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Foreword

To this day, the Bible remains the world's best-selling book, and there is good reason to presume and hope that it will retain this position in the future. The Bible is the cornerstone of Jewish culture, provides the infrastructure for the other monotheistic religions—Christianity and Islam—and constitutes one of the strongest pillars upon which Western culture rests. Its influence extends even beyond these realms.

Any individual, wherever he may be in the world, can pick up a printed copy of the Bible in his own language. His reading is influenced by the social context, the cultural tradition—be this religious or secular—that constitutes his spiritual world.

Hundreds of years have passed since the invention of the printing press, which enabled the widespread distribution of the Bible. Over 2,000 years ago the first translators began rendering the Bible from Hebrew into various languages. Accordingly, it is almost impossible to find an individual who wishes to read the Bible but is unable to do so. Today's easy access may mistakenly lead us to believe that the same was true of the Ancient world. Indeed, this was far from the case. The Bible, in fact the library that comprises it, emerged from within a small nation living in a tiny land, surrounded by larger and more powerful nations and

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cultures. The impetus to embark on this endeavor, to record in writing oral traditions, was the monotheistic revolution, the complete rejection of the pagan world, which was replaced by faith in one single God, the creator and ruler of the world, who chose Israel to serve Him and keep His commandments.

The severance of connections with idolatry is not the only revolution found among the pages of the Bible. Indeed, it is a book of “divine revolution,” containing echoes of many other religious, social, and literary revolutions.

Here, I present the revolutionary foundations that molded the Bible, fortified the boundaries of the collections of books that comprise it, and became a magnet for believers, exegetes, readers, and artists throughout the generations.

Chapter 2

A Literary Revolution – The Creation of Narrative Prose

Biblical historiography, which recounts the history of the Children of Israel, encompasses the entire sequence of biblical books from Genesis to Kings as well as Ruth, Esther, Daniel 1–6, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Most of this historiography is related in the form of narrative prose, although other literary genres also make an appearance: laws and instructions regarding worship (in the Torah [Pentateuch]), poetry, speeches, brief historical texts and lists, memoirs, and of course editorial formulae that consolidate the various literary units into a well-organized whole.

Further units of narrative can be found in the biographical chapters in the book of Jeremiah. Likewise, the entire book of Jonah constitutes a narrative, and the dialogues in the book of Job are set within a narrative framework. The abundance of stories in the Bible is surprising considering their rarity in ancient Near Eastern literature: Among the treasures of ancient Egyptian literature there are very few stories, such as that of Sinuhe (the oldest manuscripts date to around 1800 BCE) or the tale of the two brothers, which reveals similarities to the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife

(manuscript from around 1225 BCE). Canaanite literature preferred the genre of epic poetry, as did Mesopotamian literature. Even so, various stories from Mesopotamia have reached us, such as the Poor Man of Nippur (the earliest complete copy dates from the end of the eighth century BCE) and the frame story of the Aramaic work *Ahikar the Wise Man*, which originated in Assyria. The rarity of stories in the geographical space within which the Children of Israel dwelled in ancient times highlights that the breadth of biblical narratives constituted a powerful literary revolution.

Many biblical stories are short, comprising only a few verses, for example some of the anecdotes concerning the miracles carried out by Elisha (2 Kings 2:19–22; 2 Kings 2:23–24; 2 Kings 4:39–41; 2 Kings 4:42–44); some are around 40 verses in length, such as the story of the prophecy of Michiah son of Imlah regarding the death of Ahab (1 Kings 22:1–34); and some are even longer, for instance the meeting between Rebekah and Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24). Exceptions are the novellas, which tell the stories of Joseph (Gen. 37; 39–48; 50), the succession story following David’s death (2 Sam. 11–20; 1 Kings 1–2), and the books of Jonah, Ruth, and Esther.

Before being recorded in writing, many of these stories were transmitted orally from generation to generation and circulated in a range of versions. Indeed, this was evidently true of the most important biblical event, the exodus from Egypt: “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘For the sake of what the LORD did for me when I went out of Egypt’” (Ex. 13:8; see also Ex. 12:26–27; Deut. 6:20–24).

Biblical literature emphasizes the importance of the act of telling the story as well as its purpose. Once again, with

regard to the history of the people in Egypt and the exodus, we find: “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Come into Pharaoh, for I Myself have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, so that I may set these signs of Mine in his midst, and so that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son’s son how I toyed with Egypt, and My signs that I set upon them, and you shall know that I am the LORD” (Ex. 10:1–2). Psalm 78 connects between the story of the exodus, the dissemination of tradition, and obeying the commandments: “So that the last generation might know, sons yet to be born might arise and recount to their sons, and place their trust in God and forget not the acts of God, and observe His commands” (6–7).

Gideon, who was well-versed in the tradition of his forefathers, expressed wonder at the disparity between the salvations of the past and the wretchedness of the present when responding to the angel’s blessing: “Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why has all this overtaken us, and where are all His wonders of which our fathers told us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ and now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the grip of Midian” (Judg. 6:13).

At a certain stage in the course of history, a sense emerged that the oral story was insufficient and the fluid traditions of the past, of which there were infinite different versions, must be recorded in writing. This would serve to consolidate one unified, binding tradition and suit the oral traditions to the author’s perceptions, beliefs, and opinions.

Later in this chapter we will discuss the close connection between the monotheistic revolution and the literary revolution. However, first it is vital to shed light on the conditions that enabled this literary revolution. Recording

stories of the past necessitated the organized and extensive training of skilled scribes, such as the one who testifies about himself: “I speak what I’ve made to the king, My tongue is the pen of a rapid scribe” (Ps. 45:2; see also Ezra 7:6). A team of expert writers is a vital condition for the existence of a centralized state mechanism. In its absence, it is impossible to control the kingdom and the economic, judicial, and priestly systems; indeed, chaos will reign in a kingdom that does not record in an orderly fashion various types of documents. The “document of divorce” that a husband gives to his wife (Deut. 24:1) and “the scroll of purchase” made when transferring ownership of property (Jer. 32:12) are two types of administrative documents that were probably deposited in archives. So too, letters sent from and to the royal palace, such as the “books” that Jezebel sent to the leaders of Jezreel—her instructions to hold a staged, fake trial for Naboth the Jezreelite (1 Kings 21:8–10), and their response that they executed her orders meticulously (1 Kings 21:14). “Books” arrive also in the diplomatic mail, from foreign kings, such as the letter from the king of Aram demanding that the king of Israel cure Naaman of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:5–7).

The list of David’s officials mentions the king’s scribe Sheva (2 Sam. 20:25), and the officials of his son Solomon included scribes: “Elihoreph and Ahijah sons of Shisha, scribes” (1 Kings 4:3). Indeed, it seems likely that Sheva and Shisha were one and the same, suggesting the existence a family of scribes in which the secrets of the profession were passed from father to son. Yet scribes were not only occupied with drawing up administrative documents. Baruch ben Neriah, the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, recorded his master’s prophecies: “And Jeremiah called to Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah

all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him on a book-scroll” (Jer. 36:4).

The transition from one medium to another, from oral transmission to the written narrative, is not merely mechanical. Ostensibly, the two states are completely unconnected, as the sages recognized: “The words which are written thou art not at liberty to say by heart, and the words transmitted orally thou art not at liberty to recite from writing” (BT GITTIN 60b). Yet the move from one method to another is possible, even if it entails changes. In this chapter we will focus on the transition from the oral tradition to the written narrative. We can only guess as to the form and character of the oral tradition, and I allow myself to dare to hypothesize that one method of oral transmission, which left its mark on the written narrative, was drama. Several characteristics of the stories support this hypothesis: The stage can only host two or three characters at any one time (as in a Greek tragedy). This is also true of the biblical narrative. For example, let us examine the story of Jacob stealing his brother’s blessing (Gen. 27). At first Isaac and his beloved son, Esau, appear; the father asks his son to go out and hunt for delicacies, promising to bless him upon his return (verses 1–4). Then the second pair appears on stage: Rebekah and her beloved son, Jacob. The audience follows the preparations for the deception that Rebekah is planning, which involves the use of a disguise (verses 6–17). The story reaches its peak when representatives of the two original duos, Jacob and Isaac, meet; Jacob wearing his brother’s clothes in an effort to convince his father that he is in fact Esau. His deception is successful and his father blesses him (verses 18–30). From this point onwards, the original pairings meet again: Esau presents himself to his father, at which point the deception

is discovered (31–40), and finally Rebekah and Jacob return to the stage, the mother sending her son to the home of her brother, Laban, until his brother's anger will pass (42–45).

On occasion the few characters are joined by a collective, somewhat akin to the chorus in Greek tragedies. In the first chapter of the book of Ruth, Naomi returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, and the women are shocked by Naomi's appearance: "Is this Naomi?" (Ruth 1:19). At the end of the book, the chorus of women appears once again, this time speaking at greater length. Regarding the son born to Ruth, they declare: "Blessed is the LORD, Who has not deprived you of a redeemer today, and let his name be proclaimed in Israel. And may he be a restorer of life for you and a support for your old age, as your daughter-in-law, who loves you, has born him, who has been better to you than seven sons" (Ruth 4:14–15).

Similarly to dramas, biblical stories often conclude with the characters leaving the stage. Before doing so, the figures go their separate ways, as in the story of the meeting-confrontation between the pursuer and the pursued, Saul and David, "And Saul went home while David and his men went up to the stronghold" (1 Sam. 24:23); and again, "And David went on his way, but Saul returned to his place" (1 Sam. 26:25).

Furthermore, as in a drama, the entire narrative unfolds before the eyes of the beholder-reader, and the characters' actions and words advance it and help us to assess and judge the characters. Indeed, insights into the depths of the characters' souls, their thoughts, are very rare. Even when the reader is made aware of Esau's thoughts following his brother's act of treachery—"And Esau said in his heart, 'As soon as the time for mourning my father comes round, I will kill Jacob my brother'" (Gen. 27:41)—the matters are

revealed miraculously: “And Rebekah was told the words of Esau her older son” (verse 42); only then does she send Jacob away to save him from his brother’s wrath.

This assumption regarding the influence exerted by the genre of drama also accords with the lack of descriptions in the biblical narrative. When watching a play, the audience sees the actors with their own eyes. The effect of drama on biblical literature leaves the reader “blind”: we know almost nothing about the characters’ appearance. Here and there, a character’s beauty is noted, when this advances or complicates the plot. Thus, for example, Abraham tells his wife, Sarah: “Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me while they will let you live” (Gen. 12:11–12). Indeed, the beautiful Sarah is taken to the household of Pharaoh, who desires her. Regarding Joseph, the text tells us, “And Joseph was comely in features and comely to look at” (Gen. 39:6), and the wife of his Egyptian master will desire him, complicating the story.

Sometimes, when this is instrumental to the plot, the gaze focuses on a single aspect of a character’s appearance. To illustrate Absalom’s rare beauty, the narrator emphasizes his abundant hair (2 Sam. 14:26); his hair is also the source of his demise when it catches in the terebinth. Indeed, as our sages taught: “Absalom was gloried in his hair—therefore he was hanged by his hair” (M Sotah 1:8). So too, descriptions of landscapes are totally absent from the stories.

And from preserving the ancient form let us progress to the modifications required by the new genre. Oral works use repetition extensively. In ancient epic poetry that was imparted orally (Akkadian, Ugaritic, or Greek), and even in modern epic poetry performed to this day in the Balkans

by an artist-actor standing before an audience, literal repetition abounds. For example, let us look at the story of Gilgamesh, tablet 11, which corresponds, as we noted in the previous chapter, with the biblical story of the flood. When the waters of the flood abate, the boat comes to a rest on the top of a mountain for six days, after which Utnapishtim sends out the dove on the seventh day. The six days during which the boat is stuck on the mountain top are divided into three pairs, and the literal repetition is evident:

Mount Nisir held the ship fast, allowing no motion.

One day, a second day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, allowing no motion.

A third day, a fourth day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, allowing no motion.

A fifth, and a sixth (day), Mount Nisir held the ship fast, allowing no motion.

When the seventh day arrived, I set free and sent forth a dove. (lines 141–145)

The performers of epic poetry did not strive for originality and an abundance of innovation. Such works are not individual in character but rather restricted by the accepted style. The audience enjoys the precise repetition, which enables them to internalize and remember the words and even join the artist's voice during repetitive units. The audience thus suppresses any initiative for change. We must not forget that literal repetition too is not devoid of variety: The artist can slow the pace of his speech or speed it up, raise his voice or lower it, accompany his words with movements, looks, and facial gestures, etc. These possibilities do not exist, of course, in the written text. The author compensates the readers for this loss by means of different phrasings. The author challenges readers

with puzzles, expecting them to compare the repetitive units in search of changes and decipher the reason for these differences. Unlike a beholder-listener, who must progress onwards with the artist, readers control their own pace; they can flip forwards or backwards, stop, think, and discover changes and their meaning.

Let us explore, for example, one instance of varied repetition: the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). The story repeatedly quotes the words of Ahab, who covets his neighbor's vineyard, and the response of the owner, who refuses to give it to him (verses 2–3). Later, Ahab quotes his own words when reporting the exchange to his wife, Jezebel (verse 6). In addition, Naboth's response is quoted twice: once by the narrator (verse 4) and once by the king in his report to his wife (verse 6). The significant variations in this unit are not for the sake of embellishment. Any diversion is highly significant and contributes to shaping the meaning of the work and understanding the plot and its characters.

Let us look at the words of the king:

Verse 2

Give me your vineyard
That I may have it as a
garden of greens,
For it is close to my house,
And let me give you in its
stead
A better vineyard,
Or should it be good in
your eyes,
Let me give you silver
as its price.

Verse 6

Give me your vineyard for silver,

Or if you wish,
I shall give you a vineyard
in its stead.