4, 32) [239]
- “The National Narrative differs from monarchic inscriptions [such as the Moabite Mesha stele] on three important points: 1)...”***It’s lengthy and composite character—which already says much about its purpose [inclusivity]—required a lighter medium [than stone]. Produced and reproduced in parchment or papyrus, this work was not only much more portable but also easier to edit, expand, and duplicate....2)...The National Narrative is not narrated in the first person, and the one doing the narration is not a king. Instead, it portrays a people’s past in the third person, and from the perspective of an anonymous narrator—the vox populi [voice of the people]...is...in some ways, also the vox dei—the voice of Yhwh reminding his people of their story. It is also polyphonic inasmuch as it has been heavily edited and expanded to incorporate contrasting, and often conflicting, perspectives...3) ...Rather than culminating in a great victory [where the Mesha stele concludes], it proceeds to recount the nation’s political decline and ultimate demise...***The wider National Narrative begins with the people’s liberation from Egypt and miraculous conquest of the Promised Land; these inaugural triumphs render the culminating exile from the land all the more tragic...This grand saga functioned as a kind of ‘survival guide’ for communities struggling to make it in a brave new world.” [246-247]
- “The narrative sequence and literary division [biblical divisions--first the Torah than Prophets, containing Samuel and Kings] affirm a larger point: Israel constitutes a people not limited to its historical territory and longstanding monarchies, and it can survive without its temple and armies...***[It] painstakingly illustrates, for the first time in history, a cardinal categorical distinction that we take for granted today: the nation and the state are two separate entities, with the nation being greater than the state that governs it.*** The state has a responsibility to serve and protect the people; it is not an end to itself and hence must not be hallowed...By virtue of a covenant with their God, Israel had become a people long before it established a kingdom, a nation long before a state...The biblical authors wanted their readers to understand that, with the help of their narrative and the divine laws embedded in it, a vanquished and exiled population can unite and flourish as a nation even when imperial domination prohibited the reestablishment of the sovereign state and political independence that their narrative ascribes to the reigns of David and Solomon. ***The survival and bolstering of a national identity after defeat is, according to their penetrating political analysis, the presupposition for a return to the land and the reestablishment of territorial sovereignty*** [albeit a different from independent kingdoms].” [246-249]

The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were necessary but not sufficient conditions for the Bible to come into existence

- “The most important factor was a very different one: collapse, rupture, and the loss of much that the states of Israel and Judah had achieved over the centuries...As scribes were piecing together the National Narrative, the communities of Judah and Samaria were busy rebuilding their ruins and reestablishing their collective lives...When the state loses sight of [its supporting role], it swallows up the nation so that nothing remains when it is conquered. **And a basic truth documented both in this history and in the equally complex works of prophecy is that all kingdoms end up either being conquered or collapsing under their own weight. An independent state may be the ideal.**
- ***But in a world dominated by superpowers, native sovereignty is not a given...What unites...[the] biblical corpus as a whole, is [the] quest for an alternative to statehood—a Plan B...—the constitution for a new form of political community that could persist through the repeated rise and fall of kingdoms.*** Even though there is no Hollywood happy ending to the National Narrative, there is still hope...[The scribes of the National Narrative] called exiled and dispersed communities back to their homeland where they could finally reinvent themselves as the new nation imagined in the Pentateuch...”[250-251]

Isaac and Rebekah: The Family Story; analyzing the text

- Wright in Chapter 16 of “Why the Bible Began” gives an example of textual analysis of Genesis, Chapter 26: 1-34, illustrating how texts evolve by identifying additions to the core story from various sources and scribal efforts to harmonize competing versions. **The core story concerns Isaac’s residence as an alien in Gerar, ruled by King Abimelech, and his eventual peace treaty with the king after he moves to Beer-sheva.** Though the isolation of various parts of the narrative, we observe how the scribes made disparate legends of various characters into a story of the founding family of the people of Israel.
- [the following is taken from Wright, pp. 260-263, as an illustration of a general pattern in Genesis, where initially unconnected figures are woven into family relationship by the scribes].
- “...A number of scholars locate the oldest portions of Genesis in legends of Jacob’s life. These legends feature his wives and children (representing the later tribes of Israel) yet do not know about his relationship to Abraham, Isaac, and Esau; it was only at a later point that scribes began to connect these ancestral figures. **What seem to be the earliest stories of Esau present him as Isaac’s heir yet not as Abraham’s grandson or Jacob’s twin brother.**
- **Similarly, the oldest Abraham stories appear to have grown out of an earlier account related to a figure named Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah, and these stories portray the patriarch not as the father of the nation but as a wealthy sheikh like Isaac....**The authors who created what I call the Family story in Genesis did not opt for one [story] over the other. Instead, they included both, transforming rival figures [like Isaac and Jacob] into father and son and aligning their stories into a continuous narrative.”
- **“In our account we thus study how scribes constructed a narrative of the nation’s origins not only via genealogical relationships but also through an unfolding relationship with the national deity...Elsewhere Isaac’s servants dig the wells; here [in Genesis 26: 22] he [Isaac] alone also explains the name [of the well, Rehoboth], declaring the fulfillment of the promise: ‘Now Yhwh has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.’ The addition of this [late supplement] verse provides a basis for [King] Abimelech’s later statement: ‘We see plainly that Yhwh has been with you.’”**

The goals of revising the elements of the Isaac narrative

- “...The account stakes a historical-legal claim to land...The account ‘reminds’ Isaac’s descendants that they have a longstanding claim to this border town [Beer-sheva], and that its important well started producing water on the same day their ancestor ratified a treaty with the lord of the land [King Abimelech]. ***What was once a purely political parable is now a chapter in an evolving relationship between Yhwh and his people...***The divine promise in the new improved versions [the supplements to the Ur-text] preempts the pact: the descendants of Isaac have not only a historical-legal claim but also a divine entitlement. ***And the territory to which they are entitled is no longer solely Beer-sheva but ‘all these lands.’*** [264-265]
- Instead of discrete sources (or documents) that a single compiler wove together at a late stage, our [text] illustrates ***two basic ways biblical authors integrated and reworked their materials . The first way is rewriting: they created alternative versions that undermine or subvert an older account. And the second way is supplementing: they expanded an older account with lines that connect and harmonize it with the alternative versions...***”[264-265]

Moses and Joshua: The People's History

- In the same way that the scribes produced new texts by reinterpreting older ones about biblical characters, The story of Moses early childhood appears to borrow from the founding motif found in the **Legend of Sargon the Great** from the Ashurbanipal Library: ***“She [my mother] set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river which rose not (over) me, The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water, Akki, the drawer of water lifted me out as he dipped his ewer, Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me...”*** [translation from Pritchard, (ed.), The Ancient Near East, Vol. 1, pp. 85-86.[272]

- Picture source: Wikipedia. The so-called "**Mask of Sargon**", after restoration, in 1936. The braided hair and royal bun, reminiscent of the headgears of [Meskalamdug](#), [Eannatum](#) or [Ishqi-Mari](#), are particularly visible. On stylistic grounds, this is now thought to represent Sargon's grandson [Naram-Sin](#), rather than Sargon himself. **Sargon the Great**, was ***the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire, known for his conquests of the Sumerian city-states in the 24th to 23rd centuries BCE. He is sometimes identified as the first person in recorded history to rule over an empire.***



The order of scribal composition

- ***“The story of Moses and the burning bush [as well as his earlier birth at a time of genocidal activity against the Hebrew slaves, and his flight after killing the Egyptian taskmaster] introduces the Exodus-Conquest Account...which Northern scribes likely composed in the years following the conquest of the kingdom of Israel, [and which]...depicts the nation fleeing Egypt and conquering Canaan under the leadership of Moses and Joshua...That this account originated among Northern scribes is clear from its depiction of the nation circumventing Judah and entering the Promised Land from the eastern side of Jordan, at the border town of Jericho.***
- ***When reconciling the rival accounts, the authors of the People’s History [post Exile] made numerous additions to their contents. For example, in the scene of the burning bush, Yhwh introduces himself to Moses for the first time as ‘the God of your father.’ A later author added an explicit connection to the Family Story in Genesis by adding to Yhwh’s self-description an explicit reference to the patriarchs: ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ [Exodus 3:6]***
- ***The Family Story in Genesis provides a competing account of the nation’s origins. It too likely began as a work written by scribes from the Northern kingdom. But in comparison with the Exodus-Conquest Account, it imagines a more gradual genealogical evolution, beginning with a population that already lives in the Promised Land... It’s primary purpose was to show how Israel’s diverse population (eventually including Judah and the South) are all descendants of one big family... Later, scribes working in the kingdom of Judah adopted the Family Story and made it their own...In the process Jacob became the twin brother of Esau, ancestor of the Edomites that encroached on Judah’s ancestral territories in the last years of the kingdom. In the final stage, **Southern scribes rounded out their work with the figure of Abraham. The oldest texts locate him as a sheikh living near Hebron, the first capital of the Southern kingdom, while later texts link him to the originally independent figure of Lot, and make him the father of Ishmael and Isaac. As such, he serves as a unifying figure for a larger nation comprising both North and South, as well as an ancestral liaison to neighboring peoples.** The Family Story affirms that Israel is related to the surrounding populations by kinship, covenants, and long histories, and **it promotes peaceful coexistence with Israel’s historical enemies...Instead of taking the land through conquest, they purchase it.** They rarely go to war, and when one of them does, it is to defend his Canaanite neighbors (Sodom and Gomorrah) from an assault by Mesopotamian kings. **The work presents a distinctive political model, one that stands in sharp contrast to the Exodus-Conquest Account...**” [275-276]***

The scribal process collects and connects earlier writings

- “One of the thorniest problems when examining the completed scribal text of the Tanach] is **why Moses does not enter the Promised Land**. Some biblical texts explain his death as the **punishment for his sin because he struck the rock** [to provide his complaining people with water] **against Yhwh’s explicit directions**. Yhwh condemned him to die outside the Promised Land. **When Moses in Deuteronomy retells his story** from his own perspective, he claims that he begged Yhwh to be allowed to enter the land and **blames the people for being turned down**: ‘Yhwh was however angry with me **because of what all of you did**. He refused to listen to me, and said: “That’s enough! I don’t want you asking me about this again!”’

Still another, older explanation lurks below the text’s surface that seems to draw on **ancient traditions locating Moses’ grave on (or near) Mount Nebo. (Deuteronomy 3:26)** Thanks to the Mesha Stele [which we discussed earlier], **we know that a Yhwh temple once existed at the town of Nebo**, which would have been located in proximity to the mountain. **The legend of Moses’ death at this place**, just as the older memories of Joshua saving the Gibeonites, **has nothing to do with the story of Israel’s escape from Egypt**. We cannot be sure what motivated the author so the Exodus-Conquest to link Moses and Joshua. **These writers could have easily just crated a story from thin air. Yet instead of inventing their history, they discovered it by collecting and connecting earlier writings.**” [281-282]

The People's History

- ***“In creating the People's History, our scribes did not opt for one or the other tradition; rather, they embraced both.*** Not only that, but they also fused them together to form a larger narrative. The Family Story of Genesis connects disparate clans to common ancestors, while the Exodus-Conquest Account tells how a group of freed slaves consolidated to form a nation and migrated to a new land, embracing many ‘fellow travelers’ along the way. And ***while the Jacob traditions presents Israel's tribes as indigenous groups, the addition of Abraham and Sarah to the Family Story seeks to unite competing groups by declaring all to be descendants of this immigrant couple.*** In Deuteronomy...Moses commands the Israelites to recite, word for word, a condensed form of the exodus story when they bring the land's first produce to Yhwh's sanctuary [done on each of the three major festivals—Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot]:

“...You shall make this response before Yhwh your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us...we cried to Yhwh, the God of our ancestors...Yhwh heard our voice and saw our affliction...Yhwh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...and gave us this land, a land of milk and honey...’ (Deuteronomy 26: 4-9)...Thanks to the Jewish sages at the turn of the Common Era, the pedagogical project initiated by the biblical scribes persisted in new forms...***Jewish families for ages have come together each year at Passover to retell and reflect on the biblical narrative. Before they commence, they recite a command: ‘In every generation, all are obliged to regard themselves as if they personally left Egypt.’ And as they proceed, they are expected to embellish the narrative with new material, just as the scribes did in the process of creating it.”*** [283-284]

Hannah and Samuel: the Palace History

- ***“The National Narrative, as a combination of the People’s History and the Palace History, presents the duration of monarchy as shorter than the people’s past that precedes it.*** In 1Kings 7:1 this is made explicit when it counts 480 years from the exodus until the building of the Temple, a period longer than the duration of the kingdoms; the addition of many generations from Abraham to the exodus makes the contrast even starker...The monarchy comprises a single chapter in the history of the nation, which had emerged and endured for many generations before it chartered this new path. ***The Palace History’s view of kingship and statehood [is] as a compromise with a stubborn and sinful nation...***For the authors of the Palace History, the state has a pragmatic, political purpose to serve. It is a means to an end, and when it becomes an end in itself, it swallows the nation, leaving nothing in its wake: ‘So all Judah was exiled from its land.’ (2Kings 25:21)”[299-300]
- Thus Wright introduces Chapter 18 with an epigraph from the prophet Hosea (13:10-11), reminding the exiled people of Samuel’s warning about the provisional nature of kingship, under the overrule of Yhwh: ***“I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.” God has let the people have a king [because they want to be like other people’s to likewise empower their land] reluctantly.*** He tells Samuel, ***“...They have not rejected you [Samuel was a prophet and a judge and a savior/leader], but they have rejected Me from being king over them.”*** (1Samuel 8:57). As Wright puts it, ***“Their punishment will be the granting of their wish. Samuel anoints Saul and establishes the monarchy.*** Eventually, the throne is passed from Saul to David before it crumbles into two competing kingdoms: the Northern state of Israel and the Southern state of Judah. ***When all is said and done, both have been conquered and their inhabitatns exiled to foreign lands.”*** [287]

How Compromise Arose among Scribal Traditions

- “The People’s History consists...of two parts: the Family Story of Genesis and the Exodus-Conquest Account. ***At the heart of the Family Story are traditions related to Isaac, Esau and Jacob; they likely originated before the downfall of the Northern kingdom in 722 BCE but were clearly reworked—from both Northern and Southern perspectives—for centuries thereafter.*** Early additions to the Exodus-Conquest Account, which also began as a Northern product, appear to know and respond directly to, the Palace History. The authors of this account were likely reacting to propaganda from the royal court in Jerusalem, where some likely found employment after 722 BCE... In the final decades of the Southern kingdom, ***many could see the writing on the wall: Judah would soon experience the same fate as its former Northern competitor. Having long insisted on Judaeon exceptionalism.***

Southern scribes were now more sympathetic with the principle that guided the work of Northern scribes after 722 BCE—that the monarchy does not connect the present to the past, and as a late development, this institution is not indispensable to Israel’s identity...Over the centuries, Southerners came to see themselves as members of the people of Israel. As they did, the People’s History became a prehistory and preamble to the older Palace History, with the People’s History furnishing a framework for the most formative stories as well as collections of divinely revealed laws...National liberation and native sovereignty are still options, but they are postponed to a future messianic age—and in the process, also redefined. [289-292]