

Introduction

The Bible tells many stories, such as David and Goliath, or Noah's Ark.

And it tells many of them *twice*. Did David kill Goliath on his own, or did King Saul *order* him to? Did Noah treat all animals alike, or did he distinguish clean and unclean? Some readers see the inconsistencies as a challenge to faith. For them, there was devised the 1895 Four Document Hypothesis (4DH):

It held that there were at first four consistent *sources*; inconsistencies arose only when the sources were combined as *texts*. The sources were: J (Jehovah, 09c), E (El, 08c), D (Deuteronomy, 07c), and P (Priestly, 05c). But it proved hard to distinguish J and E, which were often merged as JE. Some statements of priestly character seemed to be early, and others late. This led to separating P into P1, P2, and P3, plus H for the "Holiness Code" in Leviticus 17-27.

The 4DH is held in some form by many, and we will note a few cases where it fails to give a convincing analysis of composite passages. But for the most part, we will simply try to understand how those differences arose, and what they imply for the changing situation in which the Biblical texts were written.

The most important of those changes is the one implied by the subtitle of this book: the long-term shift in human society from the sacred to the secular; from the priest to the king as the authority in the state.

Did the events related in the Bible really happen? We have outside evidence for a few (like the battle with Moab, in 0873), but for the most part, No. On the other hand, the stories were not invented out of nothing; they are responses to, or reworkings of, things that really did happen. We ask the historian's question: as far as we can see, what realities lie behind the stories as the Bible tells them?

Sometimes that is not so difficult. The *battles* in Joshua, in which Yahweh magically destroys one native people after another, are not credible as written, but their *locations* may plausibly follow the course of a series of actual battles, by which the Hebrew intruders gradually came to dominate the Land.

As for the native peoples themselves, and the traditions of earlier intruders, first the Canaanites from nearby Ugarit and then the Chaldeans from distant Ur, they can in part be recovered, and we will take note of them as we go along.

The results make sense. With Noah, a later version adds Hebrew customs to an old flood myth. With David, a popular hero story is incorporated into the official history of King Saul. The Daughters of Zelophehad acquire legal status, and new possibilities *as persons*, which they had not had before.

Then came the Exile. All previous bets, whether sacred or secular, were off. The Biblical writers sought to find paths through that very different landscape. We will follow that search to the end.

Approach

Audience. This book is submitted to the judgement of scholars, but it has been written to be accessible to the informed general reader. It is hoped that each will bear with what has been done to extend a welcome to the other.

Scope. This is not an Introduction to the Old Testament; it can consider only a few passages. We hope they may suggest the value of the historical approach: that of recognizing change, in the times and in the texts. We see contradictions not as problems, but as *evidence of growth*, as newer stories replace older ones.

Plan. The first five chapters are orientation: an overview of the Bible scene. Introductions to later sections summarize the main points of the chapters in that section; together, they provide a running account of the book's argument.

Conclusion. Can Biblical history offer anything useful to the present day? For our suggestion, see §70, the last chapter of the present book.

Details

Dates BC are given with a proposed zero; 06c is “sixth century [BC].” For events, see the Chronology, p283; for places, the Zondervan Essential Atlas of the Bible (2013), cited as **Atlas**. Also helpful is Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (1955), cited as **ANET**; and the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), **ABD**. Stylometric results for some passages, giving independent evidence for their interpretation, are available online at: umass.edu/wsp/method/style/Aurelia.htm.

Quotations follow English Bible numbering, and use the ASV translation. Short citations are expanded in the Works Cited list at p288. The Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation was based on an earlier version of the Hebrew text than the Masoretic Text (MT); its readings have sometimes been adopted. Asterisks (as Exod *20:1-17, the Decalogue) mark passages which are here considered to be interpolations. §9 is chapter 9, the Noah's Ark chapter.

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Dedication

Abraham ibn Ezra, in the 11th century, had made a beginning by rejecting Moses' authorship of the five Pentateuch texts, but modern study of the Bible really begins with the 1670 *Tractatus* of Benedict de Spinoza.

This book is dedicated to Benedict de Spinoza.

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