

## Conclusions

### *A Movable Monument and a Portable Homeland*

The nineteenth-century German poet and literary critic Heinrich Heine famously claimed that the Jews have a “written” and “portable homeland” (*portative Heimat*) in the form of the books of Moses, which they have carried with them during their wanderings. In this chapter concluding our study, we begin by comparing ancient Near Eastern war memorials preserved in the archeological record with biblical war commemoration that has been transmitted for millennia. While one was carved in stone and displayed in competing palaces, the other was conducted in the framework of a single, yet composite, narrative – what we may call a “movable monument.”

In contrast to what we encounter in ancient Egypt and Western Asia, the societies of the East Aegean produced forms of war commemoration that more closely resemble what we have witnessed in biblical writings. After presenting a selection of this evidence from ancient Greece, we examine some of factors that help explain the commonalities between Athens and Jerusalem. In the final pages, we turn back to Wellhausen and reflect on the larger implications of our inquiry for political theology.

#### FIGHTING FOR THE KING: WAR COMMEMORATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The biblical narrative presents the nation of Israel naturally evolving from a family into an extended clan and eventually into a full-fledged nation. What makes the nation is first and foremost procreation, not political negotiation. However, when we examine the seams in this narrative, we can see how its authors used war commemoration to construct Israel’s

national identity from originally separate groups and regions long before they were grafted onto the nation's family tree. In the framework of this narrative, scribes affirmed that a given group belongs to the people of Israel, or denied their membership, by reporting how its members discharged, or dodged, their duties in major war efforts and battles. War commemoration thus served as a means of both demarcating the contours of the nation and defining the status of its members. The biblical narrative grew gradually through a process of successive supplementation over centuries, and our study has situated the genesis of this narrative in relation to the commemorative activities through which political communities have long negotiated their identities.

When we take a step back and consider the larger picture, we can't help but wonder about similar projects of war commemoration and nation-making in the ancient Near East. What do we know about parallel moves in neighboring societies of the Levant, Egypt, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia? As we will see, many ancient Near Eastern monuments affirm allegiance through wartime service and sacrifice, yet they do so in the name of rulers and dynastic houses, not on behalf of populations and political communities. As strategies of statecraft, they differ substantially from the national commemoration that we find in the Hebrew Bible and in the memorial cultures of modern nation-states.<sup>1</sup>

The typical Near Eastern war monument focuses on the king. The armed forces that partake in the fighting are conceived of as an extension of the right arm of both the ruler and the deity under whose aegis he fights. The point is often expressed in Neo-Assyrian art by depicting the king, larger than life, attacking a city with outstretched bow and a symbol of the state deity portrayed in the same pose hovering above him. A similar expression of monarchic singularity is found in Egyptian art: the pharaoh rides alone in his chariot, with the reigns tied around his waist and an outstretched bow in his arms; he is completely self-sufficient, requiring neither charioteer nor weapon bearer.<sup>2</sup> We know that this riding

<sup>1</sup> To avoid any confusion, the distinction I am drawing here is between the biblical project, on the one hand, and states, on the other. It's likely that monuments similar to what we find in neighboring states (such as the Mesha Stele from Moab) were produced in the Northern and Southern kingdoms as well. Ancient Israel and biblical Israel are not the same, however, and the difference between the two is crucial to the appreciation of the biblical project; see Reinhard G. Kratz, *Historical and Biblical Israel: The History, Tradition, and Archives of Israel and Judah*, trans. Paul Michael Kurtz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For an example of this royal isolation, see the cover image of this book depicting Ramses II at the battle of Kadesh, 1274 BCE.

technique was never actually practiced; the representation serves rather to communicate the matchless sovereignty of the king and the state he embodies.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, vassals and allies who had offered their military service to the throne would have been keen to draw attention in various ways to their sacrifice and contributions – not only in the hope of receiving a larger share of the war spoils but also with the aim of affirming their loyalty to the palace and laying claim to privileges and honors. Neo-Assyrian reliefs from the reigns of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal show soldiers standing next to piles of decapitated enemy heads on the battlefield and receiving commemorative jewelry (manacles, bracelets) and other rewards. While these monuments memorialize wartime contributions, they rarely do so on behalf of a particular population or community. The message they send relates rather to the honors and material compensation that the state awards to soldiers (and the armed forces they represent) in recognition of their valorous service to the king.<sup>4</sup>

For Assyrian as well as Achaemenid armies, various sources reveal that royal officials kept records of soldierly prowess and exceptional contributions on military campaigns. These records were not public inscriptions for purposes of political-collective commemoration; rather, they are documents that the crown, in keeping with the principle of *Wissensmonopol*, deemed worthy of preservation and to which only a select few were allowed access.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Jacob L. Wright, “Chariots: Technological Developments from the Third Millennium to the Hellenistic Age” in Angelika Berlejung et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Material Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming); the manuscript can be accessed on my Academia.edu web page.

<sup>4</sup> Mesopotamian palace reliefs, like their Egyptian counterparts, often portray warriors with distinctive ethnic features, and some of the soldiers in Assyrian reliefs may in fact be from Samaria or Judah. While we may be able to detect in these representations an element of political commemoration on behalf of a particular population, the more immediate objective is to display, in a manner typical of royal houses throughout history, the strength of the state’s military forces, which recruits soldiers from populations known for their military prowess.

<sup>5</sup> On the *Wissensmonopol* (lit. monopoly on knowledge) as a strategy of statecraft in relation to the formation of the Bible, see my article “Prolegomena to the Study of Biblical Prophetic Literature” in Jean-Marie Durand, Thomas Römer and Micaël Bürki (eds.), *Comment devient-on prophète?* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2014), 61–86 (available on my Academia.edu and Scribd web pages). See also Marie Theres Fögen’s study of imperial Rome, *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993); as well as Beate Pongratz-Leisten’s study of ancient scholarship in the service of Mesopotamian kings, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien: Formen der Kommunikation zwischen Gott*

What can we say then about public commemoration? We know that Ashur-etel-ilani, one of the final Assyrian kings, issued decrees conferring honors, property, and tax privileges, along with gifts of colorful robes and golden bracelets, to a number of military commanders who had demonstrated their loyalty to him and had assisted him in laying claim to the throne during a vicious war of succession. One may compare these decrees to the Behistun Inscription of the Achaemenid king Darius, which at several points pays tribute to the names of a commander who rendered exceptional service on a military campaign or to six of the king's "followers" who assisted him in his rise to power. In the case of the latter, Darius calls on his successors to protect the families of these men. Artaxerxes III is said to have bestowed gifts, honors, and titles upon Mentor, a Rhodian soldier, for contributing to the king's reconquest of Egypt. According to legend, the Persian kings granted gold regularly to Persian women of Pasargadae for their role in Cyrus's victory over the Medes. The Egyptian records are especially rich in this regard: inscriptions and deposits in private tombs allow us to retrace the careers of military officers as they rise in the ranks and receive military decorations along with public honors.<sup>6</sup>

Closer to the land of Israel, an Anatolian king from the late eighth century set up a funerary monument that commemorates the great deeds of his father Panamuwa II. From his account, we learn that his father had served as a loyal vassal to the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III, and that when he was killed on the battlefield, the Assyrian king formally mourned his death and set up a memorial in his honor. A similar expression of service and reward is found in a mid-fifth-century funerary inscription from Sidon on the Lebanese coast; in it Eshmun-azar, king of Sidon, reports that "the lord of kings (*'dn mlkm*) gave us Dor and Joppa, and the rich grainlands in the Sharon Plain, as a reward for the mighty deeds I had done."

One could point to other examples. However, what we don't find in the societies of ancient Western Asia and Egypt is a culture of war commemoration through which communities collectively negotiated belonging and status in relation to a people. The biblical materials we've

*und König im 2. und 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the images and materials discussed throughout this section, with special attention to the Egyptian evidence, see Wright, "Social Mobility and the Military in the Ancient Near East" (paper presented at the College de France, Paris, December 17, 2010, available on my Academia.edu web page).

studied in this book commemorate the contributions and sacrifices of communities in relation to a national body (Israel); in contrast, the materials discovered in Mesopotamia and Egypt are fixated on rulers and their dynastic successors.<sup>7</sup>

#### SAVING HOLY HELLAS: WAR COMMEMORATION IN THE EAST AEGEAN WORLD

While we search in vain for ancient Near Eastern analogies to our biblical texts, we discover more decentralized, demotic forms of war commemoration in the ancient Aegean world. Greek city-states, and the classes within their societies, jockeyed with each other for power and privilege by constructing memories of extraordinary wartime service. The media for these memories range from paintings and physical monuments to works of drama and narrative histories.

Greek war commemoration has a long history; in Chapter 12, we noted the parallels between the Song of Deborah and the Catalogue of Ships in Homer's *Iliad*. Yet some of the most important materials for study originated after the Persian Wars (499–449 BCE), when Greek city-states sought in various ways to draw attention to the pivotal roles they claim to have played in key battles, such as Thermopylae or Salamis. Thus, an epitaph ascribed to the lyric poet Simonides is said to have read:

O stranger (traveler), once we dwelt in the well-watered city of Corinth, but now Salamis the isle of Ajax holds us. Here, by defeating the Phoenician ships and Persians and Medes, we saved holy Greece.

This full two-couplet version is known only from later literary sources; fragments of the first couplet were found on a marble tablet discovered in 1895 in Salamis, which likely stood on the grave of the Corinthians who died in the sea battle (480 BCE). Despite its archaicizing script, the stela was likely erected long after the battle. The second couplet may represent an instance of inscriptions being expanded in the literary tradition; if so, the pan-Hellenic perspective (“saved holy Greece”) was not found in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Biblical counterparts to this state-oriented commemoration can be found in the memories of towns, groups, guilds, and representative individuals demonstrating loyalty to King David (or failing to do so) in the wars that established the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. In my books on David, I study these memories and situate them in relation to the demotic perspective that shapes the national narrative in Genesis-Kings, as well as the revisionist history of Chronicles.

Herodotus reports that Corinth, already at an early point in the battle, panicked and retreated, returning only after victory was certain. This version of the story was still being circulated a century after the events. As most agree, Herodotus is here informed by an Athenian source that reflects a bias resulting from growing tensions with Corinth. A more reliable tradition claims that the Athenians allowed Corinth to set up the stela for its war dead on the island.<sup>8</sup>

Other forms of commemoration of Corinthian contributions are known. At the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth, there was supposedly a painting that portrayed women praying that their men may be roused to demonstrate exceptional valor; it was accompanied by a dedicatory epigram:

These women stood praying their inspired prayer to the Cyprian on behalf of the Greeks and their close-fighting fellow-citizens; for divine Aphrodite did not wish to hand over the citadel of the Greeks to the bow-carrying Medes.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these sources are cited by Plutarch in his essay “On the Malignity of Herodotus” as alleged proof of the subject’s prejudice. Not only is their authenticity problematic, but some may have nothing to do with the battle of Salamis. Even so, subsequent tradition, beginning long before Plutarch, collected these epigrams as evidence of Corinthian wartime sacrifice and contributions.

One of the monuments at Thermopylae commemorated the bravery of the Locrians, a population that later joined the Persian side. In response to doubts about their loyalty to Greece, the inscription proclaimed, “Opus, the mother-city of the Locrians with their just laws, laments these men who died fighting the Medes on behalf of holy Hellas.”

An example of a monument that salutes the contributions of multiple allied communities is the famous Serpent Column. Originally erected in Delphi and later moved to Constantinople, it lists the names of thirty-one (city-)states that contributed to the Persian War. The name of the Tenians was inscribed later, while five communities, including the Locrians, are conspicuously absent.

Other monuments, as well as works of historiography and drama, illustrate how population groups and social classes within the city-states used war commemoration in a manner strikingly similar to that of the

<sup>8</sup> See John H. Molyneux, *Simonides: A Historical Study* (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1992); Deborah Boedeker and David Sider (eds.), *The New Simonides: Contexts of Praise and Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Molyneux, *Simonides*, 193.

biblical authors (and modern nation-states) – namely, to negotiate belonging and status in a larger political community.

Aeschylus's *Persians* (472 BCE) furnishes an important testimony. Although the navy was responsible for the momentous victory at Salamis, the play asserts that the real strength of Athens is its hoplite infantry, representing the propertied class of "citizen-soldiers." That the land battle was actually comparatively insignificant is suggested by the short shrift it receives later from Herodotus. It's possible, however, that Herodotus may already have been influenced by a more democratic naval perspective, which had a vested interest in identifying Salamis as the pivotal battle in the Persian Wars. Since the Greek tragedian was writing so early after Salamis, the poorer citizen rowers may not yet have succeeded in making their voices heard in Athens.

After the battle of Salamis came to be recognized as the decisive moment in the Persian Wars, other classes claimed a share of the responsibility. As explained in *The Athenian Constitution* (attributed to Aristotle), the Areopagus Council, representing the highest classes, deserved the credit for the victory. Against this elitist claim, the *thetes* (serfs with only a small amount of property) seized on the memory of Salamis for their own interests. To bolster their newfound self-confidence, and to justify their claims to a larger piece of the political pie, they reminded others of the part they had played in the emergence of Athens as a hegemonic power.<sup>10</sup>

The Athenian democracy was sired in a vigorous tug-of-war-commemoration, with various factions claiming rights and honors by appealing to a record of exceptional wartime contributions. As today, conservatives were wary of the "identity politics" that were reshaping their society.

Thus, in Aristophanes's play *The Knights*, an old man named Demos represents "the people" who won the great victories at Salamis and Marathon (lines 781–785). Whereas the *parabasis* of this play (lines 576–580) allows the equestrians (or knights, *hippeis*) to claim for themselves "the defense of the city, gratis, nobly, and for the national gods as well," his other works designate the men of the top rowing bench, where the citizens were stationed, "saviors of the city" (see *Acharnians*, lines 162–163; *Wasps*, lines 908–909).

<sup>10</sup> Although the navy was undeniably a critical component of Athenian hegemony, it was more immediately the growth of the Athenian empire that brought wealth and, in turn, political empowerment to the lower classes.

*The Knights* pokes fun at a situation in which every social group sought to improve its political and social status by claiming an indispensable role in defending the community. Portraying the absurdity of this political contest, the play has the equestrian chorus lauding the wartime contributions of their horses, who seize the role of the democratic rowers:

We will sing likewise the exploits of our steeds! They are worthy of our praises; in what invasions, what fights have I not seen them helping us! But especially admirable were they, when they bravely leapt upon the galleys, taking nothing with them but a coarse wine, some cloves of garlic and onions; despite this, they nevertheless seized the oars just like men, curved their backs over the thwarts and shouted, “Hippapai! [a play on *hippois* (horses) and *rhuppapai* (the rhythmic chant of the lowly rowers)].”<sup>11</sup>

War commemoration from the Aegean world has much in common with the incessant wrangling that characterizes political life in modern democracies. From the cited examples, one can see how it was conducted to negotiate status for social classes *within* Greek city-states as well as *between* city-states that considered themselves to be part of a larger (yet poorly defined) political community (e.g., “holy Hellas”). In contrast, biblical war commemoration is central to a project of peoplehood, whose architects were designing a *national* identity. Nevertheless, the parallels between Greek and biblical war commemoration are much closer than what we find in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt.

#### FROM ATHENS TO JERUSALEM

We’ve seen that ancient Near Eastern war commemoration is decidedly king-focused. How then are we to explain the presence of demotic, decentralized war commemoration in the Bible and classical Greek sources? The question is complex, but two factors merit attention here: 1) the different character of statehood in the rocky terrain of the Aegean region and in the highlands of the southern Levant; 2) the appeal to a collective political entity (“Israel” or “Greece”) that was not coterminous with a single state or political power.

According to the Weberian notion of *Gewaltmonopol*, the state is a political community with a demarcated geographical territory and a monopoly of legitimate force (*Gewalt*). Yet as Mogens Hansen has observed, even major European states in the seventeenth and eighteenth

<sup>11</sup> Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill, Jr., *The Complete Greek Drama*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1938).



centuries would fail to meet the criterion of *Gewaltmonopol*.<sup>12</sup> The same applies even more to the ancient world. In the southern Levant throughout the Late Bronze Age and much of the Iron Age, states continued to compete with private armies (what Nadav Na'aman calls “Ḫabiru-like bands”), which correspond to sea pirates in the East Aegean.<sup>13</sup> The exceptional cases in the ancient world are the imperial forces that emerged in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, where strong centralized states witnessed more success in monopolizing force and curbing dissent.

Vincent Gabrielsen argues that in order to maintain Charles Tilly’s maxim that “states make war and war makes states,” one would have to expand the definition of state to include polities in which legitimate force exists within a more pluralistic (or oligopolistic) rather than one that is monopolistic.<sup>14</sup> That the monopolistic system was not the norm in the Aegean world had a lot to do with geography. The hilly terrain and countless islands impeded the efforts of any state to achieve a level of centralization comparable to that of the territorial states in the large flat basins of the Nile delta and Mesopotamia. A modern analogy is the difference between France and Switzerland: the first is highly centralized, with Paris as the focus of national life, while the latter is extraordinarily decentralized, with its twenty-six cantons, each having its own constitution, legislature, government, and courts.<sup>15</sup>

The states of Israel and Judah never achieved the level of centralization witnessed in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The highlands had always been home to recalcitrant elements (the “Ḫabiru-like bands”) that lowland

<sup>12</sup> Mogens Herman Hansen, “Was the *Polis* a State or Stateless Society?” in Thomas Heine Nielsen (ed.), *Even More Studies in the Ancient Greek Polis* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 17–47.

<sup>13</sup> Na’aman’s research over the years has paid a lot of attention to private armies; see, e.g., his “Ḫabiru-Like Bands in the Assyrian Empire and Bands in Biblical Historiography,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 120 (2000), 621–624. When a Greek community went to war, it coerced those who owned warships or commanded private armies to fight for common interests and to join together in collective war efforts.

<sup>14</sup> Vincent Gabrielsen, “Warfare and the State” in Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 248–272, at 248. Ancient states may have achieved a monopoly of force during times of crisis, but they were short-lived: “because all-out military enterprises invariably demanded that communal forces be placed under a single command structure, all early states tended to behave in a monopolistic fashion during short spells of ‘national’ hostilities, only to revert to their original status as soon as fighting or campaigning was over” (ibid., 251).

<sup>15</sup> It is notable in this respect that Switzerland has a long history of great soldiers and military bands that fought as mercenary units in the Middle Ages, and it was not until 1815 that the cantonal army was converted into the *Bundesheer*.

states and imperial governments struggled to bridle and integrate into their military forces. The same goes for prophetic groups that stood on the periphery and that often eluded the efforts of the king to lure these groups to the courts, where an eye could be kept on them.<sup>16</sup>

The states that emerged in the Iron Age faced many hurdles in maintaining control of the periphery as they expanded from the hill country into the Jezreel Valley, Galilee, the Transjordan, and the Shephelah, as well as into the Judean hills and the Negev. The number of putsches, dynasties, and shifting capitals reveals that the central highland states encountered great difficulties in achieving a *Gewaltmonopol* over other territories. This situation likely led to greater autonomy, diversity of political actors, dissent, and competition, which are expressed in the range of rival war memories (and prophetic antagonism) that characterize biblical literature.

But what was perhaps more decisive was the second factor: the appeal to a collective political entity (“Israel” or “sacred Greece”) that was not coterminous with a single state or political power. In the Aegean world, there had long existed central institutions and cultic sites serving a plurality of communities, yet it was the Persian Wars that were to catalyze a more robust sense of Greek identity. The assault by the Achaemenid armies forced Greek political communities to unite, even if recent scholarship is correct in insisting that this unification was ad hoc and, in most instances, failed to run very deeply. During the later Peloponnesian Wars, Athens and its competitors would vie for hegemony by claiming to have played the most significant role in the resistance against Persian imperial encroachment.

For biblical Israel, the situation is similar but also different. Many scholars begin with the (often unspoken) assumption that a primordial sense of kinship had long united the populations that later inhabited the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. While this assumption may not be completely unfounded, it is difficult to prove. What originally was more important than a primordial sense of kinship were the appeals by Israel’s and Judah’s kings to a collective identity as they sought to consolidate the diverse populations of their states. We can observe similar political dynamics in the neighboring kingdom of Moab during the reign of Mesha.<sup>17</sup> Like the Aegean heroes who claimed to have “saved holy

<sup>16</sup> In my essay “Prolegomena,” I delineate four stages in the growth of a pan-Israelite identity, rejecting alternative appeals to “Northwest Semitic kinship notions.”

<sup>17</sup> See Routledge, *Moab in the Iron Age*; Gafß, *Die Moabiter*.

Hellas,” these Levantine kings claimed to have “saved” their peoples in wars with their common foes, and a common designation for rulers in Israel and Judah was “savior” (*môšîaʿ*), corresponding to a popular epithet for Hellenistic rulers (*sōtēr*).

Yet even these appeals by the royal courts of Israel and Judah are of minimal significance compared to the efforts of the biblical scribes who were working after the downfall of their kingdoms. The war commemoration that we find in the Bible is more national in character than what we witness in Greek sources, and the reason for this difference is “the long seventh century,” stretching from the fall of the Northern kingdom of Israel in 722 to the fall of the Southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE. Israel’s defeat paved the way for Judah, which had long felt Israel’s direct political and cultural influence, to seize upon, and strengthen, a national discourse that appears to have emerged first in Israel.

After the defeat of their kingdom, scribes from Israel appear to have drafted the earliest iterations of the patriarchal stories and the exodus-conquest narrative. These literary productions are not only focused on the North; they also diminish the role played by the monarchy in the formative moments of Israel’s history. Meanwhile, scribes working at the Judean court in the South drafted narratives that asserted the divine right of David and his dynasty to rule Israel. The nation transcends its (existing) territorial borders in these narratives, and on this point the statist agenda of the Southern scribes agreed with the stories of peoplehood that their Northern counterparts were composing in the years after Israel’s defeat.<sup>18</sup>

The contest between these two perspectives – between the people-focused productions from the North and the palace-focused productions from the South – marks the point of departure for the biblical project. The resistance of Northern scribes to the monarchic program of the Davidic throne precipitated deeper reflection on the nature of peoplehood, and when the Davidic throne finally met its demise, the power of the Northern perspective proved itself to be vanquished. Southern scribes would later combine the accounts to create the extensive narrative of the nation, extending from the creation of the world to the destruction of Jerusalem. This new narrative includes the history of the monarchy, but in

<sup>18</sup> On the relationship between Israel and Judah in the formation of the biblical corpus, see also Fleming, *Legacy of Israel*. In my books on King David, I lay out my own thesis in greater detail.

a heavily reworked form that demonstrates both its potential and its problems.

The prophets promised the reestablishment of “the fallen booth of David” (Amos 9:11), but no one really knew when that would happen. In the meantime, the nation might survive if its members joined in solidarity, both in their homeland and abroad in the diaspora. And one of the ways in which this solidarity expressed itself was by commemorating the contributions of rival communities in the major wars that shaped the nation’s history.

What’s most significant about biblical war commemoration is that it was done in the framework of a single, yet highly composite, national narrative. In Greece, communities made discrete monuments for themselves on the land they occupied; the biblical scribes, in contrast, engaged in commemorative activities by making supplements to a collaborative, literary monument, which was simultaneously a “portable homeland.” More than this, their commemorative activities honored the contributions of others, including both ethnicity and gender (Jael, Rahab, Esau, Jethro, etc.). Inspired by a vision of unity between North and South, the purview of their narrative reaches from the Gibeonites in the west to the Transjordanians in the east.

#### BACK TO WELLHAUSEN AND THE NATION

In the Introduction, I situated our study of war commemoration and national identity in relation to the work of Julius Wellhausen, who was a torchbearer of modern biblical research and whose incisive studies from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continue to shape the way in which we, as scholars, view both the origins and objectives of biblical literature. According to Wellhausen, the armies of the world’s first empires not only conquered the kingdoms of ancient Israel; they also destroyed Israel’s national identity. What emerged from the ashes of defeat was not a new form of peoplehood, but “an unpolitical and artificial construct” called Judaism.

Wellhausen was convinced that “God works more powerfully in the history of nations than in church history.”<sup>19</sup> Deeply discontent with the Christianity of his day, he took aim at the church by identifying it as the “heritage of Judaism.” Christianity represents, in his historical

<sup>19</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *Sketch of the History of Israel and Judah*, 3rd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1891), 228.

scheme, the culmination of a protracted process by which the once thriving nation of Israel devolved into “a mere religious community” that relinquished all political affairs to foreign governments. The separation of church and state, of sacred and secular, may have some value, he claims, but it’s inherently artificial and inferior to the ideal symbiosis of religious and national life.

In good Protestant fashion, Wellhausen argued his points exegetically, even if the critical quality of his exegesis led to a break with the theological faculty over the course of his career.<sup>20</sup> His aim was to repristinate older sources and layers, and he did so by isolating later sources and accretions whose putative fixation on cultic matters now obscure the text’s original elegance. What is old in the text, according to Wellhausen, is natural and national, while what is late is abstract and unpolitical.

The findings of our study seriously undermine this polarity. We’ve seen how even the latest layers of biblical literature engage in war commemoration as they negotiate various aspects of Israel’s national identity. The authors of our texts were working not only before but also, and especially, after the downfall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Their aim was to establish a form of peoplehood that could unite and mobilize their communities at a time when colonial powers were beginning to constrict, or already had constricted, the conditions for the nation’s political sovereignty. The biblical corpus grew to its present proportions as scribes composed and collected a wide assortment of texts – from prophecies and proverbs to laments and love-poetry – for the instruction and edification of the nation.

Christian interpreters over the millennia have frequently stripped the biblical texts of their political character, either dismissing its war stories as reflections of a bellicose, “tribal,” pre-Christian people or reading them in terms of a disembodied theology. Our study has shown that a metamorphosis from nation to religion was not the objective of the scribes who composed and reworked these texts. To be sure, matters related to the nation’s deity and its cult figure prominently in advanced stages of the biblical corpus, when the palace no longer stood at the center of public life. But hopes for the reestablishment of the monarchy permeate this corpus. Moreover, after its demise, a body of written laws came to

<sup>20</sup> Wellhausen focused on texts also because, like others in the nineteenth century, he conceived of the historian’s task as the study of historical writings; see Aly Elrefaei, *Wellhausen and Kaufmann: Ancient Israel and Its Religious History in the Works of Julius Wellhausen and Yehezkel Kaufmann* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), chap. 1.

serve as the constitution for this national community, and these laws combine political and religious matters in an inseparable union. The biblical “project of peoplehood” must, accordingly, be appreciated as a political-theological discourse.

#### LAW, NARRATIVE, AND KINSHIP

In the evolution of Israel’s national narrative, we discerned a diachronic shift of emphasis: from kinship to law, with the latter being understood as the will and words of the nation’s deity. This shift should not be confused with a quest for an alternative to national identity. The biblical scribes were not en route to the religious sphere with their backsides bared to their political past, as Wellhausen would have it. If later scribes found kinship limited and inadequate, it’s because families often quarrel. There need to be ideals and a code to which one can appeal when adjudicating disputes, especially when the family comprises many clans and tribes, towns and cities. Hence the law. As a divinely inscribed document to which all members of the nation formally subscribe, it represents a rallying point that simultaneously articulates the rules by which all are to play.

Now we might deem biblical law to be a far cry from an equitable, egalitarian social-political order. If the nation is required to worship a single deity at a single place and in a precise manner, where is there room for the most basic religious freedoms? To be sure, the biblical writers were after something different from the concerns of modern secular democracies. Yet their intellectual efforts deserve our attention, especially since they were engaged in one of the oldest and most elaborate projects of peoplehood.

By appealing to a history of wartime service and sacrifice, kinship, shared laws, and a single deity, the scribes who produced our texts were not seeking, first and foremost, to eliminate communities from the national fold. While they did use war commemoration for the purpose of ostracism, as we saw with the Gibeonites and Meroz, their primary intention was to transcend divisions and to set forth a broader national identity. The developments we’ve studied here are therefore more about inclusion than exclusion. Similarly, the process of canonization was more about the collection and incorporation of texts representing competing traditions and communities, even if it also meant the omission of that which was deemed to be deleterious to a sustainable national identity.

We explored the various ways in which the biblical texts construct bonds of filiation that hold together communities from North and South

and from both sides of the Jordan, and we have much to learn from the authors of these texts. They realized that law without a story was ineffective. Thus, the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is followed throughout the narrative by stories that answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Likewise, the command to “love the stranger” is embedded in a larger narrative that portrays Israel’s origins as a group of refugees who make their way to a new land after escaping bondage; this story of liberation lays the foundation for the law.

The promulgation of law can provoke deep resentment if it does not draw on shared experiences. This is the job of storytelling. Nations need narratives, and perhaps the biggest challenge faced by political communities is finding a way for our members to tell their stories – a way that, by being both honest and inclusive, has the capacity to engender a real sense of kinship and solicitude for our neighbor’s welfare. If there’s anything that the history of ancient Israel and its neighbors can teach us, it’s that without such a narrative, we are doomed to perish.

The Hebrew Bible models a robust and persistent engagement around issues of belonging. Though often wielded in contemporary political debates as if it were a static authority, this corpus of scripture is characterized by lively exchanges from competing perspectives and across generations. Our study of biblical war commemoration has laid bare the textured fabric of these exchanges, with scribes skillfully weaving new materials into the narrative tapestry they inherited from earlier generations.<sup>21</sup>

We also witnessed how their war stories frequently feature not only marginalized communities but also women. Although, historically, women may have had a limited hand in actual fighting, their perceptions and interpretations of all aspects of the battle – why it was waged, what its implications are, who deserves responsibility for its outcome, etc. – were often determinative. The political potential of women’s performances, and their roles in memory-making, must be borne in mind when studying not only war commemoration but the formation of biblical literature more broadly.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> As we take our cue from the biblical scribes and look for new and more effective ways of telling each other our stories, the method of their work and the physical medium (expandable scrolls) they adopted deserves our attention.

<sup>22</sup> A weighty body of evidence showing that women were actively involved in ancient West Asian text production has been tendered in Charles Halton and Saana Svård, *Women’s Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Anthology of the Earliest Female Authors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Is the biblical model of peoplehood adaptable to the exigencies of modern secular democracies? Perhaps not. But the task at hand is to find new ways of bolstering a sense of kinship, as the biblical authors did in their time. Both then and now, the most powerful means of creating community is to tell stories. At this moment of populist upheaval – fomented by cynical, corrupt leaders who deem themselves to be above the law – we need narratives that reflect the diversity of our communities, temper the hostility that often characterizes national discourses, and offer tangible reasons why we should cultivate affection for our laws. As we create these narratives, perhaps we will discover a unifying force under whose aegis we will be able to face an otherwise frightening future.