

Myth  
and History  
in the Bible



Giovanni Garbini

Translated by Chiara Peri



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# Myth and History in the Bible

Giovanni Garbini  
Translated by Chiara Peri

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## FOREWORD

Though the Old Testament apparently offers a distinction between facts that are considered mythical and facts that should be considered historical, in reality the only historical thing in the Bible is the Bible itself, a superb product of Jewish thought. What is narrated in the Bible is only myth, as the important monograph by Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999) has shown. But this myth about Israel's past (and on this point my position is slightly different from Thompson's) was built *also* with fragments of history, or rather with written traditions that were different from those expressed in the actual text, and obviously more ancient. When we read, in 1 Kgs 14.25, that pharaoh Shishak sacked Jerusalem, and we learn from Egyptian texts that this pharaoh conducted a military campaign in Palestine, we must admit that in tenth century BCE in Jerusalem existed a royal palace, probably not very large, where the events concerning the town were recorded. But whether the king in Jerusalem was then a son of King Solomon is another matter. With this idea in mind, some years ago I wrote a book about the history and culture of the Philistines, largely using the Old Testament, where I discovered very interesting data that I would have never expected to find. As I often repeat to my students, quoting the title of a famous book, 'the Bible is right'; 'but', I add, 'biblical scholars are almost always wrong'.

Some of the Chapters of this book (more exactly: 1, 5, 6 and part of 8) were originally lectures, and they have preserved their conversational style. The others were written as specific studies, with a more or less accentuated philological component. On this matter, it is perhaps appropriate to spend a few words on my method of studying the Bible. I apply to the biblical text the criteria of classical philology for the reconstruction of the text, utilizing systematically the existing documents, that is the ancient versions. But the biblical text, compared with a Greek or Latin one, requires a larger use of *divination*, with all the risks that this implies, for establishing the original text, which was often deliberately 'corrupted' by rabbinic revision for ideological reasons. But during the many years of philological work I also discovered the importance of the Masoretic Text, which is



twofold. At first sight, it offers a 'corrupted' and sometimes incomprehensible text; but at the same time, when we compare it with the Greek version (which we read in a form that is very 'contaminated' by the Hebrew text), the Masoretic text somehow *suggests* the original reading. I am fully conscious that few scholars (or maybe nobody) will consider acceptable my philological method: nevertheless, the results I obtained are, in my opinion, quite interesting.

Finally, I am happy to express my gratitude to those who have made possible the publication of this book. To the 'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei', the 'Centro Editoriale Dehoniano' of Bologna, and the 'Istituto Universitario Orientale' of Naples for kindly permitting the utilization of writings originally published by them (respectively, the first one for Chapter 1; the second, for Chapters 5, 6 and part of 8; the third, for Chapter 7); to Mrs Chiara Peri, who took the initiative of translating it into English these essays; to Professor Philip R. Davies, who received this work into the prestigious series, and revised the translation, making a little 'more English' the targum realized in Rome.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AION</i>	<i>Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>IrBSt</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>OA</i>	<i>Oriens Antiquus</i>
<i>Or</i>	<i>Orientalia</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RevScRel</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
<i>RivB</i>	<i>Rivista biblica</i>
<i>ZAH</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebraistik</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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## Chapter 1

### THE MYTHS OF THE ORIGINS OF ISRAEL

Nowadays hardly anyone would consider studying the origins of Italy. The beginning and early history of an existing and still existing historical reality are usually quite well-known, so there is no need to invent 'origins', which are always somehow mythological. In the conclusion of an essay about the origins of Israel, Mario Liverani rightly observed that in the pseudo-problem 'origins of Israel' not only the word 'origins', but also the word 'Israel' should be considered mythical. The origins of which 'Israel' are we looking for? The concept of Israel itself is subject to historical evolution.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I will not deal with the historiographical problem (in that case I would speak of 'beginnings' rather than 'origins'); I am interested in determining how (and when) Israel created its own origins. But first of all we should define what we mean by 'Israel': it is a very difficult definition at an historical level, but it becomes empirically easy, because the existing documentation in fact forces us to identify ancient Israel with the Bible. In reality the Bible does not represent Hebrew people nor Hebrew culture, but only the point of view of a small minority of individuals who, at a certain moment quite late in Hebrew history wanted to express their ideology in a certain number of books; those books were later imposed as normative and as such preserved from the destruction which attended all the others.

It is impossible to doubt that when we study the origins of Israel we are talking about myths: the Bible itself presents them as such. The narratives which describe God talking to a man 'face to face' can only be mythical (in Exod. 33.11 we read: 'And Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend'). God spoke directly with the first humans, the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua and, finally, with Samuel; than he communicates with men only through messengers, prophets, dreams,

1. M. Liverani, 'Le 'origini' d'Israele: progetto irrealizzabile di ricerca etnogenetica', *RivB* 28 (1980), pp. 9-31.

oracles. Samuel, who talks with God but also transmits his message to others, marks the passage from mythical into historical time, and it is no coincidence that we find this passage right at the beginning of monarchic times: the true myth ends with Joshua. This is the essential difference between the narratives of the Hexateuch and those of the historical books. Obviously myths also have their own reality, but only in the religious sphere and not in the historical one. And if this remark implies a specific vision of the world (the modern European one, which drastically circumscribes the ambit of religion), probably all the readers of this book share this same vision. So, we should not allow that exclusively religious realities (valid only for those who are assisted by faith) should be transferred into historical research. It would be a very useful thing if in Israel also, as quite often (but not always) happens in Christianity and Islam, theologians and historians began to perform each one their own job, without interfering with each other. But let us go back to our myths.

The myths of the origins of Israel have three main characters, of differing importance: more important are Abraham, the 'founder' of the people, and Moses, the 'founder' of the religion; a lesser status is accorded to Joshua, the 'founder' of the land. Before we go on with our analysis, we must consider a ringing absence: in the origins of the 'children of Israel' not a word is said about Israel, the eponym, who is replaced by Abraham. Though the mention of 'Israel' in the stele of pharaoh Merneptah is the only extra-biblical evidence about the Hebrews before the ninth century BCE, whoever considers the secondary and late nature of the artificial identification of Israel with Jacob (Gen. 32.28-29) will start to wonder about the accuracy of biblical historical tradition and about the real identity of an Israel which could not (or rather did not want to) speak about its own eponym.

Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, then emigrated to Syria and Palestine; while he was still in Harran, God promised him that from him would descend a large people; the promise was repeated twice more, with the addition of a land extending from the Nile to the Euphrates; between God and Abraham a covenant was also stipulated. In the story of Abraham, the essential part is the promise; but if we consider the history of the Jewish people, not only in a modern historical perspective, but also from the point of view of the biblical authors, it is not difficult to recognize that this solemn and often repeated promise was never realized. Never in its history was Israel as numerous as the stars of the sky and it never had the control of all Syria and Palestine, not even at the glorious times of the 'united monarchy'. According to the Bible, David's territory was not large

enough to include Gezer (which was brought to Solomon as dowry by the pharaoh's daughter) and under the reign of Solomon the defection of the Aramaeans began. Thus it was a strange promise, marked by a covenant which Israel scrupulously observed by circumcision. In order to justify a god who does not maintain his own promises and does not respect pacts, we must assume that the promise will be realized in the future and so can be considered still valid. The promise exists, but it is projected into a future, messianic perspective, when in Abraham's descendents all the nations of the earth will be blessed. But it is also true that Yahweh requires an immediate respect of a pact he will honour only in a distant future.

This is an origin myth which apparently founds the future, but in fact founds an essential aspect of a present reality: the hope of a better future. But a people that aspires to become numerous and to dominate a not very extensive land (the entire Syro-Palestinian region was much less than the dimension of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires) can only be a little people, living in a little country, considerably frustrated in its political ambitions: this situation only suits postexilic Jerusalem and, I would add, the hierocratic Jerusalem which dreamed of emerging with the dissolution of the Achaemenid empire.

In the myth of Abraham there is one detail, apparently not very important: the birth of the patriarch in Mesopotamia. The origin of this motif is not difficult to explain, with the help of the biblical text: Chaldeans, Ur and Harran stand for Nabonidus and for his devotion to the moon-god Sin, whose most important temples were in Ur and Harran (someone had the curious idea of nominating those towns as the halting places of the return of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem: it would be like going from Rome to Florence via Bologna or New York to Washington via Cleveland). But Nabonidus stands also for Babylonian exile: against this background Abraham, who was born in Ur and sees God in Harran, could only come from the same country of the Chaldean king who was particularly dear to the god Sin. It was a *captatio benevolentiae* for the Babylonian overlord, not different from the one that the Israelites later show to the Persians in making Elam, official seat of the Achaemenids, the first son of their own ancestor Shem (Gen. 10.22). The Phoenicians also acted in the same way: for the same reason they put their origins in the Persian Gulf (not in the Red Sea!), as is told by Herodotus (7.89). Finally, when Jonathan Maccabee wanted to make an alliance with Sparta, did he not find out that Judaeans and Spartans were both descendants of Abraham (1 Macc. 12.21)? Though related to a particular moment, when the narrative about the origins of Jewish people was redacted, the Babylonian origin of Abraham (and of the

Jews) had an essential function in the economy of the mythical narrative: the promise of the land implied that the Jewish people came from abroad and the Mesopotamian origin constituted a polemical alternative to an Egyptian one.

But let us now consider Moses, a somewhat enigmatic character: miraculously saved by God and chosen for two essential moments for the birth of Israel (the liberation from Egyptian captivity and the transmission of the Law), Moses was the only one among the Israelites to have the privilege of speaking with Yahweh face to face and of touching with his own feet the same mountain where God had descended (Exod. 19.20). Nevertheless he was not considered worthy to touch something much less sacred, the soil of Palestine. The essential feature of all Moses' deeds was that they were accomplished outside the promised land. This kind of portrait had the primary goal of depicting Israel as a mainly religious entity which fully developed itself independently and outside Canaan, in the purity of the desert (according to the ancient prophetic conception): entering Palestine implies the beginning of mixing, of transgressions of the covenant with god and thus of his punitive acts. But at the same time a long stay in the desert was necessary to purify Israel from the impurity contracted during the residence in Egypt: everything that was in Egypt was impure, including Moses himself who, for this reason, had to die before crossing the Jordan river. We must remember, at this point, that even the name of Moses is Egyptian: it is a hypocoristic form of a name whose theophoric element (certainly not Yahweh) has been omitted. The forty years in the desert, the duration of a human generation, should cut any contact, including biological, with the abhorred Egypt, the land of captivity.

Once again we know, as also the Jews knew, that things did not happen in this way. The Mosaic legislation, presented as given to a population of nomads, does not have anything of a 'nomadic' character, but rather finds its justification in the context of a sedentary, rural culture, with a religion full of gods and rites of a sexual nature against which it was conceived. The religion of the Hebrew people until the fifth century, at least in some milieux, was virtually identical with the Canaanite: the only difference was the dynastic god, Yahweh, who replaced Melqart, Kemosh or Dagon (a Ugaritic text presents Yahweh as a son of El). Yahwism was not a foreign religion introduced in Palestine, but a local religion, created by some prophets as a reaction to Canaanite religious ideology. As for the Hebrew people, we know almost nothing about its formation, apart from the biblical data. It is clear, anyway, that the Israel mentioned by Merneptah did not come from Egypt, and the same is true for those probably Aramaic-speaking

tribes which settled in Palestine (and in many other places in the Near East) at the beginning of the twelfth century BCE. Only the Philistines could be said to have come, in a certain sense, from Egypt: in fact they had fought against the Egyptians in Egypt. In the Palestine of the last centuries of the second millennium BCE archaeological and epigraphical findings testify to only one foreign presence of any cultural and numerical weight: the Sea Peoples, and the Philistines were one of them.<sup>2</sup> The continuity in the local culture—though within the limits of a serious crisis similar to the so-called ‘Greek Middle Ages’—and the adoption of the ‘language of Canaan’ (Isa. 19.18) by the Israelites are the other two elements which make likely the hypothesis that the most important role in the formation of the Hebrew people was played by autochthonous populations.

It is not difficult to give a historical background to the character of Moses as a legislator. In the Bible Moses and the Law are completely identified and without the Law Moses is virtually non-existent (in a few passages, possibly written in the pre-exilic age, Moses is only a name incidentally mentioned a couple of times; in Hos. 12.14 he is called a ‘prophet’). But if we look at the Law, in its liturgical prescriptions (which are preponderant) as well as in the different forms of the famous Decalogue, we find that it is a law written by priests and for priests, who rule over a people without a king: in the ancient Near East, until the advent of the Roman empire, the king was first a high priest, mediator between god and his people. A religious law without a king is conceivable only in postexilic Jerusalem.

I have deliberately not mentioned an essential aspect of Moses, namely his role as redeemer of the Hebrew people from Egypt. The motif of exodus, which became emblematic for all Judaism, runs throughout the Bible as an almost obsessive *leitmotif*, but it is in its turn somehow puzzling. From what I have affirmed before, I think it is absolutely clear that the exit of Israel from Egypt is lacking any historical reality. What is surprising is the insistence on a redemption which never took place and had no reason to take place: the image of Egypt as an oppressor that we find in religious texts is completely belied by the historical texts of the Bible, which depict Egypt as the classical place of refuge—a theme that appears again in the New Testament, with the well-known ‘Flight into Egypt’. It is difficult to understand the origin of the strong theological hatred we find in so many biblical passages for Egypt, a country which was only incidentally active in the history of the Hebrew monarchy and after the Babylonian exile had even ceased to be an autonomous power, appearing again in Jerusalem

2. G. Garbini, *I Filistei. Gli antagonisti di Israele* (Milano: Rusconi, 1997).



only with the Ptolemies. But what appears incomprehensible in the Bible is clarified by other Jewish texts, unfortunately known to us only partially and by indirect tradition. This kind of text was in fact excluded from the various biblical canons, but they are of no little relevance for anyone who wants to study Judaism in all its aspects.

The writings of so-called 'Hellenistic Judaism', from Aristobulus's fragments to Artapanus's ones, from the *Sybilline Oracles* to the *Letter of Aristeas*, are unanimous in affirming that the origins of the Jewish people were Egyptian (and not Mesopotamian). This historical tradition, well-known also to non-Jewish classical authors, can be found already in Hecataeus of Abdera who wrote at the beginning of the fourth century: we can therefore say that it was more ancient than Judaeo-Hellenistic authors. This alternative Jewish tradition was not necessarily more recent than the one we find in the canonical texts, which were completely ignored by non-Jewish authors and did not receive a very high consideration even in Jewish circles until the first century BCE. This could have happened only if the biblical tradition was very recent or did not have enough authority (or maybe both: it did not have authority because it was not ancient). What is shown by the documents we have is that at a certain point in the history of Israel there were two different ways of seeing the origins of the Jewish people (and substantial differences also existed concerning the figures of Abraham and Moses): the first was the one we call 'biblical', that is, historically speaking that of the Jerusalem priesthood; the second one can be defined as 'Egyptian', even if a majority of Palestinian Jews appear quite familiar with it. The relations between Jerusalem priests and Egyptian Jews can hardly be defined as good; even Arnaldo Momigliano had to admit that 'there were all the condition for the strong peculiarities of Egyptian Judaism to evolve into open religious separatism';<sup>3</sup> the temple of Leontopolis did not become a second Gerizim only because in Alexandria the Jews had learned to think in Greek. But I find it difficult not to put in context the anti-Egyptian position of some biblical texts (especially of the so-called deuteronomistic texts) with the ideological struggle that the Jerusalem priesthood was engaged in against Egyptian Judaism, presumably more ancient and creative than we usually imagine, in order to affirm its own supremacy. The contemporary Egypt that allows too much freedom becomes in the Old Testament the country that brings Israel to slavery, from which Israel can be redeemed only by Moses' law. We do not know

3. A. Momigliano, *Saggezza straniera* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), p. 122. *ET Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

the answer of the Egyptian Jewish authorities to this position: but we know the strong reaction of a rabbi who came from Tarsus.

Let us consider now the third 'founder', Joshua, the conqueror of the Holy Land. The mythical hero who had stopped the sun in Gibeon is actually described in a quite colourless way: all his actions are ordered and guided by God (only once did Joshua act by his own initiative, and he had no luck: Josh. 7) and he is nothing but a posthumous executor of Moses' orders. In the hierarchy of Jewish authorities (*m. Abot* 1.1) he comes after the priest Eleazar. It is not necessary to add other details to understand where and when the figure of Joshua, who gave the name to the book, was created. But Joshua's function is all the same essential in the myth: he conquers Palestine, thanks to the decisive help of Yahweh, but his conquest brings the total and systematic annihilation of the *herem*, to the subjected peoples and of their possessions. The Bible itself admits the partiality of the conquest (Josh. 13.1-6) and in it we can read many indications of the existence and vitality of the Palestinian people who should have been annihilated by the time of Joshua; but this is only a confirmation of the mythical character of the conquest narrative, which did not intend to underline the ferocity of the Jewish people, but rather to express the idea that the land of Israel had been purified from the unclean presence of an idolatrous population, in order to become the seat of the people who adored the only true god.

There also existed less bloody ways of purifying the land: for Jacob it was enough to erect a stela and to pour oil on it (Gen. 28.11-19). It is difficult to think that the idea of military conquest and annihilation came into Jewish people's minds when they were actually controlling a good part of Palestine, among some enemies but also many allies. It was an idea in the minds of those who were confined to a small part of the territory, without any political or military power, but with a strong desire for domination.

If we try to make a synthesis of what we have said so far, we notice that all origin myths have their immediate presupposition in the delusions of hierocratic Jerusalem in post-exilic times. The small group of those returning from Babylon, with a new faith, in an isolated town of modest dimensions, imagined the origins of Israel similar to their own, but with an epic magnification in number and power. In the mythical projection of the aspirations of the Jerusalem priesthood we witness a complete overturning of the historical reality, of the present as well as of the past. This attitude is not to be found only in mythical narratives, but also in a writing which can be considered the *summa* of ethnographic knowledge of the Jews: the so-called 'Table of Nations' (Gen. 10). Here, the people of the earth are

divided into three groups, corresponding to the three sons of Noah. But actually there are only two big families: the people who are similar to the Jews and those considered 'different'. This second family is the one of Japhet (we would say: the Indo-Europeans), while the first one (that we would define Hamito-Semitic) is divided into friendly peoples (Shem's descendants) and enemies (descendants of Ham, the cursed son). According to this idea of historical valuation it is possible to explain several linguistic and ethnological incongruities and it becomes clear why the Achaemenid Elam is son of Shem, while Ham is presented as the father of Egypt, but also of Assyria, Babylon, Canaan, the Phoenicians and the Philistines.

Hebrew myths are not only an overturning of past and future history: they are most of all the founding of the present. The recurring theme of all the myths is the covenant, stipulated by god with Abraham and Moses and subscribed to by the people through the action of Joshua (who once again is put on a lower level). The covenant is a present reality which cannot end because its foundation is God's word; one can wait for the accomplishment of the promise, but the covenant with God is already in force, since all the sons of Abraham have been circumcised. The covenant between the dynastic god and the king, protector of his people, was an essential aspect of royal ideology of the ancient Near East: it was mainly because of this direct relationship with the god that the king was sacred. The peculiarity of the Jewish covenant is not the abolition of the royal intermediary, announced by Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 55.3; see also Ezek. 34.9, 11), but rather the consciousness that if God is one, the people he has chosen as an ally must also be one. In the eyes of God Israel has become 'a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation' (Exod. 19.6); in other words, with Israel the Messianic Age has already begun on earth.

The texts on the origin of Israel as presented in the previous pages give us the possibility of establishing a chronological (and historical) base for the ideological milieu where those myths were created, but at the same time they allow us to understand the religious message under the narrative model which characterizes them. The common theme of the Covenant between Israel and Yahweh, stipulated in well-determined 'historical' moments and apparently not observed by God, opens the way to a messianic perspective for the Jewish faith. But it is interesting to consider why a mythic language was chosen to express a religious conception elaborated around the middle of the first millennium BCE—that is, in a historical period in which 'mythopoeic' thought was giving way to philosophy (not forgetting that Jerusalem was part of the same Persian empire that included the

Greek cities of Ionia). But the mythical message should use a mythical language, outside history and not against it, and in any case myth is not supposed to include fragments of history, which represent an intrusion of linear time into cyclical time. The myth should take place in a sacred space, yet the mention of Ur, Egypt and Palestine projected it into a profane area, more and more limited. Hebrew mythology appears therefore weakened as well as anachronistic. The choice of myth as a form of expression was probably influenced by the Babylonian milieu, still tightly linked to its archaic cultural tradition; but we should not forget that myth was also very appropriate to express in an allusive and cryptic form, as happened in Greece, a fully rational thought, such as the one which inspired the almost final redaction of the Old Testament during the Hellenistic age.

## Chapter 2

### CAIN'S IMPUNITY

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you build the tombs of prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets'... That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom you slew between the temple and the altar.<sup>1</sup>

The vehement words of Jesus of Nazareth against the priesthood of Jerusalem reveal one of the most delicate problems in the text of the Old Testament, which touches both the moral and the religious coherence of its message. Leaving aside, for the moment, the character of Zacharias (we will come to him later), the mention of the episode of Abel's death was clearly a moral protest against the impunity granted to his brother-murderer right at the beginning of human history from a religion that claimed to be based on the concept of justice. It is impossible not to be surprised in reading in the book of Genesis that on the one hand God solemnly tells Noah at the end of the Flood: 'And surely the blood of your lives will I require... whoever sheds human blood, by a human shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God he made humanity' (Gen. 9.5-6); on the other hand, that same god not only does not punish, but grants impunity to the first fratricide of human history (Gen. 4.10-16). But we can read something else in Jesus' words: it is quite natural that he wished the punishment of the scribes and Pharisees living in his own times because their ancestors had killed the prophet Zacharias; but could they have any responsibility in Abel's murder? It is not easy to answer this question and I will not try to do so; but it is clear that according to Jesus the priests of Jerusalem were somehow implicated in the matter of the justice denied to Abel.

Before treating the general problem of Cain's impunity, it is necessary

1. Mt. 23.29-30.35; see also Lk. 11.51.

to discuss a major textual problem: in the actual Hebrew text Cain's impunity simply does not exist. In Gen. 4.15 it is written: *kol hōrēg Qayin šib'ātayim yuqqām* 'whosoever slays Cain, shall be avenged sevenfold', which is contrary to what we read, more coherently, in Gen. 4.24: 'If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold'. The Masoretic text has transferred the impunity from Cain to his eventual murderer. This textual alteration radically changed the original sense of the sentence, which is anyway clear because of the context (God gives Cain a mark in order to grant him impunity) and because of the use of the same words in 4.24. In the history of exegesis the alteration of the text had no effect: the tradition of Cain's impunity was never doubted (this was possible because the Latin text of the Vulgate is different from the Hebrew). The only consequence, in modern times, was that the commentators of the text were forced to find strange linguistic theories in order to attribute a different meaning to the form *yuqqām* 'shall be avenged': this was the only way to find in the biblical text a coherence that, in fact, does not exist.

The alteration in the Hebrew text was probably introduced at a quite ancient time, before the establishment of the text which underlies the Greek translation we have.<sup>2</sup> In the LXX text we have the following reading: *pas ho apokteinas Kain hepta ekdikoumena paralusei* 'every killer of Cain will pay seven punishments'. This sentence is actually very ambiguous: the verb *ekdikeō* means both 'to avenge' and 'to punish'. The ancient exegetes were already uncertain about the meaning of such an expression. Philo of Alexandria in his commentary on Gen. 4.8-15 confesses that he is not able to explain the literal meaning of v. 15, which he quotes in the LXX version;<sup>3</sup> in the second half of the fourth century Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, answered a question of bishop Optimus regarding the word 'sevenfold' used about Cain and asserted that, according to him, Cain had to pay sevenfold for his murder.<sup>4</sup> Some years later, in 384, Jerome also received a question concerning the same expression from pope Damasus. In his answer to him<sup>5</sup> Jerome quotes the Hebrew text, which presents some interesting variants compared to the Masoretic one: *chol orec Cain sobathaim joccamo*.<sup>6</sup> But he omits to translate it, limiting himself to adding an

2. In the Vulgate there is a translation *ad sensum*: 'omnis qui occiderit Cain, septuplum punietur'.

3. *Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat*, XLVI.

4. *Epistola CCLX* (Patrologia Graeca, 32), par. 5.

5. *Epistola XXXVI*.

6. As for the pronunciation of Hebrew we can notice: the fricative *k* at the beginning of a word, the unvoiced pronunciation of the final voiced consonant in *orec*, the

inaccurate Latin translation of the versions by Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and of the LXX text;<sup>7</sup> then he concludes, after a short commentary of the text, that in his own opinion the one who killed Cain would have brought to an end the seven revenges which he had to suffer (*septem vindictas, quae in Cain tanto tempore cucurrerunt, solvat interfector*).

The textual evolution of Gen. 4.15 is part of the long history of Hebrew exegesis on the biblical problem of Cain's impunity. It is impossible to doubt that the original text of v. 15 expressed the same concept as v. 24, that is that if Cain should be killed he would have been avenged seven times<sup>8</sup>—a rhetorical way of saying that nobody should kill him. But it is also clear that the impunity granted to Cain after his fratricide appeared unacceptable to many consciences. Maybe the first reaction to the words of Genesis was the one expressed in the book of Jubilees,<sup>9</sup> probably written towards the end of second century BCE: 'At the end of that jubilee [the 19th], in the same year [931 from the creation of the world] Cain was killed after him [Adam]. And his house fell upon him, and he died in the midst of his house. And he was killed by its stones, because he killed Abel with a stone, and with a stone he was killed by righteous judgement'.<sup>10</sup> This Jewish tradition, which applied also to Cain the principle of the expiation of sins, was lost in later Judaism.

Approximately one century later, in the second half of the first century BCE, in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and, in particular, in the *Testament of Benjamin* 7, we find a new version of Cain's end: 'It is for this reason that Cain was handed over by God for seven punishments, for in every hundredth year the Lord brought upon him a plague. When he

vocalization of the word *sobathaim*, which diverges from the Masoretic one; from a morphological point of view we can notice the vocalization in *o* instead of *u* in the form *joccamo*. The only textual variant, which is anyway incomprehensible, is *joccamo*, a form which apparently presents a pronominal suffix.

7. Jerome reports one single text for the LXX and Theodotion, but his *vindictas exsolvet* is the translation of *ekdikoumena paralusei* of the former and not of *ekdikesei* of the latter, while *vindicabitur* does not correspond to *ekdikēsīn dosei* as we find it in Symmachus.

8. Maybe the original text presented the niphal form *yinnagēm*, not in the sense of the passive of the verb *nāqam* 'avenge' ('to be avenged'), but with a sort of reflexive connotation, 'to suffer a revenge', as it is clearly shown by Exod. 21.20.

9. The book of Jubilees consists of a retelling of the same facts narrated by the book of Genesis, but from a point of view which seems closer to the one we find in Qumran texts.

10. *Jub.* 4.31; translation by O.S. Wintermute, in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, II (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 64.

was two hundred years old suffering began and in his nine hundredth year (at the time of the Flood) he was deprived of life. For he was condemned on account of Abel his brother as a result of all his evil deeds, but Lamech was condemned by seventy times seven.<sup>11</sup> In this text appears for the first time a peculiar interpretation of the biblical verse that will become well known to the Church Fathers, and maybe already spread in the form we know from the MT and LXX; the concept of the impunity of Cain, who had to be struck by several plagues, was essentially rejected, but anyway he did not pay for Abel's blood with his own life. The text is so vague that we are ignorant of the circumstances of Cain's death; the words 'at the time of the flood' are absent from several manuscripts and were probably added in later times. But we can suppose that the author of the *Testament of Benjamin* already knew the story, attested only in later times, of Lamech as murderer of Cain. We have various reasons for thinking that: the connection between Cain and Lamech implies that the latter had a role in the story of the former; the seven punishments in seven centuries, that is in seven generations (considering the average age of the patriarchs when they used to generate the first son),<sup>12</sup> which end up with the demise of Cain, indicates a much earlier date than the flood (which happened in the ninth generation). The fact that Lamech wanted similar, but seven times longer, impunity in comparison with the one granted to Cain reveals that Lamech's words 'I have slain a man to my wounding and a young man to my hurt' were not referring to common people, but to exceptional characters, like Cain.<sup>13</sup>

The textual uncertainty, a direct consequence of moral reflection, on Cain's punishment and hence on the circumstances of his death, influenced the works of Philo of Alexandria; we have already mentioned his incapacity to explain the meaning of Gen. 4.15, but it is important to say that he also refused the new traditions forming around Cain's death. In the final

11. *T. Benj. 7*; translation by H.C. Kee, in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, p. 827. The testimony of this text, which has the expression 'seventy times seven' regarding Lamech, represents a good argument in favour of the secundariness of the Masoretic text of Genesis, which reads 'seventy seven times'. See also Matt. 18.22: Jesus uses the same stylistic motif saying that it is necessary to forgive 'until seventy times seven'.

12. See Gen. 5; the average age at which the patriarchs generated their first son is about 98 years.

13. The mention of the young man remains unexplained; some later commentators have seen in it a reference to a young son of Cain, but this interpretation is evidently secondary.



chapter of *Quod deterius* (n. 3 above), he comments the fact that in the Law not a word is written about the end of Cain, but in the following treatise *De posteritate Caini*, dedicated to the last verses of the fourth chapter of Genesis, the philosopher speaks about the wives and the sons of Lamech, ignoring completely vv. 23-24. Flavius Josephus appears less reticent, though he does not add many details. In his *Antiquities*, written towards the end of first century CE, the historian combined the Genesis tradition on Cain's impunity (God 'exempted him from the penalty for the murder', 1, 57) with the one about Lamech, who according to him punished Cain's descendants of the seventh generation ('He made him accused and threatened that he would punish his descendants during the seventh generation', 1, 58), being well conscious of the plan of God and of the fact that his task was to 'suffer the punishment for Cain's fratricide' (1, 65). Josephus refers explicitly to Lamech's words to his wives, giving his personal interpretation to the whole story, in an attempt to reconcile two opposing versions.<sup>14</sup>

Christian writers inherited from the Jews a biblical text that appeared corrupt in the Hebrew original and incomprehensible in the Greek translation, together with the tradition about Lamech. The most ancient author who wrote about Cain's death is Ephraim the Syrian, author of a volume of *Commentaries on Genesis and Exodus* towards the end of the fourth century.<sup>15</sup> The great Syrian writer reports two different versions: according to some, Cain was punished for seven generations and finally killed by the impious Lamech. The murderer had said that Cain had been punished after seven generations, but he would have been punished only seventy-seven generations afterwards, that is when he and his immediate descendants

14. In a late Jewish apocryphon, the *History of the Babylonian Captivity*, preserved only in a Coptic version (K.H. Kuhn, 'A Coptic Jeremiah Apocryphon', *Le Muséon* 83 [1970], pp. 95-135, 291-350) the story of Cain and Abel is briefly mentioned: 'God of the fathers... who heard the voice of Abel, the first martyr, (and) requited vengeance on Cain'. In this text we can notice that the Coptic expression *afiōōbe nouḡikba ngaein* and the English translation 'requited vengeance' are both very ambiguous. The meaning of 'to requite' is 'to reward', but also 'to avenge', therefore the exact sense of the sentence 'requited vengeance on Cain' remains unclear. But this is the correct translation of the Coptic text, equally incomprehensible, as I am informed by the Coptologist Tito Orlandi, who kindly told me about the existence of this apocryphon and gave his opinion about this phrase.

15. *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii* (ed. R.-M. Tonneau; *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 153; Louvain: Peeters, 1955); the passage is IV, 2-3.

would have been already dead. It is easy to recognize in this version of the story the same opinion of the author of the *Testament of Benjamin* and of Flavius Josephus. According to others, Lamech had deliberately killed Cain and one son of his own, who was very similar to him, because if the fratricide stayed alive the marriage between Seth's sons and Lamech's daughters would have been impossible and the land would have been neglected because of the shortage of working people. After Cain's death, Lamech provided suitable dresses for his daughters, who managed to seduce the sons of Seth. In this story told by Ephraim we can perceive a re-elaboration of a midrashic kind, which clearly originated in a Jewish milieu.

Basil of Caesarea affirmed that Cain should be punished sevenfold and that the interpretations concerning the seven generations and Cain's murder by Lamech were unfounded.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the strong denial of the great Cappadocian father, the legend of Lamech as murderer of Cain remained alive for a long time: around the year 500 Procopius of Gaza wrote a *Commentary on Genesis* in which he told how Lamech killed Cain, in spite of the mark which God had put on him and which had allowed him to survive till then. As for the number seven and its multiples, Procopius reflects the uncertainties of the exegetical tradition and reports several interpretations: Cain was punished sevenfold or seventy times, or at the seventh generation and the same happened to Lamech. But rather interesting is the explanation of the author of the fact that Lamech had to suffer a heavier punishment: he was more guilty than Cain because, unlike him, he knew already what a murder was. All these traditions, says Procopius, were created because of the need to find a punishment for Cain, who had killed his brother Abel.<sup>17</sup>

Jerome followed scrupulously the orthodox Jewish tradition. He takes this as a reference also when he is discussing the translations of Aquila and Symmachus: *maiorum nostrorum ista sententia est, quod putant in septima generatione a Lamech interfectum Cain*. In the same context we can read the sentence: *Lamech, qui septimus ab Adam, non sponte, ut in quodam hebraeo volumine scribitur, interfecit Cain: ut ipse postea confiteatur 'quia virum occidi in vulnere meo, et iuvenem in livore meo'*. Jerome's opinion is clear: according to him Lamech had killed Cain, but involuntarily, *non sponte*; here we find the first attestation of the involuntary killing of Cain by Lamech. This story, which became famous in

16. See n. 4.

17. *Commentarii in Genesim* (Patrologia Graeca, 87, 1), par. 89-90.

mediaeval art and is documented in Jewish midrashic literature, finds in Jerome its most ancient testimony; incidentally, this is another proof of the ideological position of this author, the champion of the *Hebraica veritas*. His argumentation, moreover, appears quite strange when he tries to confirm the involuntariness of Lamech's act, quoting the biblical verse, which in fact means the opposite. In order to defend his own interpretation, the writer deliberately translates the Hebrew sentence rather imprecisely (*in vulnere meo, in livore meo*), modifying the legendary ferocity of Lamech, the real motivation of the murder, by extenuating circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

As for the history of the tradition concerning Cain's death, it is necessary to examine briefly Jerome's words 'as it is written in a certain Hebrew book'. Curiously, the author who has studied the subject most deeply has misunderstood them: in his large and erudite monograph J. Aptowitz<sup>19</sup> rejects the interpretation of other scholars, such as M. Rahmer and L. Ginzberg, who had seen in Jerome's words a reference to *Midrash Tanḥuma*, and maintained instead that the Latin writer was referring to an unknown Jewish work where it was narrated that Cain had been killed voluntarily. Aptowitz's thesis has the clear apologetic intention of presenting the tradition of Lamech as a deliberate murderer as a late development, not attested before Christian times. But this interpretation is implausible in the light of what we have exposed so far, but also impossible from the merely linguistic point of view: if Jerome intended to say, as Aptowitz affirms, that Lamech killed Cain not 'voluntarily, as it is written in a certain Hebrew book'—i.e. dividing the negation *non* from the adverb *sponte*—an integration of the sentence introduced by *sed* would have been necessary: 'not voluntarily...but...'

The Hebrew book Jerome was referring to is probably the homiletic midrash written, according to the tradition, by Tanḥuma, a rabbi of the fifth generation of Palestinian Amoraim, active in the second half of the fourth century. Jerome's quotation, more or less contemporary with the redaction of the book, reveals that the Latin author was well informed about the most recent evolution of the Jewish religious tradition. The *Midrash Tanḥuma* was not preserved in the original form, but in a later

18. In his translation of the Bible Jerome provides the correct translation: *occidi virum in vulnus meum, et adulescentulum in livorem meum*.

19. V. Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel in der Agada, den Apokryphen, der hellenistischen, christlichen und muhammedanischen Literatur* (Vienna–Leipzig: Löwit, 1922), pp. 56–93 and notes pp. 157–76. The commentary dedicated to Jerome's passage is at pp. 66–67.

redaction known as *Tanḥuma* or *Yelammedenu*. The narrative in this midrash was written in the second half of the fourth century and was probably invented by Tanḥuma himself to rehabilitate the memory of Lamech, who become an innocent instrument of divine justice.

The cycle of traditions concerning Cain's death came to an end, from a literary point of view, with the work of Petrus Comestore, who wrote the *Historia scholastica* (1179),<sup>20</sup> where the stories of the Old and New Testament were narrated. In ch. 28 we find the narration of Cain's death according to the most recent Jewish tradition, but with some small variations: Lamech thought that Cain was a wild animal because of the leather he was wearing and the young son of Lamech was deliberately killed by his father with a bow. This last detail confirms the tradition concerning Lamech's ferocity, which remains the only certain datum referring to this character from a very ancient period (from before the redaction of the book of Genesis).

After having examined the important consequences that the textual change in Gen. 4.15 entailed in Jewish and Christian tradition up to the Middle Ages, we can go back to our first problem: Cain's impunity. We do not know with certainty when the change in the text was made (Philo of Alexandria, in the first half of the first century, already documents it): but it is clear that the moral rejection of the impunity granted to the first fratricide appeared relatively early<sup>21</sup> within the priestly class responsible for the keeping and transmission of the *Torah*. It is quite evident, in fact, that in spite of all its logical and textual incongruities the 'new' text of v. 15 minimizes the concept of Cain's impunity.

The untouchability of Cain, that is a sort of special impunity, together with his destiny of perpetual wandering, is implicit in his name: *qayin* is the Hebrew equivalent of a word that in north-western Semitic means 'blacksmith', a member of a very particular category of artisans. The 'blacksmiths' were characterized by mobility and by the possession of magical powers: because of that, they were the object of forms of taboo. Though our comprehension of Near Eastern mythologies is indeed very sketchy, the absence of the root *qyn* referring to the working of metals in many Semitic languages, the name of *Ktr* given to the smith-god in Ugaritic texts and the lack of traditions concerning a mythical fratricide, make

20. *Patrologia Latina*, 198.

21. The redaction of the actual text of the book of Genesis, because of its length reveals the influences of Greek literature; therefore it is highly implausible that it was written before the third century BCE.

us think that the insertion of the character of Cain in the mythological complex of the origins of humankind is not original, but was created by the author of the book of Genesis. Before the composition of that book, traditions concerning Cain (probably considered eponymous), Lamech, Tubalcain, etc. already existed. In the biblical narrative they are presented as 'cultural heroes', inventors of specific human activities such as cattle-breeding, musical instruments, the working of metals. On this view, the book of Genesis represents an equivalent, on a much smaller scale, of Phoenician traditions collected by Philo of Byblos: this means that, in all probability, they both drew from the Canaanite cultural heritage. What appears new in the biblical narrative is the echo of legendary happenings involving Cain and Lamech: the two characters are in fact explicitly connected in v. 24. The allusive character of Lamech's words makes it impossible to reconstruct the whole story behind them, but maybe the tradition, spread in Christian times, concerning the killing of Cain by Lamech was not a creation of Late Judaism, but rather the memory of an ancient legend, of course adapted to the new context created by v. 15. The only datum that emerges clearly is Lamech's ferocity and this leads us to conclude that the killing of Cain was not a mere accident.

We can therefore say that it is quite probable that within the Syro-Palestinian traditions existed an ancient Hebrew tradition about the stories of the founders of human civilization. One of those stories narrated the killing of the first 'blacksmith' (Cain) by Lamech, in spite of the impunity of the victim. Moreover, the murderer arrogated the impunity to himself. What we have to examine now is why this clearly profane tradition was included into the narrative of a biblical book.

The initial chapters of the book of Genesis, with their narratives concerning the origins of the universe and of humankind, represent the 'founding' moments of Hebrew religious ideology: humanity's mortal nature, its destiny on earth, the subordinate condition of the woman, the sabbatical rest and other aspects, which all find a mythical prototype in the narratives of the first pages of the Torah. The insertion of the story of Cain and Abel within the complex of primordial myths seems hardly comprehensible: not only because the fratricide and the consequent impunity are extraneous to Jewish religious structures, but also because the first covenant stipulated by Yahweh with a human being (with Noah), includes the absolute prohibition of any homicide. The passage in Gen. 8.21–9.7 can be considered a sort of correction which Yahweh wanted to make to his previous attitude towards the human beings he had created; making a solemn promise to himself not to punish humankind again with another deluge, because his

creature is wicked by instinct (8.21), the god admits implicitly that he has gone too far with the punishment. The strong accent on the prohibition of homicide and on the fact that the responsible persons will pay for their action is clearly a repudiation of what Yahweh had done regarding Cain. The text does not leave any doubt over the allusion to Cain in this passage and the presence of relevant textual variations offers another confirmation. The Hebrew text, syntactically very complex (but the same complexity characterizes the other versions too), reads: 'And surely your life blood will I require; of every living creature I will require it and of every human, of every brother I will require human life' (Gen. 9.5). The Vulgate translates quite freely a Hebrew text identical to the MT: *sanguinem enim animarum vestrarum requiram de manu cunctarum bestiarum; et de manu hominis, de manu viri, et fratris eius requiram animam hominis*. The syntactic separation of *fratris* from *viri* indicates a wrong interpretation of the Hebrew expression 'iš 'āhîw. The LXX presents a variant in the final part of the verse: *kai ek cheiros anthrōpou adelphou ekzētēsō tēn psuchēn tou anthrōpou* 'and at the hand of the brother human will I require the human life', with the omission of the Hebrew words *miyyad 'iš*, which evidently are to be considered a secondary amplification of the original text.<sup>22</sup> The peculiar expression 'brother human' shows however that the Greek also translated a corrupted text. The only sure thing is that this verse makes an explicit reference to Cain's fratricide.

In order to understand the function of the story of Cain and of his impunity in the broader context of the primordial history that the book of Genesis describes, it is necessary to make some observations. First, we should note that the figure of Cain, the 'blacksmith', does not play his original role in the biblical narrative: he is a farmer, without being the inventor of agriculture—from the context it is clear that this was already practised by Adam. Cain was therefore chosen not because of his function, but for some other peculiarity of his, probably the impunity that the tradition conferred on him. Another aspect we should consider is the fratricide: the fact that he killed his brother is important, though not essential, because at the moment when the episode took place, excluding Adam (the story required two equivalent characters), next to Cain there was only his brother Abel.<sup>23</sup>

22. The insertion of *miyyad 'iš* makes the text heavier with the useless repetition of the word *yad*, but at the same time attenuates the reference to brotherhood, forming the expression 'iš 'āhîw, which often means more generally 'each other'.

23. A very important biblical data, not often remembered by biblical scholars and theologians, is the existence of population before Adam's descendants: otherwise whom

From these elements we can infer that the episode of Cain and Abel was written in a relatively recent time and it is not directly derived from Canaanite tradition, while the strong condemnation of fratricide after the end of the deluge indicates that Cain's impunity did not respect the fratricidal aspect of the crime. Our analysis should now focus on Abel, who is characterized by two features: he is a second-born and he is a shepherd who offered to Yahweh 'the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof' (Gen. 4.4). As we have said, the fact that Abel was Cain's brother is irrelevant: the essential point is that Abel was someone who offered sacrifices to Yahweh. Abel's sacrifices were not common ones: the specification that the victims were burnt with their fat indicates a special type of sacrifice. Moreover it is very important that he offered the firstlings of his flock, because the offering of firstlings was a prerogative of the priests, as is written in Lev. 27.26 and Num. 18.17. Abel was therefore a priest of Yahweh and Cain's mythical impunity was used to prefigure an historical impunity granted to someone who had killed a priest.

The Old Testament recalls the killing of a priest named Zechariah (2 Chron. 24.20-22), but apart from the fact that this episode appears as a late invention of the Chronicler who intended to hide the historicity of another episode whose protagonist had the same name,<sup>24</sup> this is not relevant to our research, because Zechariah the priest was killed on the order of King Joash. In fact, nobody would have thought of 'requiring the blood' of someone who had killed by order of David or Solomon.<sup>25</sup> We indirectly understand the identity of the unavenged priest by the gospel passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter: the prophet Zechariah son of Barachiah, author of the first eight chapters of the book of that name, was of priestly origins, as we know from the title 'son of Iddo' he receives in the books of Ezra and 1 Esdras and in the book of Zechariah itself. Against the opinion of many biblical scholars, who deny the identity of the biblical writer-prophet with the one mentioned by Jesus, it is sufficient to quote the

should Cain fear (Gen. 4.14)? Where did Cain find a wife and enough people to found a city (Gen. 4.17)?

24. For a commentary on this episode, see my book *Il ritorno dall'esilio babilonese* (Brescia: Paideia, 2001).

25. I find therefore very meaningful the sentence pronounced by the dying priest Zechariah in 2 Chron. 24.22: 'Yahweh looked upon it and required it'. Clearly the author wanted to create a precedent for another unpunished murder, whose victim was a second Zechariah, another priest with prophetic attitude.

testimony of the *Targum of Lamentations* 2.20,<sup>26</sup> which adds to the Hebrew text the sentence: 'as you have killed Zechariah son of Iddo, high priest and true prophet, in the temple of the Lord on the day of the Fasting'.

The Old Testament hides this episode with a curtain of silence, but the facts were well-known to the people, as it is shown by Jesus' words and by the existence of a late tomb of Zechariah near Jerusalem. From his own writing we know that Zechariah was the prophet who acclaimed Zerubbabel as Messiah and Zerubbabel was the direct descendant of David at the time of Darius I (520 BCE), a king who never managed to reign. We also know that postexilic Jerusalem was governed not by a king, but by the High Priest Joshua. We do not need too much imagination to understand what happened: the priest (or the high priest, according to the Targum quoted earlier) and prophet Zechariah was murdered in the temple, probably during the coronation of Zerubbabel. There is a high possibility that the king-to-be had the same destiny. The bloody *coup d'état* was organized by Joshua, another priest (an Italian catholic would say 'confrère') who started the hierocratic regime in Jerusalem and so was never punished for the murder he committed.<sup>27</sup> A hierocratic regime which came to the power by means of the murder of a high priest in the temple could simply avoid talking about its origins in its own writings; but it looked for a theological justification projecting the right to impunity in a origin myth.<sup>28</sup>

26. See S.H. Blank, 'The Death of Zechariah in Rabbinic Literature', *HUCA* 12-13 (1937-38), pp. 327-46.

27. For a study of the literary traditions concerning the unclear happenings which marked the return from the exile, see my monograph quoted in n. 25.

28. My student Chiara Peri kindly called my attention to the interesting book by Abraham B. Yehoshua dedicated to the relationship between ethics and literature, *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt: Literary Essays* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000) (*Ha-koah ha-nora' šel ašmah qeṭannah*, 1998); in the first essay of the volume the author examines the story of Cain and attributes to the literary ability of the biblical writer the fact that a horrible murder was not only unpunished, but in fact rewarded and the reader does not have any kind of moral reaction. As we have seen in our study, there were on the contrary many important reactions. Yehoshua declares that he intends to read the texts directly, not considering the numerous historical and philological commentaries, because they are 'classical' and as such characterized by the possibility of reading them out of the historical and moral context in which they have been written (p. 17 n. 4). His conclusion here confirms that a merely 'literary' reading of the Bible is absolutely inadequate even if sometimes it is convenient.



## Chapter 3

### ABRAHAM AND DAMASCUS

One of the most important texts of the community whose library was discovered in Qumran is the so-called *Damascus Document*, so far documented by no less than 10 copies, all of them fragmentary. This work was already brought to scholars' attention in 1910, when S. Schechter published two large fragments of it, found in a Cairo *genizah*.<sup>1</sup> The reference to Damascus in the title with which the writing is presently known was introduced at the beginning of the 20s and derives from the fact that the text mentions a 'New Covenant in the land of Damascus' (6.19; 8.21; 19.33-34; 20.12)<sup>2</sup> and those 'who went out from the land of Judah and sojourned in the land of Damascus' (6.5); finally, in Damascus will arrive the Interpreter of the Law, according to the peculiar interpretation the author gives of Amos 5.26-27 (7.14-20). Damascus is the place of birth of the community and, at the same time, its ideal reference point.

Until the discovery of the first fragments of the *Damascus Document* in Qumran, at the beginning of the 50s, nobody doubted that the reference to Damascus had to be taken in a literal sense. One of the first commentators, R.H. Charles, wrote that Damascus was the place where 'the New Covenant was established by the leaders of the Party...but from whence they returned to the land of Israel. There is not a hint that Damascus continued to be even one permanent place of sojourn of the Party among others, much less their headquarters'.<sup>3</sup> After the discoveries at Qumran it was

1. S. Schechter, *Documents of Jewish Sectaries*. I. *Fragments of a Zadokite Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910); J.A. Fitzmeyer edited a reprint of the work in 1970, adding *Prolegomena* and bibliography.

2. Ch. Rabin, *The Zadokite Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954). In the quotations of the passages from *Damascus Document* columns 19 and 20 correspond to B1 and 2 of less recent editions.

3. R.H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 793.

soon clear that in the *Damascus Document*, strictly related to other sectarian writings and to the *Community Rule* in particular, the reference to Damascus was intended in a purely ideal sense and that no member of the community had ever been there. In those years the awareness grew among scholars that 'Damascus' was a conventional term to indicate the site of Qumran; for many years in fact the general opinion was that the archaeological remains near the caves where the manuscripts had been found corresponded to the building (a sort of monastery) where the members of the community who had produced the texts lived and wrote. Against this prevailing opinion Isaac Rabinowitz wrote an article in 1954<sup>4</sup> where he maintained that 'the land of Damascus' where the community was born was not Qumran, but the city of Babylon in the time of the exile. Though it received many criticisms, the thesis which identified Damascus with Babylon found several supporters, such as A. Jaubert,<sup>5</sup> J. Murphy O' Connor<sup>6</sup> and P.R. Davies,<sup>7</sup> while Ch. Milikowsky<sup>8</sup> underlined the metaphorical nature of the term 'Damascus'. More recently, C. Coulot<sup>9</sup> has managed to write a whole article on the 'New Covenant in the land of Damascus' without even mentioning the Syrian city.

It is interesting to note that, during the history of the studies we have briefly mentioned, the literal interpretation of the name 'Damascus' has been gradually but completely abandoned. But the question now is why Qumran, Babylon or any other ideal place should be called 'Damascus'? Why was it not possible to indicate the desert or Judah or Nebuchadnezzar's capital with their own names? Why was the name 'Damascus' chosen instead of, for example, 'Aram', or 'Aram Naharaim', or 'ēber ha-nāhār, or even, simply, *ha-midbār*? Some have answered these questions by saying that the name 'Damascus' was chosen because of Amos 5.26-27, a passage quoted and commentated in *Damascus Document* 7.14-20, where

4. I. Rabinowitz, 'A Reconsideration of "Damascus" and "390 Years" in the "Damascus" ("Zadokite")Fragments', *JBL* 73 (1954), pp. 11-35.

5. A. Jaubert, 'Le pays de Damas', *RB* 65 (1958), pp. 214-48.

6. J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'The Essenes and their History', *RB* 81 (1974), pp. 215-44.

7. P.R. Davies, 'The Birthplace of the Essenes: Where is "Damascus"?', *RevQ* 14 (1989-1990), pp. 503-17; see also *idem*, *Damascus Covenant. An Interpretation of the 'Damascus Document'* (JSOTSup, 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1983).

8. Ch. Milikowsky, 'Again: Damascus in Damascus Document and in Rabbinic Literature', *RevQ* 11 (1982-1984), pp. 97-106.

9. C. Coulot, 'La Nouvelle Alliance au pays de Damas', *RevScRel* 65 (1991), pp. 1-9.

in fact the name of the town is found. But we should also note that the text of Amos is scarcely comprehensible in the MT and that the quotation in the *Damascus Document*, at least in the existing manuscript, presents some missing words and its form does not correspond exactly to the biblical text. We must also consider that this particular passage of the *Damascus Document*, very important for the self-definition of the community, consists of a particular exegesis of several biblical texts, chosen with the aim of depicting the historical and ideological process that led to the constitution of the community itself. The reconstruction *a posteriori* of such a process forced the author not only to give a very personal interpretation of the biblical passages, but also, in some cases, to change the text. This is exactly what happened in the case of Damascus: where the Amos text mentioned a captivity 'beyond Damascus' (*mhl 'h ldmśq*), the *Damascus Document* reads instead *m 'hly dmśq* 'from my tent (in) Damascus' (the preposition *l-*, strangely enough, is missing). The reference to Damascus as the ideal birthplace of the community is therefore obtained with a modification of the original text of the prophet, who was referring to a completely different situation; but this means that the concept of 'Damascus' existed before the interpretation of Amos text, which was in fact artificially adapted to a specific ideology. In other words, it is not true that the name of Damascus was derived from the passage of Amos; it was the biblical text to be interpreted in the light of a concept of Damascus already existing in the mind of the author. In order to understand the meaning of the allusion to Damascus we must now briefly analyse the text of the *Damascus Document*.

The *Damascus Document* is a doctrinal text of a group of people, and more specifically of a group of priests (6.2-4), who 'have entered' (*bw* is the verb used in the text) the 'New Covenant in the land of Damascus'. The geographical specification, usually intended as the place where the New Covenant was made, should be interpreted in a different way and more strictly connected to the word 'Covenant'. The text is not referring to a 'New Covenant made in the land of Damascus', but to a new 'Covenant (made) in the land of Damascus'. Since, as it is now clear, the members of the community lived in Judah and not in the land of Damascus, when the text mentions those 'who went out from the land of Judah and sojourned (*wygwrrw*) in the land of Damascus', this expression has a merely symbolic value. A 'new' covenant necessarily implies the existence of an 'old' covenant that, according to our interpretation, had been stipulated 'in the land of Damascus'. The *Damascus Document* says quite clearly what this old covenant is: it is the one that God made with 'the forefathers' (1.4; 6.2),

that is with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, explicitly called ‘covenanters’ (*b’ly bryt*) in 3.24. But the Bible does not mention Damascus. It is worth examining this question more carefully.

Many times in Genesis the promises and the covenant made by God with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are mentioned. More precisely the pact was made with Abraham and then renewed with his direct descendants. But the name of Damascus is never related to these events. The first promise was made to Abraham when he was in Harran, in Northern Syria (Gen. 12.1-4); it was then confirmed in Shechem, as soon as he arrived in the land of Canaan (Gen. 12.5-9); a third promise was made after his return from Egypt, in an unknown place (Gen. 13.14-17). The fourth promise, immediately followed by the making of the covenant with its miraculous liturgy, is extensively described in ch. 15, but the place of these important events is not mentioned at all. After these episodes, the new promise of covenant and of a numerous descent in Gen. 17.1-8 looks like a repetition; once again the text does not say where this event took place. After Abraham, God renews his promise to Isaac in Gerar in Palestine (Gen. 26.3-6) and to Jacob. In the second case we have two stories, which look like two different versions of the same episode, set in Bethel.

Leaving aside for a moment the problem of the different traditions that were probably gathered into the narrative of the book of Genesis, we should base our discussion on the text in its present form. Now, it is indeed strange that the biblical text, which gives so many geographical details about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their numerous wanderings, omits the most important and says nothing about the place where the covenant between God and Abraham was made. This omission was already noted by the author of *Jubilees*, who offers a solution by setting the episode next the oaks of Mamre, in Hebron (14.10). But this is evidently a secondary development of the tradition, which finds its origin in the desire to fill an incomprehensible gap in the narrative. The choice of the oaks of Mamre was obviously inspired by the book of Genesis, the source of the *Book of Jubilees*, following the principle of the most plausible setting of the episode.<sup>10</sup> Still we have a clue that allows us to make an hypothesis about the place of the covenant between God and Abraham: we must look for it within the geographical horizon described in Gen. 15.18, where a country spreading

10. In a different context, the specification in the *Genesis Apocryphon* 21.8-9, of the place of the promise to Abraham narrated in Gen. 13.14-17 (the Bible once again omits any geographical setting) should also be regarded as secondary: the episode would have taken place in Ramat Hazor (*rmt hšwr*), ‘north of Bethel’.

‘from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates’ is mentioned. While the enumeration of peoples we find in v. 19 reflects historical-mythical populations dwelling in Palestine and therefore ascribes to this region the land that God promises to the patriarch, in another text which can be considered ‘parallel’ to the book of Genesis, the so-called *Genesis Apocryphon*, we find a significant description, in which the Promised Land is much larger and accurately delimited: ‘from the river of Egypt to Lebanon and Senir, and from the great sea to Hauran, and all the land of Gebal as far as Kadesh, and all the great desert which is to the east of Hauran and Senir as far as the Euphrates...’ (21.11-12). This is the same geographical horizon as Deut. 1.7 where we find a prevalence of Palestinian regions, but the Euphrates is also mentioned. The presence of this river reveals an unexpected enlargement towards the north of the territory promised by Yahweh to Israel, though the two biblical texts (but not the *Genesis Apocryphon*) are apparently limited to Palestine only. From a geographical point of view, the region between the Nile and the Euphrates includes both Palestine and Syria, with their population of Canaanites and Aramaeans. If on a map we draw a straight line from the region of the Nile Delta (i.e. from Cairo) to the Euphrates to the east of the Syrian desert, we will see that the geographical centre of this region is the ‘land of Damascus’ and that Damascus is the most important historical centre of the whole area. The words pronounced by Yahweh in Gen. 15.18 find a meaning only if God was speaking in a place not far from Damascus.

In the biblical narrative the name of Damascus appears only twice in relation to Abraham: in Gen. 14.17 the town of Sobah is mentioned, ‘which is north of Damascus’, where Abraham reaches the oriental kings he has already defeated. From this detail it is possible to understand that the original setting of Abraham’s wars was the land of Damascus, and not the Syro-Palestinian region as is written in the biblical text. In Gen. 15.2 we find mentioned an enigmatic ‘Damascus Eliezer’: this expression is usually rendered as ‘Eliezer of Damascus’, a ‘steward’ (literally: ‘son’) of the house of Abraham who would have been his heir if Isaac was not born. It is useless to make any hypothesis about this figure, who appears only in a corrupt text whose extreme allusiveness makes it very probable that some sentences have been eliminated. The only thing we can note is that if a ‘son of the house’ of Abraham was connected with Damascus, the ‘house’ itself was probably related to the same town. In this biblical passage it is very clear that the textual tradition wanted to hide, already in ancient times, the real relationship that tied Abraham and Damascus. Such a relationship was evidently much closer than the Bible intended to show: signifi-

cantly, despite the *damnatio memoriae*, the text has preserved some traces of the Damascene tradition.

The information neglected by the Bible can be partially found in the works of Judaeo-Hellenistic authors and classical authors who have drawn from them. In his *Praeparatio evangelica*, Eusebius quotes Nicolaus of Damascus who, because of his origins, probably knew very well the history of the town, or at least its traditions. The passage reported, or rather summarized, by Eusebius tells how Abraham arrived from Chaldaea with an army, reigned over Damascus, where he became so famous that he left his name to a place called 'House of Abraham' (*Abraamou oikēsis*) (9.16). Eusebius also mentions the writer Apollonius Molon, author of a work against the Jews, according to whom Abraham found refuge on the mountains of Syria (9.19). The most detailed data about Abraham and Damascus can be found in Justinus, epitomizer of the *Philippic Histories* by Pompeus Trogus, a Latin writer of Gallic origin who wrote towards the end of the first century BCE. According to Trogus, the Jews were of Damascene origin and Abraham was king of Damascus after Azelus (Hazael) and Adores (Hadadezer); after him was king Israel, who had ten sons, the last of which was Joseph (36.2). Of course we do not know the Jewish source of Trogus, probably an indirect one, nor the sources of the other writers; but we can say with some certainty that the works used by classical authors derived from those of Jewish authors who wrote in Greek.

The importance of these extra-biblical Jewish sources for the reconstruction of the historical tradition of Israel has been unjustly neglected by scholars, who are often too much inclined to consider only the biblical data. Regardless of the reliability of the Judaeo-Hellenistic writers prior to Josephus Flavius, the very existence of such writers has a great historical importance: if a Jewish author who wrote about the history of his own people in the second or in the first century BCE reports traditions which are sometimes widely different from the one we read in the books of the Old Testament, this means that the 'biblical' version of the fact did not exist yet (we cannot say what was written exactly in the 'biblical' books in the redaction of the third century BCE), or it was ignored by many Jews, or it was not considered trustworthy or normative as it became later. The case of Eupolemus is extremely significant: he belonged to a family of high priests and was very close to Judah Maccabee; his historiographic work, finished towards 159 BCE, was largely used by Josephus, who integrated with it the biblical sources, but never wanted to quote his name explicitly;<sup>11</sup> despite his

11. On the figure and work of Eupolemus, see my studies 'Eupolemo storico

substantial ideological and religious orthodoxy, his narration was sometimes radically different from the biblical one (Eupolemus for example presents David as Saul's son). The inevitable conclusion is that there are some well-founded reasons to consider that the Jewish traditions gathered in the Bible were, at least in some cases, elaborated later than those spread among the Jews of the Hellenistic age. The study of Abraham we are conducting in these pages is another confirmation of this idea.

But let us go back to the biblical text. The ancient tie that bound Abraham and Damascus, barely perceptible in the present text of Genesis, but largely testified by the extra-biblical traditions, finds important confirmation in the prophetic literature. The allusive nature of these texts, the majority of which have been composed as religious and ethical considerations about particular events and were therefore closely linked to the context of the history of Israel,<sup>12</sup> partially excluded them from the process of historical revision which systematically involved all the so-called historical books. In the prophetic books it is therefore possible to find references to facts and historical situations that are never mentioned in other books of the Old Testament. In the texts we are going to consider now there is no allusion to Abraham, obviously for a very simple reason: they allude to real historical situations of the eighth century BCE, which found their precedents in an archaic history, at the time of Israel's origins, according to an historical tradition which is never made explicit in the text, because it was too well-known. Since the origins of Israel implied in the allusions in the prophetic books are very closely connected with Damascus and not simply with a generically Aramaic milieu, it is clear that only the character of Abraham as it is described by the extra-biblical texts could fit in such a context. I have previously noted, that the tradition that fixed Ur of the Chaldaeans as Abraham's birth place is to be considered secondary and relatively late;<sup>13</sup> the recent origin of the relationship between Abraham and Ur is however confirmed by the Bible itself. In Gen. 11.31 we read that only Terah, Abraham and Lot left Chaldea to reach Palestine; this means that Nahor, Abraham's brother, and his wife Milchah stayed in Chaldea. But later in

giudeo', *Rendiconti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, ser. IX, 9 (1998), pp. 613-34 and 'Eupolemo e Flavio Giuseppe', *Rendiconti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, ser. IX, 11 (2000), pp. 367-82.

12. See G. Garbini, 'Dal veggente al profeta: evoluzione di un genere letterario', *Ricerche Storico Bibliche* 11 (1999), pp. 69-83.

13. G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 140-45.

the narration we find out that Nahor's family lived in Aram Naharaim instead (Gen. 24.10) and that Bethuel, son of Nahor and father of Rebecah, lived in Paddan-Aram (Gen. 25.20; 28.2). Both expressions indicated, clearly, the same place, that is the region of Harran in Northern Syria; from there, in fact, Abraham left for Palestine. It is also important to notice that both Bethuel and his son Laban were called 'the Aramaean' (Gen. 28.5; 31.20 and 24) and that the Aramaean origin of Nahor (and consequently of his brother Abraham) is fully recognized when his niece Laban gives an Aramaic name, *y<sup>e</sup>gar śāh<sup>a</sup>dūtā*, to the heap of stones which marked the covenant between him and his cousin Jacob, who instead called the same place *gal'ed* (Gen. 31.47). From the familiar ties which bound the three great patriarchs to the Aramaic people living in Northern Syria, according to the biblical text, we can draw the conclusion that Jewish tradition preserved the memory of the Aramaic origin<sup>14</sup> at least of a relevant part<sup>15</sup> of

14. Regarding this subject, it is necessary to analyse more closely the text of Deut. 26.5 included in the so-called 'profession of faith' of the Israelite. The Masoretic text reads *'aramī 'ōbēd 'ābī* 'my father was a dying Aramaean': it is quite evidently an absurd and corrupted text, a product of the rabbinic revision of the biblical text. Jerome, champion of the *hebraica veritas*, introduced it in the Christian world with his translation *Syrus persequabatur patrem meum (qui descendit in Aegyptum)*: in the English RSV in fact we read, 'A Syrian ready to perish was my father'. The traditional Jewish interpretation, officially stated in the *Onqelos Targum*, was: 'Laban the Aramaean tried to destroy (*b' l' wbd*) my father'. Such an interpretation not only contradicts the sense of the story of the relationship between Laban and Jacob as it is depicted in the book of Genesis, but does a violence to Hebrew grammar, since the verb *'abad* is intransitive. In a recent article dedicated to the history of the interpretation of this verse the author suggests that the form *'ōbēd* should not be intended as an Hebrew present participle, but rather as an Aramaic causative perfect: (see R.C. Steiner, 'The "Aramean" of Deuteronomy 26:5: *Peshat* and *Darash*', in M. Cogan, B.L. Eichler and J.H. Tigay [eds.], *Tehillah le-Moshe. Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997], pp. 127-38). I am grateful to my friend Felice Israel who has kindly indicated this study to me. The LXX version has a different text: *Surian apebalen ho patēr mou* 'my father left Syria', but the Alexandrian manuscript reads *apelaben* instead of *apebalen*: 'my father obtained Syria'. The Syriac version has *l'rm 'tdbr 'aby* 'my father was brought away from Aram', a not very clear version which is anyway another interpretation of the Greek text. In the more recent Christian versions it is possible to notice the diffuse adoption of the reading *'ōbēr* instead of *'ōbēd* and of the translation 'a wandering Aramaean was my father'. Now, since the original verb in this verse probably described a continuous action and so had to be a participle and considering that often this kind of textual change concerns only one letter, the simplest emendation of *'ōbēd* is *'ōbēd*: this verb describes perfectly the status of Jacob, who was at Laban's service, and finds an echo in Hos. 12.13:



the historical Israel. Such memory can be traced back to a period which preceded the settlement of the Aramaean tribes, which took place starting from the thirteenth century BCE.<sup>16</sup> The peculiar relationship of Abraham with the town of Damascus, hidden in the book of Genesis, is placed on a different level, both geographically and chronologically, from that of Jacob or of the age of the origins. The character of Isaac remains evanescent.

In Amos 3.12 we find an important reference to the pair Samaria-Damascus. The Masoretic text reads: 'as the shepherd takes out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the children of Israel be taken out; those who dwell in Samaria a shred of tribe and in Damascus a couch'. It is clear that the last word, *'āreś*, is a corruption because is meaningless. The LXX translates with a slightly better meaning, but no logic, *hiereis* 'priests'. This is clearly a solution invented by the translator, who has formed a Greek word using the consonants of the Hebrew one. The general sense of the passage is, however, clear: of the sons of Israel dwelling in Samaria and Damascus only a little part shall be saved. We find the same concept in Amos 5.3: 'The city that went out with a thousand shall be left with an hundred and that which went out with a hundred shall be left with

'And Jacob fled into the country of Syria, and Israel served (*wayya* <sup>a</sup>*bōd*) for a wife and for a wife he kept sheep'. The original sentence of the book of Genesis probably was: 'my father was an Aramaean who was a servant'. It is understandable that later the Jewish sensibility considered hardly honourable the memory of the condition of the forefather of the people. From a theological point of view, however, Jacob's slavery has a crucial function: the passage in Deut. 26.3-10 celebrates the redeeming action of God, who chooses a stranger (Aramaean) of humble condition (servant) and makes him, together with his family, 'guest' (*gēr*) in the most important country, Egypt, and then he changes him into a big nation (*gōy gādōl*), assigning him a land. In the economy of our discussion it is anyway important to stress in a relatively recent theological vision, as the Deuteronomic one, the Aramaean origin of the Jewish people is explicitly mentioned, even if in the book of Genesis Jacob is never called openly 'Aramaean'.

15. It is worth remembering here that the most important linguistic characteristic which marks the difference between biblical Hebrew and Phoenician is the disappearance of the final *-t* in the singular absolute state of feminine substantives and that this phenomenon constitutes an important isogloss between Hebrew and ancient Aramaic.

16. When I wrote one of my first articles, in 1956 (a very brief article which did not find much success) I expressed the opinion that there should be a relationship between the Banu Yamina (for some time transformed to the harmless Maru Yamina) of Mari and the Benjaminites of Judah. I am still of the same opinion and I am also convinced that the 'sons of the South' should correspond to some 'sons of the North', because it is difficult to consider a coincidence the fact that in the 'north', i.e. in the Aramaized town of Sam'al (today Zinjirli), there was a people who defined themselves as *y'd*.

ten for the House of Israel' (see also 6.9: 'And it shall come to pass, if there remain ten men in one house, that they shall die'). With these examples it becomes quite simple to emend 'ares' in 3.12 to 'eser' 'ten', because this number appears in several conceptually similar passages. The important information we derive from this passage is that in Damascus there lived some 'sons of Israel', of whom only a small percentage would be saved, as would happen to those in Samaria. We can now try to determine more exactly who were the 'sons of Israel' who dwelt in Damascus: a colony of Israelites, probably quite a large number of people, or maybe all the inhabitants of the town, called 'children of Israel' by the prophet for historical reasons such as common origins. We cannot answer this question (and the mention of the presence of synagogues in Damascus in Acts 9.2 is of little help), but the connection between Israel and Damascus is nevertheless clear.

Another specific connection between Israel and Damascus is in Isa. 17.1-6. In an oracle a parallel is drawn between the destruction of Damascus and the destruction of Ephraim: 'The fortress of Ephraim shall fall and the kingship of Damscus, and the rest of Aram shall be as the glory of the children of Israel' (v. 3). The meaning of this verse is not very clear and it is possible that its obscurity has been caused by a secondary intervention in the text. The LXX version makes the situation more intricate, because it presents a much longer text, clearly a later amplification.

On the same lines as the previous texts, there is also an important passage in Deutero-Zechariah at the beginning of the work. It contains an echo, in the form of an actualization, of the texts of Amos and Isaiah, which probably alludes to the Assyrian conquest of Damascus (732 BCE) and Samaria (722 BCE). The passage in Deutero-Zechariah, judging from the geographical sequence and the substantial contemporaneousness of the events, is certainly referring to Alexander the Great's campaign (333-32 BCE). 'The word of Yahweh is against the land of Hazrak and will rest upon Damascus, for the cities of Aram and all the tribes of Israel belong to Yahweh' (Zech. 9.1). The Masoretic text, followed by the LXX version, hid the reference to Aram reading 'dm instead of 'rm, losing completely the meaning of the sentence. The word 'ayin, translated *oculus* in the Vulgate and interpreted as *ephorā(i)* 'look' in the Greek text, should be understood in the sense of 'source', a term metaphorically used to indicate the descent, as in Deut. 33.28 where 'ēn Ya 'aqōb 'source of Jacob' is the equivalent of 'people of Israel'. The word *mēnūhā* 'rest', used to define Damascus in relation to Yahweh, is clearly corrupt; the LXX translates *thusia* 'sacrifice',

reading *minhâ*. It is not possible to determine which was the original word, or even the specific semantic value of the word 'rest'. However, it is clear that in this verse Damascus is presented as a place somehow privileged by Yahweh, who is considered the 'owner' of the Aramaeans as well as of Israel. This historical vision, depicted by a prophet of the fourth century BCE, is completely absent from the historical books of the Bible; therefore, we cannot be surprised if the text appears corrupt in all the traditions.

A text which deserves a special attention is Amos 5.26-27, which we have already mentioned because it is quoted by the *Damascus Document*. Its first part, where some forms of idolatry of the Israelites are mentioned, is scarcely comprehensible, probably because of the redactional interventions in the text. The LXX version, whose Hebrew *Vorlage* was quite different from the Masoretic text, also presents several problems. The Vulgate follows the Greek text, omitting some words. More important for our argument is the second part of the passage, where Yahweh states: 'Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus' (the same text is found in Greek and Latin versions). The question now is: why should the exile of Israel be 'beyond Damascus'? This information is interesting, because it is different from the usual references to the Babylonian captivity. In order to answer this question, we must turn to another passage in the same book, Amos 1.5. Here the prophet, in an oracle against Damascus, threatens the Aramaeans of the town with exile in Qir; this was the region from which Yahweh himself, seen as a universal god, had made them come to Syria, as he had called Israel from Egypt and Philistines from Caphtor (Crete) (Amos 9.7). In the theological conception of Amos, the place of the exile for a people had to be its country of origin. From a historical point of view this idea may appear strange, but it reveals a deep religious thought: bringing back, after centuries, a people to the place from where it had come was like cancelling all its history. Only God had the power to do this, establishing again, with the punishment of exile, the original situation, before the beginning of history. When Yahweh threatens the people of Israel with sending them 'beyond Damascus', he means to send them back to their place of origin.<sup>17</sup> Thus an allusion in a prophetic text confirms what we have said

17. To the light of the previous considerations, we might suspect that the reading 'Egypt' in Amos 9.7, referring to Israel's origin, should be considered secondary. According to the book of Genesis, Egypt was only an intermediate halting place between Mesopotamia and Syria, from one side, and Palestine from the other. Egypt was considered the country of origin of the Jews by some Judaeo-Hellenistic authors; according to Amos, Israel came from Damascus.

before about the origins of Israel: the most ancient Jewish tradition set them in Syria, near Damascus, closely related to the Aramaean origins of the town. It is interesting that a late redactor of the book of Kings wanted the Amos prophecy about Damascus to come true: in 2 Kgs 16.9 we read in fact that the Aramaeans of Damascus, after having been defeated by the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (732 BCE), were deported to Qir. The lateness of such a specification is demonstrated by the fact that it is not found in the LXX text, where only much later an addition was made in order to harmonize it with the proto-Masoretic text: but Qir became 'Cyrene', and in this form we find it also in the Vulgate.

It becomes now clear why the members of the community which recognized itself in the *Damascus Document* consider Damascus not only the capital of the region where the old covenant with Abraham and the new one with the founder of the community was made, but also the land they had chosen for their voluntary exile. In his metaphorical language, the author of the *Damascus Document*, who takes the message of Amos as an essential point of reference, substantially rejects all the history of Israel, the history of the 'sons of Jacob' who had stained themselves with guilt already in Egypt (CD 3.4). But also interesting is the textual correction the author makes in the text of Amos, in the passage we have quoted at the beginning of this study, and especially its interpretation. According to the author of the *Damascus Document*, God has transferred to Damascus something which was in his 'tent': this cannot be a reference to objects of idolatrous cults, as is the case in the text of Amos, but rather something which concerns the cult of Yahweh. As a confirmation of this, the word *skwt* becomes a 'hut', which recalls 'David's hut' and the *kywn hšlmym* become 'the books of the prophets'. In other words, Yahweh himself moves from the Jerusalem temple, which has been defiled (CD 4.18; 5.6; 20.23; see also 6.12), to Damascus, where, as 'a star', the Interpreter of the Law will appear. The one in Damascus is a very special 'exile', because God also came to dwell there.

As a conclusion we could say that according to the author of the *Damascus Document* the founder of the new community wanted to accomplish the 'new covenant' predicted by Jer. 31.31-34, drawing inspiration directly from the ancient one, made by god with Abraham when he was still living in the region of Damascus; the reason for this choice was the conviction that the covenant made with Moses had found the Israelites already corrupted. There is only an allusion to the rejection of this religious experience in Israel's history, considered as a sequence of infidelities after which only a chosen few were still innocent: the fact that the community entered

the land of Damascus, which they considered the country of origin of the Jewish people, according to the concept of exile expressed by the prophet Amos. In this rejection Yahweh is also involved, who has already left his material temple in Jerusalem to stay in the ideal temple built by the community in 'the land of Damascus'.

The *Damascus Document*, as many scholars correctly think, is the act of foundation of the community that later was called 'Essene'. The text itself gives the date of birth of the community, when it alludes to events which took place 390 years after the fall of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar, that is in 197 BCE; these events were then followed by 20 years of uncertainty and only after them the 'Teacher of Righteousness' appeared (*CD* 1.5-12). 177 BCE is thus the year of foundation of the community and the *terminus post quem* for the redaction of the *Document*; from how the text speaks about the Teacher, we can say that he was not its author and that probably the *Document* was written several years after 177 BCE. We do not intend to take part in the long debate about the origins, the history and the characters of the community (or of the different communities) who wrote the texts of Qumran; we cannot anyway ignore the fact that the *Damascus Document*, with its precise chronological indications, should be considered the starting point of all the sectarian literature. The disappearance of any reference to Damascus in all the other texts is a clue to their later date and of a certain change in the ideology of the group, which probably knew splits and secessions during its history. One of the major changes was certainly the attenuation, or maybe the disappearance, of the exclusively priestly character of the initial community. The indications in this sense found in the *Damascus Document* make it more difficult, even if not impossible, to establish a precise connection between the most ancient community founded by the Teacher of Righteousness, and the circles usually called 'apocalyptic'.

A last important observation concerns the biblical text. From what we have said in the previous pages, it is not possible to imagine that the author of the *Damascus Document* had invented the reference to Damascus, without any reason, merely because we do not find such reference in the Bible as we read it nowadays. It is more reasonable to think, instead, that it was just because of the events that occurred in 177 BCE that the priests of Jerusalem, authors of the biblical books, found it necessary to operate a *damnatio memoriae* on the text of Genesis, in order to cancel any reference to Damascus in the story of Abraham. We are not able to calculate the dimensions of the 'censored' parts (some specific episode could have been eliminated), but it is difficult to doubt that the text of Genesis at the

beginning of second century BCE had to be very different, as least as far as Abraham is concerned, from the one we have today. By now we know, even if we ignore all the details, how long and complex was the process which brought the biblical books from their original form, in the Hellenistic age, to the one they have in the Masoretic text. The events of the second century BCE, from the schism operated by the Teacher of Righteousness to the not always exemplary episodes concerning the priests that we read in 2 Maccabees, to the advent of the priestly dynasty of the Maccabees, were probably a major cause for the changing of situations and textual references. Even more important were the events of the first century CE, when another clamorous schism took place, not by chance, 'in the land of Damascus': Saul, special correspondent of the High Priest of Jerusalem, broke up with the temple just as 'he came near Damascus' (Acts 9.3). It was therefore advisable that the Bible mentioned Damascus as little as possible.

## Chapter 4

### REUBEN'S INCEST AND THE CONTESTED PRIMOGENITURE

The biblical traditions relating to the fortunes of Jacob's sons, eponyms of the Israelite tribes, are definitely scanty, apart from the case of Joseph and his story in Egypt. In some cases the lack of traditions is the natural consequence of the fact that some names have a merely geographical origin: Asher and Zebulun, for example, indicate two regions of Northern Palestine already mentioned in the *Onomasticum of Amenemope*, an Egyptian text which can be dated to the twelfth century BCE;<sup>1</sup> in the same text the land of Asher is occupied by the Tjeker, one of the 'Sea Peoples' who probably gave name to the tribe of Issachar. There are also some good reasons to think that another 'Sea People', the Danana (*dmm* in the Phoenician inscription of Karatepe), was the progenitor of the tribe of Dan. Maybe it is no coincidence that Samson, the anti-Philistine hero *par excellence*, belonged to this tribe. Such names, which originally indicated geographical areas or peoples of various origin which settled in Palestine at the beginning of the twelfth century BCE, could not, of course, give rise to legends about figures related to the proto-history of the tribe or about social groups which later formed the historical Israel. In the book of Genesis, which collects some Hebrew traditions related to the eponyms of the twelve tribes, are narrated, more or less succinctly, the stories of only five sons of Jacob: the great Joseph, son of Rachel, with his glorious career at the Egyptian court, and the four sons of Leah, Reuben (the firstborn), Simeon, Levi and Judah.

The stories of the sons of Leah have in common two aspects that are worth noting: all of them are protagonists of negative events, which all possess a strong sexual connotation. Reuben commits incest with Bilhah, the concubine (*pîlegeš*) of his father (Gen. 35.22); Simeon and Levi are the promoters of the unjust slaughter of the Shechemites, a cruel revenge perpetrated deceitfully after the rape of their sister Dinah, in spite of their

1. See Garbini, *I Filistei*, pp. 59-61.

request of a reparative marriage (Gen. 34); the sexual aspect of the episode is accentuated by the manner of the slaughter, which took place when the Shechemites were in pain from their recent circumcision. Finally, Judah himself is the protagonist of incest with his daughter-in-law Tamar, though he was not conscious of it (Gen. 38.12-26). To these stories, in which the lust and violence of the sons of Leah are stressed, is opposed, not without deliberation, the story of Joseph and his vocation to chastity and generosity (Gen. 37.39-48.50).

The motif of sex, present in different degrees in all the narratives about the sons of Jacob, is intertwined in some of them with the motif of primogeniture. Because of his incest, Reuben loses his rights of firstborn to Joseph's advantage, at least according to Jacob's words in Genesis 49; but in this same context, in the so-called 'Blessings of Jacob', we find some expressions from which the reader can deduce that Judah is the real firstborn of Israel.

Before I pass on to examine the theme of this essay, that is Reuben's incest and its consequences, I will make some general remarks on the nature of the two motifs which the Genesis narratives elaborate. Stories with sexual connotation, of which we have numerous examples in the book of Genesis and in many other books of the Old Testament, can be easily collocated in a kind of tradition whose origin can be defined as 'popular' or 'folkloric'; therefore they may be considered relatively ancient and related to the period of Israel's origins. The motif of primogeniture, which concerns the natural firstborn Reuben, Joseph as representative of Ephraim and Manasseh (the two most important tribes of the northern kingdom) and Judah, eponym of the southern kingdom, brings us instead into a full historical age, characterized first by the rivalry between the two Hebrew kingdoms and later, after the disappearance of the kingdom of Israel, by Judah's claim for hegemony, before and after the exile. The evident messianic references in Gen. 49.11-12 probably reflect expectations of the late Hellenistic age. But such an ideological re-elaboration with a political connotation that culminated in the prominent position of Judah has probably let very little (if anything) of the original form of the narratives: the necessity of giving to Judah a key role required important changes. An analysis of the biblical passages related to Reuben will provide a demonstration of such a hypothesis, which originates from a simple observation based on common sense.

In the book of Genesis there is little space for Reuben. He was Jacob's firstborn, son of Leah (Gen. 29.32) and we find him with a secondary role in a quite peculiar episode: he brings some mandrakes to his mother, who



in her turn offers them to Rachel in exchange for the possibility of spending a night with Jacob. On that occasion was conceived Issachar, fifth son of Leah (Gen. 30.14-18). In Gen. 35.22 we find a very brief mention of the incest of Reuben with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine. Reuben has, however, a significant role in the story of Joseph: he saves his brother's life (Gen. 37.21-22 and 29-30) and after having met Joseph he reproaches his brothers for their bad action in his regard (Gen. 42.22); later in the story, Reuben offers Jacob his two sons (but they become four in Gen. 46.9) as a pledge for Benjamin. Finally, we find Reuben at the beginning of the 'Blessings of Jacob' (Gen. 49.3-4), where the firstborn is exalted for his strong and exuberant character, but deprived of his primogeniture because of the incest he has committed.

Of all the things narrated in Genesis concerning Reuben, there are some that are worthy of note. First, his presence in the episode of the mandrakes: why is it Reuben, of all the sons of Leah (Simeon, Levi and Judah), who brings to his mother the plants that would have made her fertile? It is difficult not to think of the existence of some kind of relationship between the mandrakes 'of your son' (as the text stresses several times) and the episode of the incest; but since this last was committed by Reuben with Bilhah and not with Leah, the connection between Reuben and the mandrakes remains without an explanation. A second important element emerges from the confrontation of the long narrative of the incest between Judah and Tamar and the few words dedicated to the incest of Reuben, which would mark forever the destiny of Jacob's firstborn and of all his descendants: 'and it came to pass, when Israel dwelt in that land [i.e. beyond the tower of Edar], that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard it...' (Gen. 35.22). In the Masoretic text, the sentence seems to remain incomplete, while in the LXX text some words follow: 'and evil appeared before him'. Regardless of the ambiguity of this reference (it is not clear if this 'evil' appeared before Reuben or before Jacob), the sentence is anyway banal and superfluous, whatever it is supposed to mean. It should therefore probably be considered as an addition of the translator, who intended to complete somehow the incomplete sentence of the Hebrew text, which quite evidently had eliminated some words. What the reason was for this elimination remains unexplained, unless we think that this can be one of those clues which have been intentionally left in the text to attract the attention of the reader to a textual crux.<sup>2</sup>

2. On this kind of textual problem, see Garbini, *Il ritorno*, pp. 129-30.

Let us now consider a third interesting element. In the story of Joseph Reuben's role is, as we have seen before, absolutely positive; but several details should be noted. Reuben manages to convince his brothers not to kill Joseph and invents a plan to bring him back to his father. But this plan does not work because Judah, though he agrees to sparing Joseph's life, suggests to his brothers the idea of selling the young man to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37.26-27). Later Reuben offers to Jacob the life of his own sons for Benjamin's, but the patriarch refuses; he accepts instead the proposal of Judah, who offers his own life. From these two examples it emerges clearly that the biblical author sets the figure of Judah against that of Reuben; the two characters have similar functions, but the first one is much more successful. This aspect becomes more evident in the paraphrase of the biblical texts by Flavius Josephus; following the Greek historiographical model, the historian amplifies the narration with the insertion of long speeches, which take the place of the short sentences of the book of Genesis (*Ant.* 2.21-33, 100-104, 140-59) and gives to Reuben more space than the biblical narrative: he is the one who speaks to Joseph, instead of the generic 'brothers' we read in Gen. 42.7-13 (but in this case it is possible that Josephus has followed a text more ancient than the MT); he reproaches them a second time (*par.* 137). But at the same time, Judah enjoys an exceptional importance: Josephus attributes to him a very long speech to Joseph (*Ant.* 2.140-59) and not only describes him in very positive terms, but makes also a couple of precise references to his character: 'Judah, a man of impetuous nature' (116), 'Judah, being also an energetic man' (139). The relationship of antagonism between Judah and Reuben appears evident in the text of the 'Blessing of Jacob'. The primogeniture taken from Reuben because of the incest he committed is assigned, in fact, to Judah, who is exalted over all his brothers and receives the sceptre of the command,<sup>3</sup> until the arrive of the messiah (Gen. 49.3-4 and 8-12), though Joseph is called *ne'zîr 'ahāyw* 'the consecrated between his brothers' (v. 26). Also 'the Blessing of Moses' can be read in the perspective of the close tie that binds Reuben and Judah: the text puts Reuben in the first place, but Judah comes immediately after him (Deut. 33.6-7).

Now that we have focalized the problems relating to the character of Reuben, we can move on to examine some philological questions posed by the relative textual tradition. The first unexpected problem concerns the

3. The primacy of Judah is justified by the fact that from Judah's tribe will come David, the founder of Israelite monarchy (1 Chron. 5.2; 28.4; see also Josephus, *Ant.* 7.372).

name of the character we are studying. The Masoretic text has the form *Reûbēn*, which becomes *Roubēn* in the LXX; but the Syro-hexaplar, Syriac, Arabic and Ethiopic version all have the form *Rūbīl*. The antiquity of this last form of the name is proven by the variant *Roubēlos* used by Flavius Josephus. There are three arguments to affirm that the form 'Reuben' is probably secondary in comparison with the form 'Rubil':

- a. the popular etymology of the name given in Gen. 29.32 (*rā'ā yhw̄h b'ē 'onyī*) is absurd and one should ask why the most simple explanation of the name ('look, a son!') is not mentioned; also the explanation given by Josephus in *Ant.* 1.304 ('because he was born through the mercy of god in her regard') makes no sense at all: the only element which seems linguistically valid is *-ēl* = 'god'.<sup>4</sup>
- b. the textual tradition of the Greek text is uncertain on the form of the name *Roubēn*, which variously appears among the forms *Roubēm*, *Roubin* and *Roubim*.
- c. Semitic onomastics offer no parallel for the name *r'wbn*, while we find the name *rblt* (feminine) in a Qatabanian inscription (RES 3902.123). Moreover, the Arabic root *rbt* gives a very satisfactory etymology for the name Rubil, since the verb *rabala* means 'be rich in men', with reference to a tribe, or to a man 'who has many sons'. Rubil/Rouben can be consequently be considered a personal name of Arabic origin: this is perfectly coherent with the fact that the tribe was settled to the east of the Dead Sea; it can be remembered, in this regard, that the name of the other Transjordanian tribe of Israel, Gad, is very common in North Arabian onomastics.<sup>5</sup>

A significant confirmation of the fact that the original name of Jacob's firstborn was Rubil instead of Reuben can be found in the 'Blessings of Moses' dedicated to Reuben, in Deut. 33.6, in the Greek version: 'May Reuben live and not die, and may he be rich in number' (*polus en arithmō*). This blessing, as it is often the case in this literary genre, develops the etymological meaning of the name, which is exactly that of the Arabic root mentioned earlier. The Masoretic version presents a text with the opposite

4. H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus*, IV (London, 1930), p. 147, n. c, affirms, 'modern scholars see in the final syllable not *El* but *Baal*'; this affirmation is rather strange, because one could think of the Babylonian form *Bel*, but not *Baal*.

5. G.L. Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 154.

meaning—‘and let his men be few’ (*wyhy mtyw mspr*). This recent reading, which did not enter in the Greek text,<sup>6</sup> helps us to understand the probable cause of the changing of the name from Rubil to Reuben; in spite of the substantially negative portrait of Jacob’s firstborn given by the book of Genesis, the transmitters of the biblical text increased the damage to Reuben’s image: changing his name, they wanted to cancel any reference to the numerous descendants of the patriarch, which was still explicit in the text of the ‘Blessings of Moses’. Only subsequently have they directly modified the text of Deuteronomy; this happened relatively late in the Christian era, but before St Jerome, while the changing of the name has as its *terminus post quem* the date of the Greek version of the book of Genesis used by Josephus. The hostility of Jewish tradition towards Reuben in the first centuries of Christian era seems hardly comprehensible.

Let us now consider the episode of the incest. As we have already noticed, it is indeed strange that such an important event is mentioned only very briefly. A textual examination will show, however, some interesting aspects. The news of the incest is given in the book of Genesis in the context of Jacob’s journeys, as also the death of Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse (Gen. 35.8) and Rachel’s death (Gen. 35.16-20). In the Masoretic text, the incest between Reuben and Bilhah occurred beyond the Tower of Edar, where Jacob planted his tents after he had left the area of Ephrath-Bethlehem, where he had buried Rachel. Since Jacob was coming from Bethel and was going to Hebron, he was travelling from north to south; the Tower of Edar had to be, consequently, to the south of Bethlehem. But once again the LXX text presents a different picture: from Bethel Jacob goes first to the Tower of ‘Gader’, and then to Ephrath, where Rachel dies (Gen. 35.16 LXX); therefore the incest did not take place to the south, but to the north of Bethlehem. We must now consider that in Mic. 4.8 the Tower of Edar is mentioned as a synonym of Mount Zion and so this tower had to be located in Jerusalem. The ‘Tower of the Herd’ (*migdāl ‘eder*) seems to be part of a group of typical toponyms of the town, such as the ‘Gate of the Sheep’ (*šā‘ar ha-šō‘n*, Neh. 3.1) and the ‘Valley of Cheese-makers’ (= *mgbnm*; see Josephus, *War* 5.140), which cut Jerusalem from north to south.<sup>7</sup> On these considerations, the episode appears to have taken place in

6. The Codex Alexandrinus has the strange reading ‘Let Reuben live and not die and Simeon be rich in number’; the lacking of the verb and the insertion of Simeon’s name (which is not included in the list) in the place of the verb *estō* reveals that the author wanted to change the Hebrew text with the idea of being hostile to Reuben.

7. In the light of the Micah passage and of this kind of toponym of Jerusalem,

Jerusalem or in its immediate surroundings. In order to hide this, both the Masoretic text and the LXX altered the text, in two different ways, and this discrepancy has allowed us to discover their intervention. Considering Jacob's itinerary, the 'Tower of the Herd' must have been mentioned before Ephrath: from this point of view, v. 16 of the LXX text is correct, while the first part of v. 21 of the Hebrew text is out of place. The Greek text hides the allusion to Jerusalem mentioning a 'Tower of Gader', which is a fairly common toponym; the use of *Gader* instead of 'eder is deliberately misleading, since the homonymous town of Edar, in the extreme south of the Judaeen region (Josh. 15.21) is in Greek *Edrai* (LXX<sup>A</sup>) or *Ara* (Vaticanus).

From our analysis of the few words devoted to Reuben's incest, we can conclude that the original Genesis text, which dedicated only a few lines to the episodes, has been deprived of its final words and altered again, in order to hide the place where the episode in fact took place, that is near Jerusalem in the land of Judah. This is indeed a strange circumstance and it must have a precise significance, judging from the care the revisers of biblical text have demonstrated in hiding it. But once again Reuben's destiny is intertwined with Judah's.

Let us examine, finally, the words pronounced by Jacob on his deathbed: the passage presents several textual difficulties.<sup>8</sup> The first sentence (Gen. 49.3) in the Hebrew text appears fully positive: 'Reuben, you are my first-born, my might, and the beginning of my strength, excellent in dignity and

which seem to reveal a pastoral milieu, it is probable that the expression *har gabnunnîm* in Ps. 68.16, used in parallel with *har ʿelōhîm* and probably indicating the mount chosen by Yahweh (v. 17), was correctly interpreted by the Greek version, which translates—with a little variant—*oros teturōmenon* (*mons coagulatus* in Vulgate). The reference to the 'Mount of Cheeses' (usually thought by scholars to indicate the round-shaped top, or even to hypothetical 'peaks': but why the plural?) was hidden in the Hebrew text by the repetition of the same word: in the following verse: *hārîm gabnunnîm*; here must be noted that the lack of a construct state in the word *hārîm* makes of *gabnunnîm* an apposition without semantic explanation, 'mounts humps'. Only by doing violence to the text can we translate the expression as 'mounts with humps'. It is therefore clear that *gabnunnîm* was repeated only to give to the word a different meaning, referring it to other mounts outside Jerusalem. The repetition of the word, as of *bašan* in v. 16, goes against the rules of poetic use and appears, for this reason, secondary. However the whole text of the psalm is clearly corrupted.

8. On 'Jacob's Blessings', I refer the reader to the recent and well documented monograph by R. de Hoop, *Genesis 49 and its Literary and Historical Context* (Oud-testamentische Studien, 39; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999).

outstanding in power'. In the Greek text there is, by contrast, a tendency to put Reuben in a bad light: 'the beginning of my strength' is banalized, with a textual variant which constitutes a repetition of a concept already present in the expression 'the beginning of my sons' ('*ónāy—bānāy*); the Hebrew word *śe'ēt* 'dignity' is interpreted as the construct infinitive of the verb *nś* 'and translated with the meaningless infinitive *pheresthai*; *yeter* is translated as *sklēros* 'hard'; *āz* 'strength' becomes *authadēs* 'arrogant'. Nobody could deny that the Hebrew original has been completely misunderstood. The second verse constitutes a notorious *crux*. The first word, *paḥaz*, considered a substantive by many scholars, can only be an adjective or, with a different vocalization, a participle, since it indicates a quality of the water; the Greek text correctly translates with the participle *exubrisas*. The difficulty for our understanding of the first part of the verse is the presence of the root *phz*, which as a name of uncertain meaning represents a *hapax*, while the attested verbal form, the participle, indicates something like 'arrogant', like the abstract noun *paḥazūt* which means 'arrogance'. 'Arrogant' is a plausible attribute for a person, but it becomes much less logical if it is applied to the water, as in this case; an 'arrogant water' is no less improbable than a 'wily water', a translation suggested by a scholar who has recently studied the meaning of the root *phz*.<sup>9</sup> The inevitable conclusion in similar cases is that there is a mistake in the Masoretic text; but we can easily emend it, if we pay attention to the Greek and to the general meaning of the sentence. The LXX translate: 'you are as arrogant as water, you will not boil': the use of the verb *ekzein* 'to boil' for the Hebrew *ytr* 'to be over' reveals that the original Hebrew word should be a participle of the root *zyd*, a verb with the double meaning of 'to boil' and 'to be arrogant'. The whole verse is skilfully built on the image of 'going up': Reuben is compared, because of his temperament, to boiling water; but whilst boiling water rises, he will not ascend, that is he will not prevail, because he has climbed into his father's bed. The correct translation of the verse will be: 'you are as boiling as water, but you will not go up, because you climbed your father's bed'. We could legitimately ask why, at a certain stage of the transmission of the text (after the Greek revision) the root *zyd* was replaced by *phz*, which had the meaning of 'arrogance' but not of 'boiling', losing completely the real meaning and the efficacy of the image. One possible answer is that the root *zyd* and the adjective *zēd* derived from it are often used in the Old Testament to indicate the attitude

9. R. de Hoop, 'The Meaning of *phz* in Classical Hebrew', *ZAH* 10 (1997), pp. 16-26 (11).

of the Egyptians, of the Babylonians and of other people who act against Yahweh; it was maybe too negative a term to describe a son of Jacob, even though he was guilty of it.

The difficulties of the verse are not yet finished. The last word, 'alâ 'he climbed' appears out of place after the sentence 'you went up to your father's bed and you defiled my couch'. The Greek text changes the third person to the second person, but the repetition remains. There is another detail which reveals that the text has been altered: the plural *miškebîm* does not indicate the 'bed', as the verb 'alîṭā requires, but rather 'sexual intercourse'; this means that there has been an exchange between the names *miškebîm* and *yašúa*, and that maybe the word hidden behind the impossible form 'alâ derived from *miškebê*: 'you went up to your 'father's bed (*yešua*) and you defiled the sexual intercourse of...' More than this, it is impossible to say.

After having examined the textual problems in Gen. 49.3-4—even if, of course, not all of them have been solved—it is impossible to escape a question which comes inevitably to the reader's mind: why the author of Reuben's 'blessing' has insisted on the impulsive temperament of Jacob's son, representing this characteristic by the image of boiling water? The few elements we know of Reuben's character can be deduced by his attitude in the story of Joseph, where he appears a generous and reflexive man, averse to violence, that is, exactly the opposite of the picture traced by Jacob's words. Such a description is, on the contrary, very appropriate for Judah: talking about him in this same episode, Josephus underlines his 'impetuous' and 'energetic' temperament. This aspect of Judah's personality is not an invention of the historian, because it is confirmed elsewhere; in 1 Chron. 5.2, concerning primogeniture, the author implicitly states that Judah prevailed 'because Judah was the strongest among his brothers and because of the prince born from him'. The fact of having produced the Davidic dynasty was considered a secondary argument in respect to his physical strength.<sup>10</sup> This aspect is particularly stressed in the *Testament of Judah*, where the patriarch relates that Jacob had seen in a vision that an 'anger of strength' was constantly following Judah (3.10); it is probably significant that in the same work the main motif of moral exhortation consisted of the licentious conduct of Judah regarding his Canaanite wife and of his daughter-in-law.

10. The text of this passage suffered some alterations: the Hebrew text is missing a word present in the Greek (*gabar—dunatos ischui*) and the latter has a *kai* before 'among his brothers'.

The intimate, though hidden, connection that binds Judah to Reuben can also be found, at a textual level, in the 'blessing' dedicated to him by Jacob. In Gen. 49.9 we read, following a literal translation of the Masoretic text: 'Judah is a lion's whelp, from the prey, my son, you have gone up (*'ālītā*); he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lion (*lābī*) who shall rouse him up?' Even though the interpreters of the biblical text do not seem surprised by the logical and syntactical absurdities of this verse (someone even described it as a 'vivid picture of the growth of Judah's power'),<sup>11</sup> this passage deserves a closer philological analysis. The LXX text has *ek blastou* 'from a sprout' for the word *miṭṭerep*; the two perfects of the third person singular translated, respectively, with a participle and with an indicative aorist passive of the second person singular (*anapeson ekoimethēs*), whilst *leōn* renders 'aryeh, but *skumnos* both *gūr* and *lābī*'. The variants of the Greek text, or almost all of them, originated from the need to give a more adequate syntactical structure to a text which was probably identical to the one we read today; the only significant variant is the rendering of *miṭṭerep*, which deserves our attention.

Modern commentators justify the translation of the word *ṭerep*, 'sprout', through a mistake of the translator, who has chosen for this passage a 'wrong' meaning. According to Hebraists, the word *ṭerep* means 'prey' and 'leaf, sprig'. This double meaning is indeed strange, because in other Semitic languages there are no other examples of a meaning connected with plants for the root *ṭrp*. Let us now examine the situation of the texts: in Gen. 8.11 we read that Noah's dove went back to the ark with 'alēh zayit *ṭārāp* 'an olive sprig *ṭrp*' in its beak. The last word, which is apparently an apposition, would be a useless repetition of 'alēh if we gave it the meaning 'leaf, sprig'. In fact, the word *ṭārāp* is a sort of explicative gloss of the two preceding words, and the Greek version intended it as such: *kai eichen phullon elaias karpnos*, where the lack of any kind of syntactical bind between the last two words is notable. We have just used the term 'gloss', but actually it has rather an opposite function: in this case it is the word *ṭārāp* which plausibly seems to be intended as something related to plants. In Ezek. 17.9 the kingdom of Judah is compared to a vine, whose roots will be torn by an eagle: the consequence will be that *w<sup>e</sup>yābēš kol ṭarpē simhā* 'it will wither [*sic*] all the *ṭrp* of its sprout'. Here the word *ṭerep*, clearly equivalent to *ṭārāp*, apparently indicates not a little branch, but rather the single buds of the sprout; what is interesting here is that the

11. J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), p. 519.



Greek version *xēranthēsetai panta ta proanatellonta autēs*, ignoring the word *ἄρπε*, translates an original Hebrew text *wēyābeš kol simhā*. From this analysis two conclusions are evident: the meaning ‘sprout’ for the word *ἄρπε/ἄρῶ* was artificially created inserting the term in contexts which explicitly referred to the plant connotation; the Greek version of Gen. 49.9 is conscious of such a situation and translates the Hebrew text exactly in the sense suggested by the interpolators, that is ‘Judah is a lion’s whelp; from a sprout, my son, you grew up; couched, you stooped down as a lion, and as a young lion’. The interventions on the Hebrew text, only partly included in the Greek version, did not find St Jerome’s approval: in his translation *ad praedam, fili mi, ascendisti*, shows in fact the rejection of the plant connotation for the word *ἄρπε*, even if, in order to give to the sentence a more satisfactory sense, he had to attribute an improper meaning to the preposition *m-*.

We must finally conclude, with reasonable certainty, that the original form of *mṯrp* was a participle (*piel* or *hiphil*) meaning, ‘which tears’; since it referred to a young lion, the prey was probably little animals, maybe the ‘sons’ (*bēnē*) of hinds (*‘ayyālôt*), that is ‘fawns’.<sup>12</sup> In Jacob’s ‘blessings’ there are many comparisons between the sons and various animals: Issachar is a working donkey, Dan a snake biting who passes by, Naphtali is a hind, Benjamin a devouring wolf. The change made in v. 9 had a double function: the creation of the verb *‘ālītā*, in order to refer to the present tense in Reuben’s blessing (a sort of echo of the tie which bound the two brothers) and the possibility of avoiding the mention of the verb *ṯārāp* in a text referring to Judah. We will soon understand why both things were necessary.

In Jewish tradition the name of Reuben is almost exclusively related to the episode of the incest with Bilhah; *Jub.* 33.2-9 describes in many details, though stereotypical, the scene of the incest, and the same is true for the *Testament of Reuben*, completely focused on the same fact;<sup>13</sup> in the *Testament of Issachar* we find, at the very beginning, the episode of the mandrakes, taken from the book of Genesis. These literary developments

12. In the second chapter of the *Testament of Judah* are narrated the heroic deeds of the patriarch, who chases many animals: deer, gazelle, lion, bear, wild boar, leopard, wild ox; this is probably an amplification of the data in Gen. 49.9. The fact that the first animal mentioned is a deer is maybe an indirect confirmation of the reading *bny ylw*.

13. See also J. Kugel, ‘Reuben’s Sin with Bilhah in the Testament of Reuben’, in D.P. Wright, D.N. Freedman and A. Hurvitz (eds.), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Honour of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 525-54.

demonstrate an affirmation of the traditions collected in the first book of the Bible but, since they derive from it,<sup>14</sup> they do not prove the antiquity of such traditions. Our philological analysis has offered us several elements (the incongruity of Reuben's presence in the episode of the mandrakes, the hiding of the place where the incest was committed, the reference to the impetuous temperament, strange textual interventions) which make us think that the incest with one of Jacob's two women was not committed by Reuben, but by Judah. The lustful nature of the character is stressed by the biblical text, which insists on Judah's marriage with Batshuah,<sup>15</sup> a Canaanite

14. From the comparison between the quoted texts emerges a very interesting datum, which cannot be discussed at length here, but deserves our attention. In the *Testament of Judah* there is a large section (chs. 3–7) dedicated to Judah's military exploits, alone or with some of his brothers, against several kings and cities; after ch. 8, where the circumstances of the marriage between Judah and the daughter of a Canaanite king are briefly narrated, ch. 9 tells the story of the war engaged by Esau against Jacob and the death of the former through the latter. This narrative section has an exact parallel in *Jub.* 34.1-9; 37; 38.14, where we read also the detail that Jacob killed Esau by instigation of Judah (38.1-2). Concerning the narratives, the commentators only talk about later amplifications derived from a common source which remains unknown. But the essential point is another: why two literary works, so different one from each other, which seem to be based exclusively on the narrative material included in the book of Genesis, needed to use a different source for this episode? It can also be observed that Genesis 36, where such stories would find their natural collocation, consists entirely in a genealogy of Esau, very similar to the one we find in 1 Chron. 1.28-42: it is very plausible that this secondary genealogy has been added in order to replace a narrative section, especially as its final part (Gen. 36.31-43) is repeated, in a substantially identical form, in 1 Chron. 1.43-54 and in *Jub.* 38.15-24. All these considerations bring us to the conclusion that when *Jubilees* and the *Testament of Judah* were written the text of Gen. 36.1-30 was probably completely different from the present one: it narrated the stories which are now included in the two apocryphal texts. The main episode of these stories, i.e. the war between Jacob and Esau culminating in the fratricide committed by Jacob, suggests that the change was made under the reign of the Idumaeen Herod the Great, probably for his own purposes.

15. The Masoretic text does not give a name to Judah's wife, who is indicated only as 'daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah' (Gen. 38.2). But in v. 12 of the same chapter the woman is called *bat-šūā*: the hyphen between the two words indicates that Batshuah was her real name and in this form it is attested also in 1 Chron. 2.3. In the Greek text the name is *Saua* in Genesis and 'daughter of Saua' in Chronicles. In this uncertainty concerning the name of Judah's wife it is easy to see a sort of reticence of the textual tradition in revealing the woman's real name. Such reticence had in fact a good reason: a Batshuah mother of Shelah (*šēlā* in Masoretic text), or Selom (*Sēlōm* in the Greek text of Genesis, of some manuscripts of Chronicles

woman, and on the incest with Tamar (Gen. 38). The same aspect is present, and even further stressed, in the *Testament of Judah* (especially in chs. 8 and 11–17). The story of the mandrakes points towards a sexual relationship between Judah and his mother Leah. This hypothesis would have had to be based only on the data we have collected so far, if there were not another, much more explicit, testimony.

In a paper which deals with the historical setting of the oracles of the first chapter of the book of Amos (1.3-15),<sup>16</sup> I have shown that the references to Edom in the Masoretic text (vv. 6, 9, 11) were originally destined to be Judah: this is revealed by the readings of the most important manuscripts of the LXX text. For the present issue v. 11 appears of special interest: in this verse the prophet lists a series of sins committed by Judah. Obviously, the text appears seriously corrupted, but a comparison between the different textual traditions allows a quite plausible reconstruction of the original text. The first sentence, which concerns our topic is well preserved in the *Vetus Latina*, *et violavit matrem super terram*; the second one should be read *wyṯrp b 'dh smth* (Masoretic text: *w<sup>e</sup>yitṛōp lā 'ad 'appō*) 'and he tore her cloth during her menstruation'. The detail of the menstruation enhances the impurity of the action and, at the same time, explains why the woman did not become pregnant, in spite of the mandrakes. Reading Amos' words, we understand why in Gen. 49.9 a reviser tried to give a different meaning to the root *ṯrp*, which in the case of Judah immediately reminded one of the episode of the incest.

In the light of all these data, it is now possible to try a reconstruction—at least partial—of the traditions concerning Reuben and Judah. Jacob's firstborn does not seem to have had originally any special connotation nor was he the protagonist of particular events; Judah, on the contrary, was

and of the *Testament of Judah*), closely reminds us of the Batshuah who generated Solomon, son of king David, according to 1 Chron. 3.5; the name *Bat-šeba*, in Greek *Bērsabee*, attested in 2 Sam. 11.5 is the Davidic pendant of the onomastic mess created about Judah. Cases of homonymy are always possible, but in this case geography makes us exclude this possibility; it cannot be a coincidence that Judah found his spouse in Adullam (according to the *Testament of Judah*, the patriarch would have married the daughter of the king Barshabah), a place connected with David's war-deeds (see 1 Sam. 22.1; 2 Sam. 23.13; 1 Chron. 11.15). We may legitimately conclude that some of the traditions concerning Judah were created in relatively recent times, using the existent material about David as a source.

16. G. Garbini, 'La "deportazione di Salomone" (Amos 1,6-11)', in D. Garrone and F. Israel (eds.), *Storia e tradizioni di Israele: Scritti in onore di J. Alberto Soggin* (Brescia: Paideia, 1991), pp. 89-98.

characterized by his violence (see the article in the previous note, 16, for other considerations made by Amos on this trait) and lust, which reached the extreme peak of violating his own mother. The words of Jacob on his deathbed, which are today referred to Reuben, were in tradition addressed to Judah. The change was effected by the author of the book of Genesis, who left to Judah some minor sins, but transferred to Reuben the incest committed by his brother; the gravity of the episode was somewhat attenuated, since the victim was no longer Leah, the mother, but Jacob's concubine, Bilhah. Later interventions on the text tried to make the picture even more confused.

Before we finish with this subject, it is useful to devote a few words to the 'Blessings of Moses'. We have already seen how the words dedicated to Reuben (Deut. 33.6) had a positive sense, before the changes to the Hebrew text; let us examine now the section dedicated to Judah. The Masoretic text reads quite enigmatically: 'Hear, Yahweh, the voice of Judah, and bring him to his people; his hands brought (singular) him to trial and be thou an help from his enemies' (v. 7). The only comprehensible thing here is that Moses invokes Yahweh's help for Judah, who is asking for something and is apparently implicated in a legal trial (the use of the verb *ryb* is very eloquent). The allusion to 'his people' is not very clear, while the perfect singular *rāb* with a plural subject reveals the corruption of the text. The Greek is even more obscure: 'Hear, Lord, the voice of Judah, and let them come to his people; his hands judge on him be the defender from his enemies'. It is not useful to discuss the Vulgate text, which gives an interpretation of the Masoretic text: *Audi, Domine, vocem Iudae. Et ad populum suum introduc eum: manus eius pugnabunt pro eo, et adiutor illius contra adversarios eius erit*. Since Judah has been conducted to trial by his own hands, it is probable that the word *mšryw* should be corrected in *bsryw* 'in his distress', 'in his tribulations'; but the singular form of the verb *rāb* supposes a singular subject, *ydw*: 'his hand brought him to trial'. If we give to the word 'hand' the well-known sexual meaning, the sense of the verse becomes clear to us: a serious guilt of sexual nature is the real cause of the legal action instituted against Judah, who has been condemned to stay far 'from his people'. Since Deut. 23.1-2 prescribes that whoever 'uncovers his father's skirt' shall be excluded from 'the congregation of Yahweh', the reference to the incest of Judah with Leah becomes evident. If this interpretation of Deut. 33.7 is correct, the 'Blessings of Moses' preserve traces of the tradition about Judah's incest and were therefore redacted prior to the writing of Genesis.

We shall now consider the problem of Reuben's primogeniture, which plays a prominent role in Genesis. It is clear that the biblical writers are not interested in the primogeniture *per se*, because nobody ever questioned the fact that Reuben was the oldest of Jacob's sons; the question concerns all the rights reserved to the firstborn (see Deut. 21.15-17), which make him automatically superior to his brothers. It would be meaningless, though, to speak of primogeniture in a juridical sense in the case of Jacob's sons: in Israel's historical memory, at least in the form transmitted in the Bible, there was no tribe more ancient, and consequently more important, than the others. The question, in a historical perspective, was to determine if one of the tribes turned out to be superior to the others. About this, Jewish tradition had no doubts: the primacy went to Joseph, whose two sons Ephraim and Manasseh gave rise to the kingdom of Israel, which had been often politically superior to its neighbour states. The general sense of Jacob's blessing, apart from all the textual problems, and of Moses' blessing, testify in an unequivocal manner the primacy that the most ancient Hebrew tradition preserved to us gave to Rachel's firstborn. At a certain point, though, the situation changes; when the author of Chronicles in the third century BCE rewrites the history of the Jewish people, he uses the device of genealogies to indicate the development of historical events from Adam to David's ascent to the throne; the order in the succession of the genealogies indicates the ideological position of the Chronicler. Now, after the list of Jacob's sons, where Reuben occupies of course the first position, we find immediately Judah (David's descent is also given: 1 Chron. 3) and then Simeon: the Southern kingdom precedes the Northern one. Joseph is not even mentioned, but Manasseh and Ephraim are included towards the end of the list, followed only by Asher: the Northern kingdom is practically ignored, as it happens, however, in all the rest of the book.

The primacy assigned to Joseph in the traditional 'blessings' and the prominence given to Judah in Chronicles did not challenge the harmless primogeniture of Reuben; only in Genesis does the loss of Reuben's primogeniture start to be mentioned, in the way we have seen. The reason for this change in perspective appears quite obvious: in the book that was to become the most important of the Torah (and, later, the ideological base for all the 'Bible') it was necessary to give a 'mythic' and, at the same time, juridical precedent for the elimination of the concept of 'primogeniture', that Judah in any case could not claim for himself. Joseph, with his two sons, could even keep a primacy that was no more than a far memory: the kingdom of Israel did not exist any more. But Judah could not tolerate the existence of a primogeniture that was not his. Given the question of

primogeniture in these terms, an intervention in the text of Chronicles, where Reuben appeared as the firstborn, became indispensable: therefore all the sections in 1 Chron. 5.1-2, which has all the characteristics of a secondary addition, were inserted into the original text. The explicit reference to Reuben's incest shows dependence on Genesis, whilst the contradictory affirmations in the passage (the primogeniture was given to Joseph's son, but was not registered as such; anyway 'the birthright was Joseph's') show a certain confusion—if not mental, at least textual. The Greek text, which presents several discrepancies in respect to the Hebrew, makes things even more complex, because of the presence of the word *eulogia* (*b<sup>e</sup>rākāh*) where the Hebrew mentions the *b<sup>e</sup>kôrāh*. This Chronicles passage remains very important, because it presents in an explicit form the same thought expressed by Gen. 49: primacy among the tribes of Israel is due to Judah, because from that tribe David is born. This affirmation presupposes of course the existence of the new Jewish historiography, an essential part of which was constituted by Chronicles: in this new historical perspective the glorious past of the kingdom of Israel (confirmed by the extra-biblical sources) is replaced by a merely fictitious David's empire.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the aspiration of the Jerusalem priesthood, which wanted to reconstruct his own past as a reflex of the actual situation, is perfectly comprehensible: the little Jewish state was the only political entity which had managed to survive in the stormy historical events that had upset the Near East.

On the ideological level, Judah's prominence was obtained at the expense of the only two brothers who, in different ways, had the primacy. Reuben's primogeniture was neutralized by attributing to him the serious sin committed by Judah himself; the historical primacy of Joseph, which could not be denied, was put in the shade by the invention of a precedent and even higher supremacy of the Judaeen David. But Joseph had another primacy, about whose origin and nature we remain ignorant, exalted by the 'Blessing of Moses' in which we found words of appreciation for Reuben and an invocation of mercy for Judah's sin. In Deut. 33.17, speaking about Joseph, we read: 'Firstborn<sup>18</sup> of his bullock, he has glory and his horns are horns

17. See my *History and Ideology*, pp. 21-32, 183-85 [but reading on p. 21: 'not seldom' instead of 'not often'; p. 183, line 6 of note 2: 'sling' instead of 'politics'].

18. This expression seems to reflect a tradition which considered Joseph the firstborn of Jacob; the extensive reshaping of ancient Hebrew traditions which took place during the second century BCE (Genesis originated from it) eliminated the most ancient material. Some traces of it are still preserved in the fragments of the works of some

of buffalo; with them he shall push against the people together, to the ends of the earth; and they are the ten thousand of Ephraim and the thousands of Manasseh'. It was impossible to formulate any accusation in respect of this imposing figure, to which a substantial part of Genesis was dedicated; but there was still the possibility of reducing his glory by a more subtle form of denigration.

At the beginning of this study we noticed the singularity of the opposition between the stories of Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, where the sexual element plays an essential role, and Joseph, which gives to its protagonist, in spite of the exceptional position he manages to reach, a particular connotation that can be summarized in the expression 'chaste Joseph'. Even if this aspect is secondary in the development of the plot, it was nevertheless perceived as significant in later literature, from the *Testament of Joseph* to the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*: in these narratives the chastity of Jacob's son constitutes, in fact, an essential element.<sup>19</sup> In Genesis the chaste conduct of Joseph, which finds an instance in the story of Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39.7-20), is introduced in the context of Joseph's exemplary moral behaviour;<sup>20</sup> and it is undeniable that Joseph's conduct remains exceptional in the Old Testament, where men who are also famous for their piety, such as David and Solomon, are presented in their intense sexual activity, usually without any disapproval (unless other factors—murder or idolatry—intervene). Abstention from sex assumes therefore a substantially negative character for a man and even more for the eponym of the most important Israelite tribe. In this perspective it is instructive to confront this connotation of Joseph with the enthusiastically opposite one, that we find in Deut. 33.13-17.

This characteristic of Joseph in the Book of Genesis has not been so far adequately pointed out, still it deserves close examination. Much has been written on the tunic given as a present by Jacob to Joseph, the *k<sup>e</sup>tonet passim* whose characteristics we cannot be sure of (was it a long tunic or a

'Judaean-Hellenistic' authors, such as Eupolemus, and of non-Jewish writers like Nicolaus of Damascus.

19. Perhaps it is not merely a coincidence that Joseph is also the name of Mary's husband, according to Matt. 1.18-25 and Lk. 1.26-38.

20. The words 'sin against God' in Gen. 39.9 are expunged from the text in the critical edition by A. Catastini, *Storia di Giuseppe (Genesi 37-50)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1994), pp. 54, 84-85; see also, by the same author, *L'itinerario di Giuseppe. Studio sulla tradizione di Genesi 37-50* (Roma: Università di Roma 'La Sapienza', 1995), pp. 341-42.

polychrome one?). In one recent study of mine<sup>21</sup> I think I have presented enough arguments to demonstrate that the Hebrew words *passim* and *pissah* (from a root *pss* II) do not exist; the first one originated from a corruption of the word *pešet* 'linen', while the second one is the result of one of the many textual alterations in Psalm 72. Leaving aside the latter, I would like to point out here that only one biblical character, apart from Joseph, is described as wearing a *ketonet passim*: Tamar, the young daughter of David violated by her brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13.18-19). Describing Joseph's dress as the same as that of the virgin Tamar, the text suggests that he was like a woman, without any virility; this was even more significant if we think that the tunic was given to Joseph on the occasion of his seventeenth birthday, several years after the beginning of puberty.<sup>22</sup> The only thing that we cannot know with certainty is whether the invention of the word *passim*, attested in Genesis and in Samuel, was made by a reviser of the biblical text, as is perhaps less probable, or by the author of Genesis. In this last case, we should admit that the same person redacted the two books in their present form.

Much more significant for our study is the textual analysis of Jacob's 'blessing' in Gen. 49.22-24. The text appears for the most part incomprehensible and the Greek version is not very helpful in this case. The reconstruction of the original text is impossible because several rabbinic revisions have definitely altered a text that had already suffered various manipulations when it was included in Genesis: the large discrepancies between the Hebrew and the Greek text are the direct consequence of the transmission undergone by the text. It has already been pointed out<sup>23</sup> that the scope of the revisers of the text was to hide any reference to Joseph's sexual vigour, a characteristic to which the same name of Joseph alluded: *yôšēp* means, in fact, 'the one who increases'. The double etymology suggested in Gen. 30.23-24 is significant: the first, from the verb *'āsap*, is semantically absurd and it is based on the graphic ambiguity of the verbal form of *'asap* without *aleph*, which make possible the confusion with *yāsap*. The idea of an 'increasing' Joseph bothered them so much that the vocalizers of the bibli-

21. *Note di lessicografia ebraica* (Brescia: Paideia, 1998), pp. 111-15.

22. It is not clear why the word *pešet* 'linen' was changed into the incomprehensible *passim*: a plausible reason would be the need to avoid having two characters negatively connoted wearing a linen tunic, which was typical of the Levites during the liturgical service (see Ezek. 44.17-20), even if the linen was used also for dress in common use (see Lev. 13.47-59).

23. Catastini, *Storia di Giuseppe*, pp. 59-60.



cal text invented a participle *yôsîp* instead of *yôsêp*, in the only two passages where this participle was attested (Isa. 29.14 and 38.5). Joseph was not a 'shoot' (*pōrat*) as we read in the Hebrew text, but 'one who increases', as it is testified by the Greek *ēuxemenos*; the mentioned 'wall' (*šûr*) was probably a 'bull' (*šôr*) (see also Moses' blessing); the sexual power of the 'arch' is well-known (we find it also in the Ugaritic poem of Aqhat) and it is hard to translate *zr 'y yd(y)w* other than 'seeds of his member': the latter was worthy of the one of his father Jacob, from which were born not 'the shepherd, the stone of Israel' (*r 'h' 'bn yśr 'l*) but, more simply, 'the sons of Israel' (*bny yśr 'l*).

We can finally affirm that the author of Genesis achieved by literary means a radical reduction of the figure of Joseph. Since he could not attack him directly on his political success, he tried to humiliate him at the personal level, depicting as a shy and effeminate person the man that the ancient tradition had exalted as a champion of virility: as everybody knows, the end justifies the means.

## Chapter 5

### MOSES AND THE LAW

This essay aims at investigating, from an historical point of view, how and when the link between Moses and the Jewish religious law—a link which became indissoluble in the Torah—was created, and when the Torah assumed the normative aspect which was accorded to it during the Christian era. For nearly two thousand years, under the influence of theology, Moses has been considered the author of the Pentateuch. Today it is difficult to imagine Moses, toward the end of his life (in the year 2450 from the creation of the world, according to the chronology of the book of *Jubilees*, i.e. circa 3300 years ago) writing his own memories and telling—he, who was Egyptian—some Babylonian myths which had still not been written.<sup>1</sup> Putting the matter of direct authorship aside, it is difficult to find anyone who would deny some kind of influence, variously filtered, of Moses the legislator—who lived towards the end of the thirteenth century—on the five books which have been ascribed to him. What follows is an attempt to find out whether it is possible to confirm this opinion, and to what extent.

Moses is, directly or not, the dominating character in four of the five books of the Pentateuch (the exception being Genesis) and in Joshua;<sup>2</sup> but only the Pentateuch was linked to him, even becoming his law, in spite of the existence of Genesis, which is quite cumbersome from a Mosaic perspective (I will come back to this point at the end of this essay). This is the situation we find in the current text of the Old Testament, a text which was already established, apart from some variants, in the third century (some rather think at the beginning of the second) when the Pentateuch was translated into Greek. The Hebrew original which was translated could have been much older of course, but could as well have been composed

1. The dating of *Enuma Elish* to the eighteenth century BCE is only a pious wish of those who want to demonstrate the great antiquity of the book of Genesis; the poem in fact was not written before the end of the second millennium.

2. See A.G. Auld, *Joshua, Moses and the Land* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980).

just before the Greek translation. For the moment it is impossible to tell which of the two alternatives is more plausible (it is obvious that we are talking of the *present* form of the Pentateuch: substantial parts of it were likely to have existed already for a fairly long time).

Looking at the ancient Hebrew literature, apart from the Pentateuch, we find some interesting statements about the existence of a 'corpus' of normative writings ascribed to Moses. In the first book of Maccabees we have a mention of 'the books of the law (*ta biblia tou nomou*)', an expression used as a synonym of 'book of the Covenant (*biblion diathēkēs*)' (1.56-57); those books, according to the author, were torn up and burnt during the persecution at the time of Antiochus IV and their owners were put to death. Another testimony, perhaps a little earlier than 1 Maccabees, which can be placed between the end of the second and the beginning of the first century BCE, can be found in Ben Sira (24.23), where a 'book of the Covenant (*biblios diathēkēs*)' and the 'Law of Moses (*nomon Mōūsēs*)' are mentioned. In its prologue we find, I think for the first time, the subdivision of the Hebrew sacred texts into Law, Prophets and 'other books' (*tōn allōn patriōn bibliōn*). In the brief passage dedicated to Moses (45.1-5), Ben Sira reminds us that Moses received from God 'the law of life and wisdom', in order to explain it to the people.<sup>3</sup> From those attestations, which are contained (perhaps not by chance) in books not included in the Jewish canon, we can affirm with some certainty that towards the end of the second century BCE the Pentateuch was considered, at least in some environments, the normative text of the Mosaic religion. It is worth observing, nevertheless, that in a more or less contemporary writing, the second letter at the beginning of 2 Maccabees, we find an explicit reference (2.9-11) to the episode narrated in Lev. 9-10, but with details outlining a text very different from the current one: the actual protagonist is Moses, and not Aaron as in the current version.<sup>4</sup> It will be possible to better appreciate the importance of this element after examining other data.

Since unfortunately no other text allows us to place at an earlier date what we can deduce from 1 Maccabees and Ben Sira, we must fix around 150 BCE the *terminus ante quem* for the acceptance, at least partial, of the Pentateuch as a normative Mosaic text. We find the *terminus post quem* in the biblical text itself.

3. G.L. Prato, *Il problema della teodicea in Ben Sira* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1975), pp. 281-83.

4. Also the detail of the fire which descends on the altar is different: in 2 Maccabees it is invoked by Moses.

Let us consider 2 Kgs 18.4: Hezekiah, the zealous king of Jerusalem living in the last decades of the eighth century BCE, carried out a religious reform which we can suppose was inspired by the prophet Isaiah, since the historical tradition presents those two characters in close relationship. It was a Yahwistic reform, as we deduce from the biblical text and as it is confirmed by epigraphy, which testifies to preponderant Yahwistic onomastics in the kingdom of Judah starting from the seventh century BCE. The most significant aspect of the reform—the only one which is explicitly recalled by the deuteronomistic historian—is the destruction of the ‘brazen snake which Moses had made’, an object of the popular cult. The value of this episode, whose essential truth we have no reason to doubt, is much higher than what one would think, judging from the scarce interest that this episode has stirred up among biblical scholars. It reveals that a Yahwistic reform took place, a religious reform which has not been investigated sufficiently. If Hezekiah could break into pieces a liturgical vessel made by Moses himself, this means that Moses was far from having the assumed authority and charisma he has in later texts: an act like Hezekiah’s would have been inconceivable in the Jerusalem of the second century BCE and it is not by chance that the Chronicler avoided mentioning it. Hezekiah’s episode indicates also that the figure of Moses was connected to a relic that we could define as ‘historical’, rather than to his eventual legislative work, and that it was possible to operate a Yahwistic reform even against him.

Let us consider now another biblical text, the book of Hosea which, through the redactional note which indicates it as contemporary to Hezekiah, is actually more ancient by some years. In 12.14 we read: ‘by a prophet Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he preserved’. Although he is not explicitly mentioned, it is hard to doubt that the ‘prophet’ the text is referring to is Moses. For a full understanding of the meaning of this passage it is necessary to make use of textual criticism. In this I was facilitated by the critical edition published by Piergiorgio Borbone<sup>5</sup> (but some of my conclusions will be different from those of this scholar). A curious fact is that the Syriac version and one of the Greek manuscripts attest the word ‘prophet’, but in both cases, in the plural form, therefore denying the identification with Moses. This textual variant, which evidently occurred in more than one Hebrew manuscript, would remain unexplained if we did not consider the expression we find in 12.10 and 13.4: ‘I am Yahweh your god from the land of Egypt’. This sentence

5. P.G. Borbone, *Il libro del profeta Osea. Edizione critica del testo ebraico* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani, 1990), pp. 3, 88-89, 172-73.

simply ignores the Sinai theophany and this is confirmed by the Greek, Syriac and Aramaic versions which add the words 'I made you go out' to harmonize it with the Exodus narrative. The *lectio difficilior* of the Masoretic text (rightly recognised as such, but wrongly rejected, by Borbone) must be considered the right reading, because it reflects the same historical perspective of Hezekiah's reform: in the eighth century BCE the figure of Moses not only did not have the authority it assumed in more recent times, but also, although deeply connected to Egypt ('Moses' is an hypocoristic Egyptian name) and to its culture (the brazen snake is simply the ureus, the Egyptian cobra used as a powerful apotropaic symbol),<sup>6</sup> it had no direct relationship with the revelation of the divine name on Mount Sinai nor with religious legislation. If we consider again the passage in Hosea previously quoted, we notice a sort of grammatical mistake, that is a change in the subject that only the general sense makes comprehensible (the one who 'was preserved' is Israel and not Yahweh, as the grammar would imply). If we bring the text back to what had to be its original form, linguistically correct and with an appropriate use of the parallelism, the verse would read: 'by a prophet Israel was made to go out (*or* went out) from Egypt and by a prophet was he preserved'. So Moses was the redeemer from Egypt and the people's 'defender': it is easy to see here an allusion to the brazen snake, the talisman, an essential instrument and therefore Moses' specific attribute. In the more ancient Jewish tradition Moses was ideally represented with the snake in his hand, instead of the Tables of the Law. How it came that the brazen snake ended up in Solomon's temple, the Bible does not tell us, neither do biblical scholars; we will try to find this out later.<sup>7</sup>

If we admit that a quite ancient tradition existed about the coming of the Jews from Egypt to Palestine under the guidance of Moses, we are in fact implying that it existed already in the eighth century BCE; it is possible that it had an historical basis, but we must not look at it as a proof of the 'historicity' of the Exodus as it is described in the Pentateuch. Today we know that many of the inhabitants of Israel in historical times had been autochthonous in Palestine for a long time and that others came from the East concomitant with the arrival of Aramaeans settling down towards the end of the second millennium BCE. It is quite probable that a 'group of Moses' existed, but we should find out how numerous it was and, most of all,

6. See my article 'Le serpent d'airain et Moïse', *ZAW* 100 (1988), pp. 264-67.

7. In the article quoted in the previous note I suggested a solution that now I find inadequate.

when it arrived in Palestine; nothing prevents us from thinking that it had arrived, for example, in the tenth century BCE, when the Hebrew states were already formed and had adopted Yahwism. Hezekiah, as we have seen, did not at all like Moses' Yahwism. The insistence of Hosea in making a distinction between Israel and Ephraim, though in the form of a parallelism, makes us think of two components in the Northern kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

If a conclusion, necessarily general, can be drawn from the two passages we have examined, it is that in the eighth century in both Hebrew kingdoms existed a strong tradition about Moses and a migration from Egypt full of miraculous events; a tangible souvenir of that migration was kept in the temple of Jerusalem. The destruction of this relic by Hezekiah can only be interpreted as the imposition by the king of a reformed Yahwism, different from the Mosaic one observed till that moment in Jerusalem. I would not exclude that this reform, perhaps meant to replace a kind of 'Isaiah-type' to a 'Kuntillet 'Ajrud-type' of Yahwism, was somehow connected to the fall of the northern kingdom. Whatever the way the facts really went, we have found an important element in our quest: we can set the *terminus post quem* for the Pentateuchal Moses at 700 BCE. We must therefore look for our Moses between this date and 150 BCE.

In the second festal letter of 2 Maccabees, dated 124 BCE (also this date, as all those we find in late Hebrew literature, is to be taken as a *terminus post quem* and not as the actual time of the redaction), we find a mention of Nehemiah's library. This information was possibly taken from *Nehemiah's Memoirs* (whose original redaction, still known to Flavius Josephus, is lost). This library contained 'books about kings', 'prophets' books', 'David's books' and 'letters of the kings about the offerings' (2 Macc. 2.13). This information, dating back to the third century BCE (which is plausible for the redaction of those *Memoirs*, as can be inferred by the literary genre of Greek origin and from the allusion to the *Letters of the Kings*, a work composed towards the end of the fourth century BCE),<sup>9</sup> indicates the existence of our book of Kings, of prophetic books and of Psalms. The absence of writings corresponding to the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua is strange, because in the third century those books already existed, either in their present form, or in a different one but with the same contents. The

8. It is well-known that the references to Jacob in ch. 12 were extraneous to the original text. I wonder if the two sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel could be part of this dualism.

9. See my book on this subject, *Il ritorno dall'esilio babilonese* (Brescia: Paideia, 2001).

most likely explanation for this strange omission is, in my opinion, the following: the author of the letter thinks of his own time, when Moses' law was already in use and, as a form of respect, he omits to mention it in a generic context such as a comparison between Nehemiah's and Judah Maccabee's library. The existence of the books of the Law is taken for granted. So the information about Nehemiah's library says nothing about the Pentateuch, although at this point we have to keep in mind the discrepancy, already pointed out, between the text of 2 Macc. 2.9-11 and the episode in Lev. 9-10 concerning Moses.

If we leave the Pentateuch aside for a moment, after 700 BCE we find in the biblical texts some allusions to Moses which are quite relevant to our investigation. In Judg. 1.16 and 4.11 we find a reference to the Kenites, descendants of Hobab, Moses' father-in-law. The information, whose dating it is impossible to determine, shows a connection between Moses and the Kenites, the 'blacksmiths', and appears to be coherent with the tradition that presents Moses as constructor of a prodigious metal talisman. It is almost superfluous to note that this relationship of Moses is in contrast with both traditions of the Pentateuch (Exod. 2.16-22 and Num. 12.1), which are also in contradiction with each other. We find another very interesting reference to Moses in 1 Sam. 12.8; in his resignation speech, Samuel refers to 'Moses and Aaron, who brought forth your ancestors out of Egypt, and made them dwell in this place'. The implication of this sentence is clear: in contradiction with what is affirmed in the Pentateuch, Moses entered Palestine. This fact is confirmed, as in the case of the book of Hosea, by several ancient versions presenting a *lectio facilior* with the verb *y<sup>a</sup>šab* in the singular form, which implies Yahweh as subject of the sentence (as it is the case in the precedent one).<sup>10</sup> Also in this case we cannot determine the dating of this passage, which was, furthermore, revised by the deuteronomistic historian: we can only affirm that it is more ancient than the Pentateuch.

We have a more certain dating in the case of Hecataeus of Abdera, who wrote in Alexandria towards the end of the fourth century BCE. In a passage quoted by Diodorus Siculus (40.3.1-3) Hecataeus gives some information about the Jews: from the nature of the elements reported it is possible to affirm that only other Jews can have given such information to Hecataeus and that the ultimate source should be the milieu of Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

10. G.W. Ahlström, 'Another Moses Tradition', *JNES* 39 (1980), pp. 65-69.

11. D. Mendels, 'Hecataeus of Abdera and a Jewish *patrios politeia* of the Persian Period (Diodorus Siculus XL, 3)', *ZAW* 95 (1983), pp. 96-110.

According to Hecataeus the Jews (as well as the Greeks) were of Egyptian origin and were led to their land by Moses, as the Greeks were led by Danaus and Cadmus. Moses led a 'colony' (*apoikia*) of Jews to Palestine, where he founded several towns: among them there was Jerusalem, the capital, where he built the temple, produced liturgical and civil legislation and established the priestly corps, at whose head was the High Priest, who had the functions of head of the State.

Following in the wake of Hecataeus,<sup>12</sup> who inserts the description of the Jews in a typically Greek cultural frame, there are a number of authors (Jews and non-Jews) who have written in Greek about Jewish history and customs, till the end of the first century CE. This quite rich literature, almost completely lost apart from the works of Philo, Flavius Josephus and some other little fragments, offers a peculiar delineation of the figure of Moses.<sup>13</sup> The Jews Demetrius, Eupolemus and Artapanus describe Moses—as well as Abraham—in terms of a 'cultural hero', a teacher of civilization and writer of laws and even an army leader (Artapanus). These authors, who write in the second and maybe (Artapanus) in the first century BCE, obviously know the Pentateuch, but seem to prefer topics that are not included in it. The state of preservation of their works (often only one or two sentences is left) does not allow us to know what their position was on narratives such as the long stay of Israel in the desert or the death of Moses outside the promised land; even if we do not have any testimonies (maybe because they have not been handed on because they were considered disturbing) it is difficult to imagine that Jewish writers so ready to exalt Moses made him die before entering Palestine, with the nation that he had created.

As for the non-Jewish writers, we do not know the sources of Pompeius Trogus (epitomized by Justin 36.2), Strabo (16.2.35-36) and Tacitus (*Historiae* 5.3), but it is probable that, at least indirectly, among them were Jewish authors. When, for example, Justin writes about a stop of one week on Mount Sinai (*montem Sinaeum*) relating it to the sabbath, it is easy to imagine that among the sources of Trogus was a Jewish one who received, maybe only at second- or third-hand, some elements partly corresponding to those in the Pentateuch. Now this is not a case when these three authors, as well as Hecataeus, relate that Moses arrived in Jerusalem; Tacitus

12. E. Gabba, 'La Palestina e gli Ebrei negli storici classici fra il V e il III sec. A. C.', *RivB* 35 (1986), pp. 136-41.

13. See G.L. Prato, 'Cosmopolitismo culturale e autoidentificazione etnica nella prima storiografia giudaica', *RivB* 35 (1986), pp. 143-82 and Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 138-39.



writes about an arrival to Palestine after a '*continuum sex dierum iter*'—therefore without any stopping near Mt. Sinai—and about the immediate construction of the temple in Jerusalem according to Justin, '*post Mosen etiam filius eius Arruas (Aaron) sacerdos sacris Aegyptiis, mox rex creatur*' (G.L. Prato has also mentioned a tradition according to which Moses was a king).<sup>14</sup>

If we consider again our sources about Moses aside from the Pentateuch we find that in the eighth century Moses was considered a prophet-thaumaturge (like Elijah and Elisha), who had led Israel out of Egypt into Palestine, defending his people with a bronze talisman that he himself had made, since he was related to a group of 'smiths'. Then, probably, he had put the talisman in the Jerusalem temple built by himself; the Sinai theophany was not yet known. This is substantially the tradition that at the end of the fourth century Hecataeus received from well-informed Jews about the founding of Jerusalem; this same tradition was resumed by the following authors till the end of the first century CE. But in Hecataeus we find a new element, which was not present in more ancient tradition: Moses' legislative work. Accordingly, we must divide our research into two different streams: the historical figure of Moses on one side and on the other the Mosaic Law. This will have some important consequences for the history of the formation of the Pentateuch.

The historical Moses in the Jewish tradition, from the eighth to the first century BCE, is always very different from the one who appears in the five books of the Old Testament (from Exodus to Joshua). To find a biography of Moses which is perfectly coherent with the biblical data we have to await the works of Philo and Josephus Flavius and then Christian authors such as Gregory of Nissa; and to find again, in Jewish tradition, a Moses different from the biblical one it will be necessary to wait for Sigmund Freud. This fact implies that even when the Pentateuch was already known, in the second century BCE, there were several Jewish milieux which simply ignored its narratives; 2 Maccabees quotes a Mosaic prescription according to a text in which Aaron had not got the upper hand of Moses. If the Judaic-Hellenistic milieu kept its independence of judgment for almost three centuries, at least in what concerned the historical traditions of the Jewish people (there are also several extra-biblical traditions also about Abraham), the only conclusion we can draw about the Pentateuch is that it had not enough authority to impose its own version of facts—and this happened

14. Prato, 'Cosmopolitismo', p. 160, n. 46.

because such a version, clearly anti-Mosaic and anti-Egyptian,<sup>15</sup> was a recent creation of the priestly class of Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> We could date this creation, with a large approximation, between the end of the fourth and the middle of the second century BCE. My study of the character of Moses was a very important contribution in forming my opinion that the Greek translation of the Pentateuch was made immediately after the redaction of the extended Hebrew text.

Now we have given an answer to the first question, that of when the Pentateuch began to be considered normative and, at the same time, I think we have also found in which century the Pentateuch was written in its present form. This date, which many people will consider incredibly low, changes the terms of the problem: the facts about Moses have convinced me to fix the redaction of the Pentateuch to the second century BCE, but the 'Law of Moses'—the one known by the deuteronomistic historian, by the Chronicler and by the sources of Hecataeus—already existed. We have already found which are the chronological boundaries for it: after Hezekiah and before Hecataeus.

A Mosaic Law subsequent to Hezekiah and before the fourth century BCE immediately recalls Deuteronomy, with the obvious appendix of the deuteronomistic historian who judged the kings according to the 'Law of Moses'. Apart from some problems of redaction (for example the first four chapters of the present book of Deuteronomy presuppose the narrative of the extant text of Exodus–Numbers) we can immediately affirm that in Deuteronomy and in the rich complex of laws collected in Leviticus and inserted into the narrative of Exodus–Numbers we must look for legislative work ascribed to Moses before the extant Pentateuch (and so, actually, the normative part of it corresponds in a large part with the normative section of the redaction previous to the second century, as it is shown by the case of 2 Maccabees already mentioned). This fact poses two problems: the first is a chronological one and concerns the moment when the first consistent nucleus of this legislation was created (without excluding contributions from already existent texts); the second originates from what we have just said: if the Yahwistic reform of Hezekiah was made against Moses, why was this character, who seemed destined to *damnatio memoriae* or even to oblivion, rehabilitated at a later time? The answers to those two questions are strictly connected and one implies the other.

15. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 139-40, 147-50.

16. Prato, 'Cosmopolitismo', p. 181; *History and Ideology*, pp. 138-39.

It is a common opinion to link the deuteronomic legislation to the religious reform realized by Josiah in 621 BCE, according to the narrative in 2 Kgs 22–23. The different dating in 2 Chron. 34.3, which collocates the reform in the twelfth instead of the eighteenth year after the discovery of the ‘book’, derives only from the wish to depict Josiah, considered the anticipator of the liturgical reforms of the third century and as immune from idolatry since the very beginning of his reign, as it is clear from the initial words of the verse. This connection appears, however, hardly plausible. Apart from the fact that the discovering of an old book as the cause of a religious reform should be considered only a literary expedient,<sup>17</sup> so that the date 621 represents a *terminus post quem* (it is impossible to say how much later it was chosen as a date), we can rightly advance some doubts on the importance of Josiah’s reform, if it existed at all. The spreading of Yahwistic names in the onomastica can be explained as a result of richer documentation rather than of a larger diffusion of Yahwism. It is well-known that archaeological and epigraphic documentation undermine the uniqueness of the Jerusalem temple that is the basis of ‘Josiah’s reform’; but it is necessary to consider another element that increases our scepticism about this famous reform. If Josiah was really a model of religious virtue as he is depicted by Deuteronomistic tradition, why were there in his time prophets like Jeremiah and Zephaniah who heavily accused all the leading class of Jerusalem, including both priests and laity? Saying that Jeremiah’s criticism was in fact against Josiah’s successors, as some scholars suggest, or that it was pronounced in the years before the reform is hardly convincing, and anyway the same cannot be true for Zephaniah; if this prophet was active only during the reign of Josiah, this can only mean that there was something that did not work well during his time. Is it possible that the prophetic writings of the time present no trace of the positive actions of the converted monarch? One is tempted to think that, considering the good relationship between Josiah and the priestly class—as the story of the discovery of the book shows—it was the clergy of Jerusalem who ascribed to this particular king the merit of a religious reform, maybe because he had introduced some administrative measure unknown to us, but particularly appreciated by the priesthood. These are exactly the same priests, including prophets, who were the object of the violent rebukes

17. W. Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), p. 128, n. 17.

of Zephaniah (3.4) and Jeremiah (2.8). It is worth noting, by the way, that we have no information about a close relationship between Josiah and a specific prophet, as in the case of Hezekiah and Isaiah.

Anyway, we are not interested, at this moment in what kind of role Josiah had in the development of Yahwism, since our problem now is Deuteronomy. And the book itself is substantially incompatible with a dating to the reign of Josiah and to the monarchic age in general. Deuteronomy is thinkable only as a product of a society without a king. Unfortunately there are still many scholars who study the ancient Near East, and so also the Old Testament, without a clear idea of the functions of the monarchy in those societies. For all Near Eastern peoples a 'covenant' between a god and his people simply made no sense: the covenant concerned only the king and his dynastic god and the king was legitimate just because of this direct relationship with the god. It was through it that the king could grant the prosperity of his people and legitimated his own function. This is clear even from the biblical text, where it is written, just about Josiah: 'And the king stood by a pillar and made a covenant (*wayyikrōt 'et ha-berūt*) before Yahweh' (2 Kgs 23.3). Someone with a due degree of curiosity might wonder why biblical criticism, which has investigated so intensively about and beyond Deuteronomy, never posed the question of why this book, which guided the steps of pious Josiah, does not contain any mention of covenant rites of this kind. The same ceremony, after all, was celebrated at the time of Solomon, as is clear from the narrative of 1 Kings 8, in spite of all the Deuteronomistic amplifications. Consecrating the temple, Solomon made a covenant (8.23) with Yahweh, god of the dynasty (8.25), invoking his protection on the people, especially in the hard moments of war and famine.

The acts of Solomon and Josiah, which the deuteronomistic historian has tried to minimize or hide, are clarified by two texts. The Ugaritic ritual KTU 1.119 contains (lines 24-36) a prayer that the king had to pronounce when he assumed his power. The heading is: 'Here is the oil of the consecration of Baal, the libation of the commencing kingship';<sup>18</sup> the following text of the prayer has as its focal point the theme of an eventual attack of the enemy against the town and Baal's intervention to defend it after invocations and sacrifices; this is the exact equivalent of 1 Kgs 8.33-34. The covenant between the king and his god included an annual ceremony, as can be inferred from the bilingual inscriptions of Karatepe, where the local

18. See G. Garbini, 'Note sui testi rituali ugaritici', *OA* 22 (1983), p. 58.

king installs in his town Baal *krntryš* as his own dynastic god and city-god at the same time<sup>19</sup>

In the light of those testimonies, biblical and extra-biblical, when we read in Deuteronomy the few lines concerning the king (17.14-20), where it is said that he cannot have many horses, many wives or a lot of gold and silver (exactly the opposite of Solomon, to be precise) and that his specific task is: ‘when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write a copy of this law in a book from that which is before the priests, the Levites’ (v. 18), we should be honestly admiring of the arrogant ingenuity of the author. This kind of statement, which originated from a Levite’s pen, could have been written only by someone who was absolutely sure that he would never have to cope with kings, that is to say by someone who lived after the final liquidation of the monarchy, after the end of ‘the Zerubbabel affair’. We are towards the end of the sixth century. Deuteronomy subscribes to the strong anti-monarchical ideology contained in Isa. 55.3 (Isa. 49–55 is a section of the book which, for its nationalism, appear to be very far from the pro-Achaemenid universalism of Isa. 40–48, the true ‘Deutero-Isaiah’). A direct covenant between God and the people of Israel without the royal intermediary could be conceived only in a prophetic milieu, which had always been hostile to the monarchy, and was adopted by the priestly class. The priest-king of Jerusalem was not very different from the Phoenician king of Sidon, whose main title was in the Achaemenid age, ‘priest of Ashtart’.<sup>20</sup> The centrality of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel in all the ‘Law of Moses’ is the most certain proof of its postexilic origin<sup>21</sup>

Taking the date of 500 BCE as an approximate date for the redaction of the ‘Law of Moses’, later substantially inserted into the Pentateuch, we

19. See G. Garbini, ‘L’iscrizione fenicia di Karatepe’, *AION* 41 (1981), pp. 158-60; and see also Chapter 7 of this book.

20. See my *I Fenici. Storia e Religione* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1980), pp. 53-63.

21. G. Widengren, ‘What Do We Know About Moses?’, in J.I. Durham and J.R. Porter (eds.), *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of G.H. Davies* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1970), pp. 21-47 already 30 years ago had noticed that in the pre-exilic age the name of Moses was never related to the law (see p. 27). But the Swedish scholar did not make good use of this correct observation, proposing the strange theory of the existence of Deuteronomistic circles in the Northern Kingdom from which the idea of Moses as a legislator would have arrived to Jerusalem only at the time of Jeremiah. For the same reason the real cause of the strange absence of the name of Moses from Ps. 119, where the law is mentioned several times (see pp. 25-26), was not correctly interpreted. See on this subject n. 25 of this essay.

still have to investigate the reason for the rehabilitation of the character of Moses. We do not know if this process already started after Hezekiah's times (the allusion in Jer. 15.1, where Moses is collocated as intercessor next to Samuel, is far too vague); but it is certain that the ancient figure of the prophet who led the chosen people out of Egypt to Jerusalem was too suggestive not to become a model for those who came out of Babylonian exile and went back to the beloved city. (This kind of suggestion is still valid in our times, with material and spiritual 'exoduses'.) The 'Law of Moses', that is, the law created for the new rigidly henotheistic religion brought to Jerusalem by the survivors of Babylon, had probably almost nothing in common with the old Yahwistic religion of the 'blacksmith'-prophet.

The 'Law of Moses' considers the temple of Jerusalem as the centre of all religious and social life, which in ancient times was connected directly with the person of the king, without being circumscribed to a particular place: *ubi rex ibi ecclesia*, we could say, even if the two capitals, Samaria and Jerusalem, were of course privileged. The uniqueness of the place of worship, which made no sense during the monarchic age and was not in fact realized before the exile, becomes a necessity only for the exiles coming back from Babylon, who had to cope with the traditional Yahwism of Samaria and of Jerusalem itself, where a sacred place probably continued to exist for the religious necessities of all those who had remained in Palestine. One could even think that the famous 'second temple' was an ideological rather than architectural creation. The obsessive idea of the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem is only comprehensible in an anti-Samaritan function, while the hierocratic form of government explains why in the 'Law of Moses' the liturgical prescriptions (or in general these that interested exclusively the priesthood) are far more numerous and detailed than those which concerned the people. These last comprehend civil and penal rights, especially concerning the sexual sphere, but any kind of law about the structure of the state is missing. We have already mentioned the ridiculous rule concerning the king; we could add a couple of references to popular judges and to 'rulers of 1000, 100, 50 and 10' (Exod. 18.13-26; Deut. 16.18-20), but they are sporadic cases: a 'law' does not tell who should exercise the political, military or economic power (excluding the tributes to the temple), or how. The 'Law of Moses' could be the liturgical and pastoral guide for a diocese; all the rest was evidently regulated by the Persian administration.

Apart from its final period, we are ignorant of almost everything about the vicissitudes of the Jerusalem priesthood from the return from Babylon

to the secession of the group who formed the Qumran community towards the middle of the second century BCE. Postexilic writings document the existence of strong internal tensions and a progressive claim of the Levites on the traditional priesthood; this long story is not relevant for the present study, except for the fact that it demonstrates the inconsistency of Wellhausen's distinction between 'deuteronomistic' and 'priestly' thinking, from a conceptual as well as from a chronological point of view. The attitude that today is sometimes defined as a fashionable 'pan-deuteronomism' can well be considered the beginning of a critical awareness that brings to evidence the fact that nearly all the Old Testament we read is conceived and written by redactors from the postexilic sacerdotal milieu. The divergences in the different texts are not caused by chronological stratifications, but rather by the combination of different currents within the same priestly class, divided into 'sons of Zadok' and 'sons of Aaron'. This ideological duplicity is probably the reason for the existence of parallel texts, equivalent one to the other, such as the two names for the mountain of God (Sinai and Horeb) and for Moses' father-in-law (Jethro and Reuel).

This could be the end of this essay, since I have already discussed all the points I intended to examine; but I had promised to say something more about the book of Genesis. As we have seen, the Pentateuch is the final result of a long process of systematization and elaboration of already existing writing and in the end it imposed itself as the 'Law of Moses', to the detriment of all previous texts or of those writings that, even if canonical, were extraneous to it. Being conceived as a self-sufficient and normative *corpus*, the Pentateuch was intended to be the initial part of a larger narrative complex, ending with the second book of Kings. All those books form not only an intrinsic unit (the narrated events are in chronological succession), but most of all an ideal, theological or ideological one. What we read is a huge historical narration conceived as such *a posteriori* and consequently realized through more or less consistent redactional connections. It is difficult to think the historical books in the form we have (the Former Prophets of the Jewish canon), with their judgments and point of views, without the actual Pentateuch: but with this I do not suggest—as I think it is clear by the rest of my exposition—the existence of an author-compiler working in the sixth century, following Paolo Sacchi's suggestion.<sup>22</sup> What I rather want to underline is the ambiguous position of the

22. P. Sacchi, 'Il più antico storico di Israele: un'ipotesi di lavoro', in *Convegno sul tema: Le origini di Israele (Roma 10-11 febbraio 1986)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1987), pp. 65-86.

Pentateuch within the Hebrew literature: closed and open at the same time, closed as Law and open as narrative work and especially as ideological conception. Everybody knows that the actual Pentateuch makes little sense without the indispensable conclusion of the book of Joshua; the position of the Samaritans, who accepted as Law only the Pentateuch, but included in their canon only the book of Joshua of all the books of Jewish canonical tradition, clearly reflects this same situation. The death of Moses explicitly marks the ending point of the 'Law of Moses'; the normative aspect has prevailed over the narrative one; but in this case, what has Genesis to do with the 'Law of Moses'?

A first answer is easy to find: the Pentateuch is the basis of Judaism and, as such, it presents the laws and the origins of the Jewish people. These origins, mythical and metahistorical at the same time, are dated back to the creation of the world according to the exigencies of Hellenistic historiography: the same thing happened in the case of the Phoenician History by Philo of Byblus. From this point of view the Pentateuch is self-sufficient and its articulation in five books can be brought back to a literary tradition largely attested among the Jews: it is sufficient to recall the Enochic Pentateuch, the five *megillot* or the five collections forming the book of Psalms. But we could rather wonder why the 'Law of Moses' and the history of the people who in this law find their intimate identity contains so much history which has nothing to do with Moses and why this history remains substantially incomplete.

To answer this question, let us go back to the state of Hebrew traditions preceding the second century BCE, when the origins of the Jewish people were still assigned to Egypt and Moses was the liberator who led his people to Palestine and founded the Jerusalem temple.<sup>23</sup> Let us try to imagine a completely Mosaic Pentateuch: the first book would have been Exodus and the fifth a book of Joshua, but with Moses himself, instead of Joshua, as protagonist. This Pentateuch would have been the real 'Law of Moses'

23. Into this historiographical perspective we can put the problem of the construction of the Jerusalem temple. The biblical text shows some indecision between David and Solomon and this implies that the attribution of the construction to the latter was a quite recent story. This is confirmed by the later tradition according to which David is the author of the Psalms and of their melodies: such tradition would make no sense if not related to the liturgical celebrations which took place in the temple. The tradition which considered Moses the founder of the Jerusalem temple should be more ancient still: if it originated at the beginning of the postexilic period together with the Mosaic 'corpus', it was probably neglected with the gradual affirmation of a priestly class different from the one which had come back from Babylon.



and the religious foundation, projected into history, of the Jewish people in Palestine: it would have had no need to become a Hexateuch to be historically complete.

I have discussed elsewhere<sup>24</sup> the reasons that made me think that the origin of the actual Pentateuch is probably connected to a strong reaction of the Jerusalem priesthood against Egyptian Judaism and its most famous hero, Moses. The translation of Jewish origins from Egypt to Mesopotamia and the heavy reduction of the role of Moses, who becomes a stutterer, often replaced by Aaron<sup>25</sup> and not allowed to enter Palestine, are the historical results of the new deal. As happened with his bronze snake, at a certain point Moses himself was banished from the temple: it seems that the atmosphere of Jerusalem did not suit Moses much.

This supposition, or if you want, this fancy, about a whole Mosaic Pentateuch which was replaced towards the middle of the second century by the current one might seem 'sensational' (personally I consider it only the logic consequence of reasoning), but it helps us to solve a certain number of literary problems.

A history of Moses, which extended to the conquest of Palestine and to its partition between the tribes would include all the contents of the book of Joshua and would make superfluous a part of the book of Judges. This would explain why the library of Nehemiah contained historiographical books only about kings, including perhaps also Abimelech and Gideon. The new historical vision elaborated in Jerusalem in the second century compensated a redistribution of the traditional historiographical material, probably collected in compositions very similar to the book of Ruth. So the book of Genesis was created and the actual books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel were 'manufactured' (or 'redacted', according to the current terminology). Everything was then included in an absolute chronology starting from the creation of the world and ending with the monarchic age, where the relative chronology of the deuteronomist historian began. Historical memories and popular traditions, part of which maybe already existed in written form, offered the material to fill up the historical gaps,

24. See the reference in n. 15.

25. The process of progressive marginalization of the character of Moses finds its peak in the *Temple Scroll* which was intended, as Angelo Vivian has convincingly shown, as an alternative Torah opposed to the Pentateuch and where Moses is completely absent, replaced by Aaron and his 'brothers'. See A. Vivian, 'Il concetto di legge nel *Rotolo del Tempio* (11Q Temple Scroll)', *Ricerche Storico Bibliche* 3 (1991), pp. 97-114.

such as the age of the patriarchs and that of the judges. The Greek system of genealogies was the historical model for the mythical period, with the *toledot* which are simply the Hebrew translation of the Greek term *genealogika*, the Ionic historiography which originated at the beginning of the sixth century BCE within the same Achaemenid empire that also included Jerusalem.

This is my personal vision of the formation of the Pentateuch and of the definitive systematization of 'biblical' historiography. Why this history finished four centuries before the time when it was written remains an open question. One thing is sure: if one is dealing with a remote past, history—including the sacred one—is always easier to write.

## Chapter 6

### DAVIDIC TRADITIONS

If we compare how much space the historical books of the Old Testament (from Genesis to Kings) dedicate to the stories of the different characters, the figure of David clearly stands out. The chapters concerning him number about 39 (1 Sam. 16–27; 29–30; 2 Sam. 1–24; part of 1 Kgs 1–2). David largely surpasses Moses (apart from the chapters dedicated to the legislation), who has nearly 31 chapters (Exod. 2–19; 32–33; part of 34; Num. 10–14; 17; 20–21; part of 27 and 31; Deut. 34). Also in the books of Chronicles, where one would expect Solomon, the builder of the temple, to predominate, David easily defeats him by 15 to 9 (1 Chron. 10–22; 28–29 about David; 2 Chron. 1–9 about Solomon). And, since we are talking of statistics, we may also notice that if we consider the importance attributed by Ben Sira to the different protagonists of biblical history, we find a very different situation: David, with his 10 verses (47.2–11) is exceeded by Solomon (4.12–23a) and by Elijah (48.1–2a), who both count 11 verses and a half; but the distance increases if we consider Aaron (45.6–22), who has 17 verses, and, most of all, Simeon the high priest (50.1–24), celebrated for no less than 24 verses. These results, in texts conceived right in the age of major Davidic expectations, show members of the priestly class in the top places and will help us to understand many aspects of the problem we are to investigate. A merely quantitative comparison of the space dedicated in ancient Hebrew literature to the major characters of the past can contribute to forming an historical judgment. We cannot ignore the fact that, even in a preliminary look, David was the most important figure in Hebrew history; and if this was not ‘factually’ true, at least he is considered as such in the historical tradition the Bible preserves (a tradition which of course does not necessarily reflect the only Jewish tradition, and not even the prevailing one).

#### *Examination of the Material: The ‘Succession Narrative’*

The rich historiographical material concerning David is presented in the historical books as a continuous narration, except for the last four chapters

of 2 Samuel, which are in fact a series of appendices. But this narration only puts into a sequence very different sources, without even trying to eliminate repetitions and contradictions: certainly this peculiar way of writing history was consciously adopted by the author, in order to underline the fact that several different but equally important traditions existed and that he intended to collect them all, even when the data they offered were discordant. This same plurality of equally authoritative traditions in fact justified and legitimized any literary creativity and supplementation by the author of the final text of Samuel-Kings.

Just to give some examples of repetitions: David was employed in Saul's service four times (1 Sam. 16.22-23; 17.31, 55-58; 18.2), once as a musician and three times as a young and brave shepherd who had killed Goliath; three times the text mentions the envy of Saul for David's military success (1 Sam. 18.6-9, 14-16, 28-30), twice Saul makes an attempt on David's life with a lance (1 Sam. 18.10-11; 19.9-10), twice Jonathan suggests that David should hide (1 Sam. 19.1-7; 20.1-10), twice David spares Saul's life while he is sleeping (1 Sam. 24 and 26), twice David finds a refuge at Achish's place (1 Sam. 21.11-16; 27.1-6), Saul's death is narrated twice, with minor differences (1 Sam. 31; 2 Sam. 1.1-16) and Samuel's twice (1 Sam. 25.1; 28.2); two different explanations are given for the proverb 'Is Saul also among the prophets' (1 Sam. 10.9-12; 19.22-24; the second contradicts 1 Sam. 15.35).

The repetitions and contradictions that characterize the entire story of the relationship between David and Saul appear again in the narrative of the rebellion of Absalom, who according to the text had no sons (2 Sam. 18.18), just after having been described as father of three sons and a daughter, Tamar (2 Sam. 14.27); this same Tamar later will be indicated as Absalom's sister (2 Sam. 13). To these contradictory data concerning Absalom's family we can add that another daughter existed, Maachah, who is mentioned twice in 1 Kings (15.2 and 10) as the mother of kings Abijam and Asa (the two were brothers and not father and son, as it is said in 1 Kgs 15.8; the LXX text calls Asa's mother Ana, who appears to be Absalom's daughter too). To make the picture complete (and to add to the general confusion) we must say that Maachah is also the name of Absalom's mother in 2 Sam. 3.3.

But let us go back to our narrative. Ahimaaz and Jonathan, sons of the priests Zadok and Abiathar, who act as spies for David, once appear as residents of Jerusalem where they find information (2 Sam. 15.27 and 36), but at other times they are living with David (2 Sam. 17.17-21; 18.18-29); the decisive battle between David's and Absalom's supporters takes place

in two different localities, in Transjordan (2 Sam. 17.22-26) and in Ephraim (2 Sam. 18.6), while David is staying in the first case in Mahanaim (2 Sam. 17.24) and in the second maybe in his palace in Jerusalem, even though it is not explicitly stated (2 Sam. 18.24; 19.4, 6, 9).

It is clear that in this narrative we find material from different sources, scarcely harmonized in the final redaction. It is nearly impossible to reconstruct such sources, which at times have been used in parts and in a fragmentary manner; it is also important to consider all the different redactions we know nothing about and especially the work of the final author, who did not limit himself to copying an existing text and adding some little marginal notes, but also carried out quite a different operation, as we will see.

An exception to this general situation appears to be the 'Succession Narrative', a single homogeneous block comprising 2 Sam. 9–20 and the first two chapters of 1 Kings. Defined in its structure by L. Rost,<sup>1</sup> who in fact only revised a hypothesis put forward by J. Wellhausen some 50 years before<sup>2</sup> which was largely accepted, the 'Succession Narrative' would have been composed, according to these two scholars, during the first years of Solomon's reign (i.e. approximately in the middle of the 10th century BCE) by a member of the court. It is easy to imagine that a literary work of such antiquity, so original and even of some artistic value, was very attractive to the eyes of biblical scholars. For example, R.H. Pfeiffer was so enthusiastic that in 1957 he published a translation of the Hebrew text with the ambitious title 'The Hebrew Iliad' and the revealing subtitle 'The History of the Rise of Israel under Saul and David—written during the reign of Solomon probably by the priest Ahimaaz'. But, as sometimes happens to overly attractive things, this bright monument of Hebrew literature progressively fell into pieces before the reality, represented in this case by literary criticism. First the effective extent of the work was questioned,<sup>3</sup>

1. L. Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1926).

2. J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1885) (collection of articles that appeared in 1876 and 1877).

3. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 137-41; G. Garbini, '“Narrativa della successione” o “Storia dei re”?', *Henoch* 1 (1979), pp. 19-41; P.R. Ackroyd, 'The Succession Narrative (so called)', *Int.* 35 (1981), pp. 383-96; G. Keys, 'The So-called Succession Narrative', *JrBS* 10 (1988), pp. 140-55; R.C. Baylay, *David in Love and War* (JSOTSup, 75; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

then its historical validity—the narrative has in fact the form of a novel<sup>4</sup>—and finally its dating,<sup>5</sup> which now appears considerably later than the age of Solomon.

In fact this ‘Narrative’ constitutes a literary complex which cannot be defined as homogeneous: all the contradictions we have noticed in the story of Absalom are included in this account, which dedicates to this character seven chapters out of 14. The composite nature of the ‘Succession’ is evident because of the presence of some extraneous blocks, such as 2 Sam. 10 and 12.26-31, which are reports of battles.<sup>6</sup> This finds a valid confirmation in the analysis of Absalom’s story, where it is easy to isolate a first theme coherent with the spirit of a chronicle written in the court, which underlines the personal rebellion which will lead to the usurpation of the throne and to David’s flight from Jerusalem; but also a second theme, partly diminished in the text, where the effective secession of the northern tribes plays an important role. David’s war is a war against ‘Israel’, and this becomes explicit in 2 Sam. 20, where a rebellion promoted by a certain Sheba is mentioned. The text tends to minimize the international implications of the war: in Mahanaim David is helped by three men, Shobi, Machir and Barzillai (2 Sam. 17.27), later reduced to Barzillai alone (2 Sam. 19.32-39), an old and rich landowner. The omission of the other two names is easily explained because of their identity: the first, as we can tell by his titles, was the king of Ammon and the second the king of Lohdabar (see 2 Sam. 9.4). Sheba, with his slogan ‘We have no part in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: every man to his tents, o Israel’, anticipates literally what was to happen with the secession of Israel from Judah in the times of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12.16); this fact not only confirms a historical tradition completely extraneous to the line of the ‘Succession Narrative’, but is also an important link with a part of the narrative Rost wanted to exclude from his ‘History’.

This point brings us to a discussion of the problem of the real extent of the ‘Succession Narrative’, which from any point of view cannot remain

4. R.N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative* (London: SCM Press, 1968); E. Würthwein, *Die Erzählung von der Thronfolge Davids: Theologische oder politische Geschichtsschreibung?* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974); D.M. Gunn, *The Story of King David* (JSOTSup, 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978).

5. J. Van Seters, *In Search of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 277-91 suggests a postexilic dating; Baylay, *David*, admits a deuteronomic redaction.

6. Rost in fact also admitted this.

within the limits indicated by Wellhausen, nor the wider ones fixed by Rost. An examination of the typical literary motifs indicates that these are largely present before and after the block 2 Sam. 9–20 to 1 Kings 2. For example, the faithful Ziba, who meets the escaping David and brings him asses loaded with food (2 Sam. 25.18) is linked to the action of Abigail in 1 Sam. 25.18; typical is the presence of wise women, such as the woman of Tekoa who convinces David to forgive Absalom (2 Sam. 14) and the woman of Abel of Beth-Maachah who tells Joab to kill the rebel Sheba (2 Sam. 20.14–22). Both women are similar to the woman of Thebez who personally killed Abimelech (Judg. 9.50): the fact that the episode is explicitly quoted in the ‘Succession Narrative’ (2 Sam. 11.21) makes the autonomy of the narrative even more implausible.

As for the chronology of the story in which the basis of the ‘Succession’ lies, Van Seters thinks of the postexilic age, rightly considering the aspects he defines as ‘post-deuteronomistic’ as written by the author and not by a late redactor. In fact it is impossible to imagine a mere editorial intervention when, for example, both the woman of Tekoa and Meribaal compare David’s wisdom to the one of an ‘angel of God’ (2 Sam. 14.17 and 20; 19.28): this expression implies a quite developed angelology. And when we find the expression ‘in those days’ in a context like 2 Sam. 16.23 we tend to exclude the possibility of a later addition. To a postexilic age can be assigned expressions like ‘Lord’s anointed’ (2 Sam. 19.22), ‘law of Moses’ (1 Kgs 2.3), ‘from Dan even to Beer-sheba’ (2 Sam. 17.11), ‘elders of Israel’ (2 Sam. 17.4 and 15) and ‘elders of Judah’ (2 Sam. 19.12), a set of terms absolutely anachronistic in David’s or Solomon’s times; not to mention the instance of the Levites bearing the ark (2 Sam. 15.24).

If I had to express a personal opinion, I would say first of all that we should dismiss the traditional approach and stop considering the stories of the books of Samuel (and all the biblical texts) as the result of a collection of several different sources, still preserved as such, apart from the more or less accurate revision of a ‘redactor’ (‘deuteronomistic’, of course). In my opinion it is far more reasonable, and methodologically more economical, to conceive of a late author, coming from a priestly milieu, who is responsible not only for some sporadic additions, but also for the whole ideological scheme of the literary work we read today. He has used very freely some ancient materials, though not so many as is usually thought. If throughout the Bible scholars now feel the action of a ‘deuteronomistic’ or, better, of a ‘priestly’ hand, this means that all the Old Testament, with its own internal coherence, was written in more recent times. A ‘priestly’ author wrote,

in imitation of Hellenistic historiography and of the 'Phoenician History' which was the source of Philo of Byblos,<sup>7</sup> a history of the Jewish people, starting from the creation of the world. P. Sacchi rightly noticed an unifying concept which connects all the biblical books from Genesis to the books of Kings; but the author of such a work did not live in the first half of the sixth century as Sacchi supposed but probably in the second century BCE.<sup>8</sup> This same author, and I use the word in its fullest sense, composed the whole history of Israel, from Joshua to Jehoiachin, hence also the 'Succession Narrative'. He was a great writer and, as was common in oriental authors of ancient times, he was able to change the register or style of its narration according to the facts he was telling: he could be a pleasant story-teller, with a strong dramatic attitude (the narration is often revived by dialogues), but became didactic when enumerating the precepts of God or alluding to liturgical acts. The many repetitions and contradictions in the story are due to the fact that this author wanted to repeat in his own way the episodes he found in the literary material he had. And he did this only partly for the pure sake of narration, but more often in order to give a different version of the facts. This is the easiest way to explain the

7. See G. Garbini, 'La letteratura dei Fenici', in *Atti del II Congresso Internazionale di Studi Fenici e Punici. Roma 1987* (Rome: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1991), pp. 493-94.

8. P. Sacchi, 'Il più antico storico', pp. 65-86. The fact that the author-redactor of the narrative block Genesis-2 Kings lived after the sixth century is demonstrated by several elements. What we have said in previous pages and what will be said in the following indicates many details, well integrated in the textual frame and therefore not attributable to some late redactors, which appear incompatible with a dating to the exile age (see, for example, note 18). But the general conception of the work itself, a long narrative starting from the creation of the world, can be dated to the Hellenistic age. It is also important to consider that the Graecism *toledot* 'history', largely used in the book of Genesis, implies the term *genealogika* of the Ionic historians; and we cannot exclude the possibility that the 'Phoenician History' by Sanchuniaton (the typological equivalent of Moses), utilized by Philo of Byblos but written during the fourth century BCE, served as a model for the Jewish historian. The ideology of the 'covenant', well delineated by P. Sacchi, necessarily presupposes the end of the monarchy, because the Jews of the Bible, starting from Deutero-Isaiah, transferred the royal pact to the people of Israel. But it is Sacchi himself who has convincingly shown that the end of monarchy occurred in Israel only with the disappearance of Zerubbabel, eliminated, probably in a violent way, towards 515 BCE (see *Henoch* 11 [1989], pp. 131-46). The choice of the date of the rehabilitation of king Jehoiachin as end of the narrative does not mean that the author did not know what happened after that date, but only that he did not intend to narrate it for ideological reasons, because the facts were in contrast with his own conception of history.



existence of different works narrating the same facts in the same way, with only little differences in some details (as it is the case of the double attack of Saul on David, the double act of grace accorded to Saul, the double episode concerning Jonathan). In this case we do not have different versions in the narration of historical facts (as in the case of the Synoptic Gospels), but rather of literary inventions; and it is difficult to think that the same events have been invented twice.

*David in the Sources of 1–2 Samuel*

We can now try to make an evaluation of the biblical traditions concerning David. The continuous narrative was written, as we have seen, around 150 BCE by a single author who used several ancient sources, concerning in particular David's military actions and his difficult relationship with Saul. It is almost impossible to isolate and put in chronological order all those sources (we have also the title of one of them, the 'Book of Yashar': 2 Sam. 1.18). But from the variety of the subjects (and of the narrator's interests) we can suppose that different works existed, maybe a sort of cycle of stories concerning David. To have an idea of the content of those stories we could isolate some sentences and compare them with the continuous narrative composed by the final author: the conqueror of Goliath, the ambiguous relations with the House of Saul, the conquest of Jerusalem (narrated with incredible brevity in 2 Sam. 5.6-8: three verses, in great part dedicated to a proverb), the family misfortunes, the unfulfilled construction of the temple. Regarding these well-known episodes, we read, 'there was again a battle in Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan...a Bethlehemite, slew Goliath the Gittite' (2 Sam. 21.19); after the killing of Goliath, he 'took the head of the Philistine, and brought it to Jerusalem; but he put his armour in his tent' (1 Sam. 17.54); when Nathan reproaches David because of Bathsheba, he tells him, in the name of Yahweh, 'I gave thee your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom' (2 Sam. 12.8). Here are a series of facts which are in strong contrast with the canonical narrative, or at least appear different: David did not kill Goliath and did not conquer Jerusalem, because the town was already part of Saul's kingdom, whose palace and harem were later taken by David, the usurper.

But the biblical texts have other surprises for us, in their most hidden parts. When, a little more than a century later, the priest Jehoiada organized a conspiracy against the queen Athaliah, he gave to the chiefs of his men 'king David's spears and shields, that were in the temple of Yahweh' (2 Kgs 11.10). How did they arrive there? We find the answer to this

interesting question in a detail of an episode narrated in 2 Samuel: after the victory against Hadadezer, king of Zobah, 'David took the shields of gold that were on the servants of Hadadezer, and brought them to Jerusalem' (2 Sam. 8.7). This is the version in the Masoretic text, which does not offer any other detail or explanation. But when the LXX text and Flavius Josephus report the sack of the Jerusalem temple by pharaoh Shishak, with an interesting variant, they mention 'the golden spears David had taken from the hands of the servants of Hadadezer king of Zobah' (1 Kgs 14.26 and *Ant.* 7.104 and 8.259: the Jewish historian mentions also some 'quivers').

From these 'crumbs' of text we can infer that before the second century BCE several historical traditions concerning David existed, and some of them were very different from those we read in the powerful narrative structure conceived by the author of 1–2 Samuel. From a historical point of view, the most important elements to consider are those concerning Jerusalem and the temple: the first was under Israelite control already before David and the second was built by David, but we cannot ignore the possibility that he could have simply enlarged a pre-existing building, already in use under Saul's reign. But we are not so much concerned with the historical character of David, rather with the figure which emerges from these traditions, more ancient than the final text of 1 and 2 Samuel. David is described as a young warrior of Saul, tied to Jonathan, the king's son, by a strong friendship; his military successes give rise to Saul's suspicion, as he fears, not without reason, a usurpation of his own throne. David is therefore forced to flee and becomes a mercenary of Saul's enemies, who are also his people's enemies. With them he fights for the end of the dynasty, finally managing to take Saul's place. Together with this kind of tradition, some insist on the fight against the house of Saul, or the friendship with Jonathan, or again the life of the runaway soldier, others depict instead David as the king of Israel who defeats all the enemies and embodies, in fact, the sense of revenge of an oppressed Judaism. To sum up: the most ancient tradition we are able to detect about David may be contradictory (was he the Philistines' vanquisher, or their vassal?), but all agree on a crucial point: David is first of all a warrior-king.

Now, we cannot escape a very important question: if, not long before the Hellenistic age, David was known only as a valiant fighter, on what was the judgment of the deuteronomistic historian based? When he wrote his work (which only partially corresponds to the extant text of 1 and 2 Kings) during the exile, he certainly had some annalistic writings on which he based his positive and negative judgments on the kings of Judah. It is well-known that the conduct of the just kings (Asa: 1 Kgs 15.11; Amaziah:

2 Kgs 14.3; Hezekiah: 2 Kgs 18.3; Josiah: 2 Kgs 22.2) is measured by the exemplary behaviour of David, the just king *par excellence* (the only doubt can be found in 1 Kgs 15.5, but the absence of the passage in the LXX text shows that it is a secondary addition). As for the 'wicked' kings, sometimes the texts affirm, as a justification, that God wanted to leave a 'lamp in Jerusalem' (Abijam: 1 Kgs 15.4 and Joram: 2 Kgs 8.19) in consideration of David's merits. It is hard to believe that our historian would have had such a high consideration of King David if he had read only the texts that we have today: we must therefore admit that not only the annalistic sources used by the deuteronomistic historian were lost,<sup>9</sup> but also the text he has written, which was certainly abundant in religious appraisals. Nevertheless we can infer that, since the judgment on the kings' behaviour was essentially based on their attitude regarding the cult and David was taken as a reference point, the temple of Jerusalem already existed in David's time. This would confirm what I was saying earlier and I think that we can even assume that it was precisely the building of Jerusalem temple that made David so great in our historian's eyes. We still have to understand why the author of 1 and 2 Samuel chose to reject the profile of King David traced by the deuteronomistic historian and collect instead popular tales with fictional elements, which he further elaborated into a sort of 'soap-opera' perspective. But we will solve this problem later on.

### *The Warrior-King and the Expectation of his Return*

For the moment we must examine a little more closely the figure of David as a warrior. Since we have many reasons to doubt the effective political importance of David's kingdom,<sup>10</sup> and we can also imagine that the deuteronomistic historian did not particularly exalt his military triumphs, it is highly probable that this aspect of the king's description had a quite recent origin. David's military role became more and more important with the worsening of the conditions of the little hierocratic state of Jerusalem, which passed from the relatively peaceful times of the Persian Empire to

9. In the actual text the elements that probably derive from an annal source are those concerning the buildings on Millo (2 Sam. 5.9) and the deposition of precious weapons of Hadadezer's officials in the temple (2 Sam. 8.7 and 1 Kgs 14.26 LXX). To be considered pseudo-annalistic are the data on David's wives and sons (2 Sam. 3.3-5 and 5.14-16), while it is difficult to formulate a judgment on the original text, heavily modified in the present one, concerning the members of his court (2 Sam. 8.15-18).

10. On this subject see my *History and Ideology*, pp. 21-32.

the turbulent period of wars and military expeditions inaugurated by the conquests of Alexander the Great. But we must also consider that if the late Jewish tradition exalted so much the military virtues of King David, this means that such an element was already present, even if perhaps not so prominent, in the more ancient traditions, now lost. David was, after all, the first king of Judah, even if perhaps he was not the first king of Israel who had his residence in Jerusalem (this right, probably, should be attributed to Saul). Most likely, this is David's major importance, at least from the Judahites' point of view: in fact the Bible itself ascribes to Saul victories of the same importance as David's (1 Sam. 14.43-53, a passage in annalistic style).

David, the glorious king, was therefore the most appropriate character to incarnate the hopes of revenge of the people of Judah: his son (i.e. one of his descendants) would give back to Jerusalem its role of great capital. This is the atmosphere in which the messianic expectation of a more political kind (the one largely attested in the New Testament) was born and grew, pervading first the popular milieu, addressing those oppressed by the Macedonians, by the Seleucids, by the Ptolomies and, later, by the Romans. The legendary literature rich in fictional elements, which flourished during the Persian empire on the basis of a more ancient historiographic tradition that probably already existed, offered the grounds for building the image of a king who, as an ancient judge, would deliver Israel from its oppressors. This hope, the waiting for the 'anointed' who would renew David's glory, was not limited to the lower strata of the population; it made its way through the educated classes, who used to read the ancient prophetic texts, adding to them passages which reflected the aspirations of a priestly milieu deeply unhappy with the present state of things. A detailed examination of this prophetic literature it is not my aim, but here I must at least offer some examples to illustrate my thought.

In Amos 9.11 we find a merely political expectation, with the wish of a restoration of the 'tent-hut' of David;<sup>11</sup> while it is impossible to deny the messianic tones in Mic. 5.1-3 (the apostrophe to Bethlehem), Isa. 11, Jer. 23.5 (image of the 'branch'), Ezek. 34.23-24 (David as a shepherd) and, in particular, Zech. 12.7-13.1. But the imaginative language must not deceive us. It is enough to mention here the messianic atmosphere described by

11. On David's 'tent' (Amos. 9.11) and its interpretation as 'hut' (*sukkā*), see my brief article 'La capanna del re', in G. Sfameni Gasparro (ed.), *Agathè Helpis: Studi storico-religiosi in onore di Ugo Bianchi* (Rome: 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, 1994), pp. 173-76. See also ch. 9.

Proto-Zechariah for a historical, contemporary character, Zerubbabel (whose name in the actual text is often replaced by that of his victorious enemy, the High Priest Joshua): 'This is the word of Yahweh to Zerubbabel, saying: not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says Yahweh Sabaoth. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain' (Zech. 4.6-7). It appears that a certain messianic style, with accents reminiscent of the Golden Age, was characteristic of the royal hymnology (see, for example, the royal psalms), as is clear also from the Mesopotamian royal hymns, not to mention the Egyptian texts concerning the Pharaoh. Only with Deutero-Zechariah do we have examples of eschatological messianism, where the House of David, inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judaea as a whole are mentioned, but not really in celebratory terms: 'that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem do not magnify themselves against Judah' (Zech. 12.7).

We can therefore affirm that in the prophetic texts of the Persian and proto-Hellenistic age the expectations of the Davidic Messiah were essentially political, as was the case among the popular classes, but still there were some strong religious connotations, probably due to the connection between David and the temple. That becomes explicit in Ps. 132, which presupposes the text of the books of Samuel: the two texts share the same ideological position, as we will now see.

### *David in Samuel—Kings and the Eschatological Messiah*

We will now move to consider the text of the books of Samuel, leaving aside all the parts that probably derive from existing sources. The figure of David we discern from here is, I must admit, quite disconcerting. The king described by the final author appears completely different from the sacred monarch typical of the ancient oriental ideology: it is a king appointed, 'anointed', by a prophet, who can even, as in the case of Saul, change his mind and deprive him of his royal prerogatives. But the anointing can also be carried out by a priest, as significantly happens to Solomon (1 Kgs 1.39 and 45), or even by the people, who 'anointed' David twice (2 Sam. 2.4; 5.3)—Solomon had only been acclaimed (1 Sam. 10.24). Incidentally it is interesting to note these differences in the practice of anointing, which does not reflect an ancient custom, but rather the ideological position of the postexilic priesthood. The king of the books of Samuel must submit to written rules, of whose author we are ignorant (2 Sam. 10.25), but David is the one who, in particular, has his rights limited by the people: not only must he be 'anointed' by the men of Judah and by the elders of Israel, but

he must also make a covenant with the latter before Yahweh—an act that a real king had to stipulate with his god, and not with the chiefs of his own people. The books of Samuel describe a king who never existed in the history of the ancient East: it is what Jerusalem priests wished a king to be, something very similar to what the Roman bishops tried for centuries to impose on Europe. The attitude of the Jerusalem priesthood is clearly understandable, and even obvious, if we consider the concrete situation. Levi and Aaron's descendants, who governed Judaea from the Jerusalem temple, were of course not particularly enthusiastic about a political restoration of the Davidic monarchy: in that case they would lose all their power and have to submit again to the authority of a king. A suitable historical picture of the institutional relationship in the past had to be the ideological premise for the eventual creation of a new form of monarchy.

The priest who wrote the books of Samuel and Kings not only depicted a royal power substantially deprived of political autonomy and institutionally submitted to the religious authorities; in his portrait he also underlined on several occasions the ontological evil of a monarchical institution. He used for that the character of Samuel, forced to become, against his own will, the creator of the abhorred monarchy. The real masterpiece of the writer, both from a political and literary point of view, is his way of presenting David, the national hero venerated by the crowds: he dedicates to him many pages, as was inevitable because of his importance, and mentions of course his numerous military successes. But what can we say about the rest? Several modern authors have pointed out the literary value of the narratives dedicated to the adventurous events of David's life, and the deep humanity of a character depicted with all his loves, sins and sincere repentance. But apparently none of them noticed that the narration of the books of Samuel shows the same rhetoric ability we find in the speech of Shakespeare's Antony after Caesar's death. Considering his conduct, David appears first of all as an incorrigible womanizer, who does not hesitate to kill in order to conquer a woman and who needs young girls even in his extreme senility. He is eager for blood and revenge, and orders his son<sup>12</sup> to kill those whose lives he has promised to spare. Finally, the last touch of this dreadful picture is the indirect accusation of homosexuality: the traditional friendship of the future king of Israel with Jonathan is presented, with apparent nonchalance, in very explicit terms. For example, Saul

12. A son even worse than him in respect of women: he took the power after a conspiracy of the court, promoted by a woman, and inaugurated his reign with a long series of political murders.

reproaches his son with these hard words: ‘Do I not know that you were the lover of the son of Jesse, to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother’s vulva?’ (1 Sam. 20.30); and in David’s lament for his dead friend we read: ‘Very pleasant have you been unto me! Your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women’ (2 Sam. 1.26). It is difficult to deny that the relationship between David and Jonathan recalls the one that tied Achilles and Patroclus.<sup>13</sup>

The entire narrative of the books of Samuel concerning David conceals the same underlying idea: David, lucky hero when he was young (Goliath), encounters all sorts of misfortune as soon as women are concerned. His troubles begin when the two daughters of Saul appear on the scene, but after the adultery with Bathsheba a divine curse falls on David’s kingdom pronounced by prophet Nathan: ‘Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house; because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife’ (2 Sam. 12.10). With these words begins a long sequence of mourning, always with a strong connection between women and death: Bathsheba and the death of Uriah and of the son conceived in sin; Tamar, incestuously raped, and the killing of Amnon and then of Absalom, who had also possessed his father’s concubines (Ahithophel, who had suggested to Absalom the outrageous act, committed suicide); Abishag and the murder of Adonijah. Of course this was not the David known to the deuteronomistic historian; it was rather the David invented by the priest-historian and little considered by Ben Sira, great exalter of the priesthood.

The elaborate political and ideological conception of the author of Samuel–Kings is not limited to this aspect. After having shown his firm anti-monarchical position through Samuel’s speeches, demonstrating with his historical reconstruction that even the best king is a rascal, it is obvious that this priest would never wish the restoration of the monarchy, not even a Davidic one. But there was a consistent part of the people waiting for a king to redeem Israel from foreign domination and it was not impossible that in the end he would come (as happened in fact with the advent of Judah Maccabee). In this case it was safer to fix the limits of royal power, as we

13. The subtle treacherousness used by the author of the book of Samuel in depicting the relationship between David and Jonathan will become even clearer if we remember that the historian Eupolemus (c. 160 BCE) referred to a tradition according to which David was Saul’s son. The love between the two young men was therefore a fraternal one and it is in this sense that the elegy of David (2 Sam. 1.19–27), where Jonathan was explicitly called ‘my brother’ (v. 26), was intended.

have seen with the passages about ‘anointing’. To the general expectation of a ‘son of David’, Jerusalem priests could not openly declare their dissent, which would have alienated them from popular sympathy. So, in the temple an ‘anointed one’ was also awaited (see Pss. 89 and 132), but of a very special kind, well described by the words of prophet Nathan: ‘And your house and your kingdom shall be established for ever before me, thy throne shall be established for ever’ (2 Sam. 7.16). As we have seen before, the kingdom was only part of the divine project, which concerned in particular the people of Israel: ‘I will appoint a place for my people Israel’ (2 Sam. 7.10). The promise to the people comes before that made to the king, whose answer reflects exactly the same priority: he thanks God first for the people, with a long speech of nationalistic exaltation (‘And what one nation on the earth is like your people Israel, whom God went to redeem to be his people, and to make himself a name’, 2 Sam. 7.23), then quickly for himself and for his dynasty. This is exactly the same ideological position expressed by Deutero-Isaiah, who had transferred David’s privileges to the people (Isa. 55.3). It is important to notice the stress on the ‘truth’ (*’emet*) of the word of God (vv. 25, 28-29), which cannot be belied, in particular as it concerns the dynastic perpetuity. Such a solemn promise, at a time when that dynasty had already disappeared leaving no trace, is a clear indication that the eternity of the Davidic dynasty was intended in a purely eschatological dimension: taking it literally, in a historical sense, the divine word was loudly denied by the reality of facts.

In this the Jerusalem priesthood managed to combine different and contrasting exigencies: without disappointing the expectation of the Davidic king, and even enriching it with ethic and religious content, they nevertheless granted the political and economical prerogatives to the priestly class. The advantage of an eschatological future lies in the fact that it does not interfere with the present or the near future, leaving undisturbed those who meanwhile keep their power. The human story of Jesus of Nazareth shows very well the attitude of Jewish priests in a case where someone arrived too early to claim David’s throne.

### *David and the Temple*

We have for the moment left aside an essential topic: the building (or rebuilding) of the Jerusalem temple by David. This fact is presupposed by several biblical passages and is the only one that can explain the Davidic origin of the priestly organization as described in the book of Chronicles. It is now time to tackle this problem directly. Not without reason has the



author of the book of Samuel put in the same context the prohibition of building the temple and the Messianic promise. The first striking element is the inconsistency of Nathan's argument that Yahweh's wish was to live in a tent. Only a few years later, in fact, Yahweh would forget such a wish, since he agreed to have a temple built by Solomon (2 Sam. 7.5-7). Even more surprising is the different motivation produced by Solomon (David fought too many wars: 1 Kgs 5.3), in open contradiction with 2 Sam. 7.1, where it is said that God conceded to David a long period of peace, which the king wanted to use for building the temple. It is hard to find a logical explanation for the biblical author's affront to his readers' intelligence: we can only say that in manipulating the historical data, the coherence of the thought was not particularly important. It was enough to provide a coherent ideological conception: if this required a falsification of facts, so much the worse. But why ascribe to Solomon the temple built by David?

Regardless of its real history,<sup>14</sup> the Jerusalem temple during the Persian period had become the real vital centre of Judaism, or at least of the more ideologically conscious Judaism. The principal reason was the lack of a king of its own. We do not know if the priestly class developed its own ideal Messianism at the same time as the birth of the Davidic Messianism, which had a clear political connotation. The priestly Messianism put Jerusalem at the centre of the world, not as an example of national restoration, but rather as a privileged place appointed by God. Some late prophetic texts, such as Isa. 4.2-6; 54; 60; 62; Mic. 4; Zeph. 3.14-18 and Zech. 9.9-17, illustrate quite well this 'heavenly Jerusalem', a beacon for the whole of humankind, a light rising from Zion and identified with the temple. This

14. Probably built by David and thoroughly restored by Jehoash (2 Kgs 12.6-17), there are many reasons to believe that the temple continued to exist and to be used during the exilic period. It would be hard to believe that the city of Jerusalem could have remained without a temple for about seventy years. The Bible itself never says that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it, but only that he sacked it. The book of Nehemiah, written in the third century BCE (before the book of Ezra), talks only about the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls: this probably means that the temple was still standing. The significant date of the second year of king Darius, which is the basis of the short book of Haggai and is also found in the first chapter of Zechariah, probably marked the coronation of Zerubbabel, as we can infer from the whole of Proto-Zechariah. The renewal of the royal pact with Yahweh somehow signified the return of the god to Jerusalem. The description of the temple we find in 1 Kgs 6 and 7.13-51, which looks quite recent even if it describes ancient structures, is proof that the later temple was substantially the same one that existed in ancient times. The text of Ezek. 40-48 offers another indirect confirmation: in his hostility against the Jerusalem temple and against the monarchy related to it, the author foresees a new ideal temple, where only the 'sons of Zadok' will serve.

is the starting point of priestly Messianism, opposed to the Davidic one, which will find expression in the expectation of the Messiah of Levi (*Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*), or of the Messiah of Aaron (Qumranic).

It is clear enough, at this point, that if a king-Messiah and a priest-Messiah could even be compatible (in fact some texts do mention two Messiahs), there was no room left for a king-Messiah strictly connected with the temple. Just as, on a practical level, the restoration of a Davidic monarchy should not limit the power of the temple, the same thing should happen on the theoretical and ideological level: the Davidic eschatology had to remain separated from the priestly one. But if we gather that David was really the builder of the temple, and if this fact constituted his major merit in the eyes of the deuteronomistic historian, the eschatological restoration of the Davidic monarchy would have automatically implied an eschatological vision of the Jerusalem temple as strictly connected to Davidic Messianism, and not to the priestly one. It was exactly for this reason that it was necessary to explicitly deny any connection between David and the temple, especially when the idea of a future, eternal Davidic dynasty was elaborated and put forward. In this way it was possible to separate the temple's destiny—whatever it might have been—from that of the house of David. We have already seen in what kind of consideration King David was held by the priests of Jerusalem: it is understandable that the actual rulers of the House of God were not particularly proud of admitting a connection between him and the origins of their temple.

#### *David's Priests*

The *damnatio memoriae* of the Davidic origin of the Jerusalem temple was not the only historiographical intervention that the author of the books of Samuel made in order to separate the temple from David. The importance of a temple consists mainly in the divine presence, which nevertheless remains invisible; the result is that, to the eyes of people of little faith, those who always visibly live in the temple become even more important. In David's time there probably lived two high priests, whose names were, in alphabetical order, Abiathar and Ahimelech (it is not relevant if they officiated in the temple or simply attended to the Ark). Now, the Bible has created an incredible confusion concerning them, adding a third name, Zadok, and supplying contradictory information about their kinship and about the order of succession.<sup>15</sup> It was not possible to ignore the existence

15. The first peculiarity is the presence of two priests instead of one: the pair

of those priests, because their descendants still lived side by side with our author.<sup>16</sup> Among the many contrasting elements in Samuel–Kings, two emerge clearly. The first one concerns Zadok, who occupied a subordinate position in David's time, but had a key role in the conspiracy that brought Solomon to the throne, anointed the new king (1 Kgs 1.39) and was nominated high priest by him (1 Kgs 2.35). The second element concerns Abiathar and Ahimelech, who appear as descendants of the priest Eli (1 Kgs 2.27; see also 1 Sam. 14.3). Now we have to remember that in the ideal temple described by Ezekiel only the 'sons of Zadok' could officiate (Ezek. 40.46); Zadok has a privileged position compared to the other

Moses-Aaron comes to mind. The second of the pair, Aaron in the case of Moses, and Zadok in the case of David, is too closely related to the priestly groups of the Hellenistic age to leave doubts on the secondariness and late dating of the formation of the couples. According to 2 Sam. 8.17 in David's time the high priests were Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar (in the corresponding passage in 1 Chron. 18.16 the name of 'Ahimelech' becomes 'Abimelech'). But such information is in a pseudo-annalistic passage, completely out of context. In 2 Sam. 15 (and 20.25) we find Zadok and Abiathar instead: the first is mentioned as bearer of the ark together with the Levites, while the second one celebrates the sacrifice. From this is clear that, despite the importance the text gives to Zadok, the high priest was Abiathar. The couple Zadok-Abiathar is mentioned also at the time of Solomon (1 Kgs 4.2 and 4), in contradiction of the fact that a few pages before (1 Kgs 2.26-27) the text had mentioned the deposition of Abiathar by Solomon newly came to power and his substitution by Zadok (1 Kgs 2.35). All these elements confirm that there was in fact only one high priest. It is impossible to establish the real relationship between Abiathar and Ahimelech: in the annalistic passage quoted before, Ahimelech is said to be Abiathar's son, while in all the narrative sections Abiathar appears as the son of Ahimelech (1 Sam. 22-23; 1 Kgs 2.26-27). The situation becomes even more complicated if we consider Mk 2.25-26, where we read that the priest who helped David in his flight was not Ahimelech father of Abiathar, but Abiathar himself. This Abiathar stayed 'in the house of God', clearly the temple of Jerusalem (there was also the 'showbread', an essential element in the temple's cult; see 1 Kgs 7.48). As for Zadok, his lineage is not clear either: in the genealogy of 1 Chron. 5.27-41 the name of Zadok the son of Ahitub appears twice, but it is clearly part of a genealogical section which has been repeated. The interesting thing is that Ahitub is not only the name of Zadok's father, but also the name of Ahimelech's, killed by Saul (1 Sam. 22.9). One would think that Ahimelech and Zadok were brothers and that in any event the relationship between Zadok and Abiathar was very close, even if 1 Chron. 24.1-6 (whereas in 2 Sam. 8.17 David's priests are Zadok and Ahimelech) connects Zadok to Eleazar and Ahimelech to Ithamar.

16. According to 1 Chron. 24 the priestly classes of Zadok and Ahimelech, instituted by David, were in fact very close to each other: this element probably reflects the situation of the third century BCE.

priests also in the book of Chronicles (1 Chron. 16.39-40; 24.3-4; 2 Chron. 31.10).<sup>17</sup> Concerning Eli's descent, the author of the book of Samuel put the following words in the mouth of an anonymous 'man of God': 'I said indeed [Yahweh is speaking] that your house, and the house of your father, should walk before me for ever; but now Yahweh says. Be it far from me; for those that honour me I will honour, and those that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days come, that I will cut off your seed (following LXX text), and the seed of your father's house, that there shall not be an old man in your house forever... And I will raise me up a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind; and I will build him a sure house... And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left in your house shall come and grovel before him for a silver coin<sup>18</sup> and a morsel of bread, and say, Put me, I pray you, into one of the priests' offices, that I may eat a piece of bread' (1 Sam. 2.30-31, 35-36; see also 3.11-14). This speech, addressed to the old priest of Shiloh, which presents many analogies with the one of Samuel to Saul, will find its complete fulfilment in the narrative of the books of Samuel (1 Sam. 4.11; 22.6-18; 1 Kgs 2.26-27).

The appointment of Zadok as high priest by Solomon, before the construction of the temple, signifies a clear caesura between the Davidic and the Solomonic priesthood. The first one was stable (*ne 'emān*), but its stability should not be confused with the eschatological promise (*'ad 'ōlām*); the second one was condemned to a miserable state, almost of beggary, because of the greediness of the son of Eli. Finally, it would be interesting to know the exact meaning of the enigmatic sentence in 2 Sam. 8.18: 'and David's sons were priests'. In the text of the book of Samuel this could hardly have meant something positive for the house of David.

Such sharp opposition traced by the author of the book of Samuel between the 'sons of Zadok', connected to Solomon's temple, and the priests descended from Ahimelech and Abiathar, faithful to the Davidic tradition, reveals the deep ideological schism which at a certain point was created

17. The situation will radically change in later times, when the 'sons of Zadok' (or at least part of them) will be forced to move to Qumran.

18. The word <sup>u</sup>*gōrā* is a *hapax* and must be considered an Aramaism, since in biblical Hebrew the root *'gr* 'to hire' does not exist. It is not correct to translate the word as 'payment', as has been suggested, because this would include also the bread. It is clear that a little coin is intended: so interpreted the ancient translators (*obelos, nummus*) and also the Jews, who made the <sup>u</sup>*gōrā* a small coin of the State of Israel. The 'silver coin' of Saul is the Athenian drachma: the consequences for the dating of the biblical text are obvious.

within Jerusalem priesthood. The anti-monarchic position of the author of the books of Samuel, deeply anti-Davidic despite some formal concessions, was shared by Deutero-Zechariah, whose king riding on a donkey (9.9) appears absolutely non-Davidic. The author of the Chronicles and the author of Psalm 132<sup>19</sup> are instead openly pro-Davidic. The vivid but negative portrait of the son of Jesse we read in Samuel–Kings was probably written in a sort of polemic fervour against the confrères who recognized themselves in David.

### *Some Conclusions*

If we turn back to assess our research, we must admit that we have found very little that can justify the forming of David's Messianic character, as we expected to find. Within the long and suggestive narratives, we have seen a man without merits and with plenty of defects, deprived of the only action that had made him important to the eyes of many—the building of the temple. Instead of traditions exalting a king we found the quarrels of some priests fighting for their own privileges. The famous Messianic promise of Nathan, taken in its context and estimated in its real terms, appears, if not a teasing, at least as a skilful *escamotage* to neutralize potentially dangerous expectations. But the talented priest who wrote the books of Samuel did not know that divine providence, or rather the astuteness of history, would take very seriously Nathan's words, with the result that after 3,000 years we are still talking about a young shepherd destined for a brilliant future.

19. In a general valuation, we must admit that the anti-Davidic attitude was held by only a small minority of Jerusalem priests. The greater part of them shared instead slightly different forms of Messianic exaltation of David.

## Chapter 7

### THE CALF OF BETHEL

One of the most famous, but also the most peculiar, episodes in the Old Testament is the story of the golden calf, which was built, according to Exod. 32, by Aaron for the Israelites while Moses was away for too long. The whole narrative is rather puzzling: it is at least surprising that the people could ask for 'gods who will go before us' (v. 1) after having witnessed all the wonders Yahweh did to deliver his people from Egypt—and even stranger is Aaron's positive response to their request. Incomprehensible, too, is the schizophrenic attitude of Moses: in fact he intercedes with God for the Israelites, after having ordered the Levites to slay nearly three thousand people. But the attitude of Yahweh himself cannot be considered a model of consistency: at first he orders the slaughter of the three thousand (v. 27), then he allows the rest of the people to reach Palestine (v. 34)—but there they will find their just punishment. As for Aaron, who is responsible for the whole situation, he does not receive any punishment, not even a simple reproach for what he has done.

It is understandable that the story of the golden calf has excited the imagination of artists more than the meditation of theologians, yet anyone interested in the religious history of Israel will notice some features of great interest. The Levites who, following the order of Moses and without any consideration for their brothers, relatives or friends, kill all the most enthusiastic—so we presume, at least—worshippers of the calf built by Aaron, founder of the Hebrew priestly class, bring us to the very heart of internal conflicts existing in the Hellenistic age between Levites and priests: this story reveals already the winners of that ideological struggle. The barely logical coherence of the narrative is very similar to that which we find in the books of Ezra (1 Esdras and the canonical Ezra), which are typical of Levitical literary production. It is there that we must look for the origin of the present form of the narrative.

Another important point of reference can be found in the words by which Aaron shows the people his masterpiece: 'These are your gods, O

Israel, which brought you out of the land of Egypt'. The plural form, which implies more than one calf (and is precisely avoided by some of the current translations of the Bible) was used to create an explicit literary link between the calf of Aaron and the two golden calves built by Jeroboam, first king of the kingdom of Israel, for the sanctuaries of Bethel and Dan (1 Kgs 12.26-30). This literary device makes clear that the narrative of Exod. 32 was written as an aetiological legend for the calves of Jeroboam. In other words the symbols of the political and religious schism of Jeroboam, that is the two golden calves, are interpreted by the biblical author as signs of an essentially idolatrous cult, in spite of the formal reference to Yahweh, the god who delivered Israel from the land of Egypt.

I will not deal with the complex historical and ideological references implicit in the Exodus narrative, since I have already discussed them elsewhere;<sup>1</sup> here I would like to examine in more depth one detail which I had then neglected but is nevertheless of great importance. In ch. 32, vv. 4 and 8, the golden calf is called '*egel massēkâ*, an expression usually understood as 'calf of molten metal', but which can be translated literally as 'calf of fusion'. Speaking about a cultic image, this specification of the technique of its creation appears rather redundant. It can perhaps be justified in the narrative about its origin, but it is with a certain surprise that we find it again in texts like Deut. 9.16 and Neh. 9.18, both of which only mention the episode that took place at the foot of Sinai. In those contexts the words *massēkâ* seems to be an indispensable means of identifying the calf. Therefore it is worth having a closer look at the situation.

In the Exodus narrative Aaron collects all the golden earrings of the women (in the following verse they become suddenly 'all the people') but does not melt them, as is erroneously written in some of the current translations of the text which paraphrase the expression *formavit opere fusorio* of the Vulgate. The Hebrew reads instead: 'he fashioned it with an engraving tool and he made it into a *massēkâ* calf'. It is clear that Aaron did not melt the gold offered by the Israelites, though it is difficult to imagine how he managed with a simple scalpel to transform some earrings in the image of a calf. Leaving the legend the right to tell things in its own way, it is important to emphasize that the biblical author, when he uses for the first time the word *massēkâ* 'fusion', wants to tell us that there had been no fusion at all! This is at first sight paradoxical, but with a subtlety that biblical criticism has not noticed (or did not want to notice) the author gives a clear indication to the reader of two meanings of the word *massēkâ*, the

1. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 102-10.

meaning 'fusion' has to be rejected. The feminine substantive *massēkâ* is in fact derived from the root *nsk*, meaning 'pour' and in Hebrew, as in Phoenician and Aramaic, the words derived from this root indicate the action of pouring metal at liquid state in a form (the 'fusion'),<sup>2</sup> but also the act of pouring liquids from a ritual vessel, that is, a 'libation'. In a deliberately ambiguous way the biblical text wanted to say that the calf of Aaron was the 'libation calf' and that there were ideological reasons to give a different interpretation, such as 'fusion calf'. In confirmation of that we can mention Hos. 13.2—a passage which did not belong to the original Hosea text—where we read: 'they have made for themselves a molten image (*massēkâ*) with their silver'. The fact that the metal mentioned is silver and not gold (which was added in some secondary branch of the textual tradition to harmonize this passage with the narrative of 1 Kings) suggests again, in a more explicit way, that while at first sight a molten image is intended, because the name of the metal is changed it becomes clear that the text is not speaking of any fusion.

At this point we should try to understand which kind of libation was connected to the golden calf. We find the answer in Isa. 30.1, where we find the expression *linsōk massēkâ*, literally 'to libate a libation', used to indicate the stipulation of a covenant (with Egypt). The calf of Aaron and Jeroboam was 'the calf of the covenant'. The particular kind of covenant in which a calf was involved is described in a passage of the book of Jeremiah (34.18-19). The princes of Judah had made a covenant with Yahweh by a specific rite: they passed between the two halves of a quartered calf. The true meaning of the expression '*egel massēkâ*' is thus indirectly explained by the biblical text itself: it is the calf which symbolizes the alliance between a god and the king, who, in the period before the exile, was the only one who had the capability of acts that implied a political and religious authority (the two things were closely linked).

We find a confirmation of this interpretation of the word *massēkâ* in the Phoenician inscription of Karatepe (*KAI 26*). There the word *mst* is used in two similar expressions, in the epigraph of the Southern Gate (II 19-III 1) and in the one on the statue (IV 2-4). The first reads *wylk zbh lkl hmskt* 'and a holocaust-sacrifice will be offered to every *mst*' and the second *wzbh 'š ... 'lm klhmskt z z* 'and the sacrifice which [will be offered as a holocaust to the] god, as for this *mst*, is this', that is the annual sacrifice of an ox etc. To understand the sense of these two sentences, which have defied the ability of many interpreters of the inscription, it is important to

2. So the NSRV.



consider several elements. The first is the exceptional presence of the article in the expression *lkl hmskt*: in Phoenician the determinative article is usually followed by a demonstrative pronoun, as in the second sentence, *hmskt z*. This can be explained only by admitting that a relative sentence introduced by the pronoun *ʾš* (which requires the article in the name to whom it is referring) is here understood. This relative sentence was intended to specify the meaning of the word *mst*, but this meaning had to be clear enough to make the omission possible. From the context of the inscription, the general expression *kl mst*—specified by the presence of the article—finds a clear explanation if we understand it as something which was periodically repeated, and precisely every year, just like the expression ‘every Christmas’ (which is Christ’s birthday), where the use of a specific term for a particular birthday implies that we are talking about an exceptional one. So the Phoenician language uses the article to indicate that a very special *mst* is here meant.

Still, it is not clear what exactly the *mst* mentioned in the Azitiwadda inscriptions was. The interpreters of the Phoenician inscription usually translate *mst*, as in the Bible, as ‘molten image’. But the statue on which the words *hmskt z* were carved is made out of stone. Moreover some lines below there is an explicit reference to the statue, which is called *sml ʾlm z* (IV, 15-16) ‘this statue of the god’. We can thus be sure that *mst* does not mean ‘statue’. Some scholars have suggested a different interpretation, translating the word *mst* by ‘libation’. But this solution is not completely satisfying either, because sacrifices are usually made *with* libations and not *for* them. The solution to this linguistic problem is offered by the context of the inscription. The text tells about the sacrifices which were instituted on the occasion of the installation of Baal *krnryš* in the city of Azitiwaddiya; this particular god is venerated not so much as city-god, but rather as dynastic god of the governor-king Azitiwadda. This rite is very similar to the one fulfilled by Solomon for the consecration of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8), a rite which had its centre in the covenant (*bʾrît*, v. 23) stipulated between the king and Yahweh. As in the passage of the book of Isaiah already mentioned, in the Karatepe inscription the word *mst/massēkâ* indicates the particular ‘libation’ offered to the god when the king established or renewed the covenant with his dynastic god. This ceremony was in fact repeated every year, as we learn from the Karatepe inscription, which mentions annual sacrifices (*zbh ymm*) and from the Bible, in an excerpt (1 Kgs 12.26-33) I will examine later, where the calf plays a very important role.

We begin now to understand the central meaning of the calf in Hebrew culture: the Sinai calf and Jeroboam's calf were not disdainful designations of what was in fact a bull, symbol and visible support of the god, as often affirmed and as I have believed for a long time. They were rather representations of real calves, symbols of the covenant between a king and his dynastic god, which for Israel and Judah was Yahweh. The existence, in the Palmyrene pantheon of Roman times, of a god called Aglibol ('*glbw*') suggests that the *sacralization*, or rather the deification, of the calf was known also to other cultures of the ancient Near East,<sup>3</sup> but I am still not able to define the nature or the diffusion of this particular aspect of Semitic religion. But I can at least examine more closely the meaning of Jeroboam's calves.

We do not know whether we should believe what it is written in 1 Kgs 12.26-30, that in the Northern Kingdom there were two images of a calf, one in the sanctuary at Bethel and the other at Dan. From what I am going to suggest presently, I am inclined to think that there was only one calf, the one in Bethel. In 1 Kgs 12.32 we read, in fact, about the annual feast instituted by Jeroboam, that 'thus he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made'. This plural form suggests that the calf in Dan, before which the people went to worship (1 Kgs 12.30) must be a secondary addition to the original narrative. The significance of the sanctuary of Bethel for the royal dynasty of the kingdom of Israel is made clear by the words of Amaziah, priest of the sanctuary, to the prophet Amos, invited to leave Bethel because he prophesied the violent death of Jeroboam II and the deportation of Israel to Assyria: 'do not prophesy any more at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary and the temple of his monarchy' (Amos 7.13). Now everything is clear: Bethel was the religious capital of the kingdom of Israel, where kings assumed the power through a covenant with their dynastic god, Yahweh; the calf, symbol of this covenant, was thus also the symbol of kingship. The 'sin' for which historiographic tradition blamed Jeroboam was not, as one could believe at first sight, the fact of having built idols, but rather of having deprived Jerusalem of the role of capital of Israelite monarchy, a role that Jerusalem always claimed, but probably never had, judging from the legendary nature of the empire of David and Solomon.<sup>4</sup>

The calf of Bethel is mentioned again in a passage of Hosea (10.1-8),

3. G. Garbini, 'Gli dèi fenici di Palmira', *Rendiconti della Accademia Nazionale del Lincei*, serie IX, 9 (1998), pp. 23-37.

4. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 21-32.

whose meaning is unfortunately very unclear because of textual corruption affecting different phases of the text's transmission. The most recent corruption, and as such the easiest to emend, regards the calf, transformed into 'heifers' ('*eglôt*, feminine plural) in the Masoretic text: the form *moschos* in the Greek version leaves no doubts about the original reading, while the changing of the name Bethel to Beth Awen ('temple of idolatry' instead of 'temple of god'), regular throughout the book of Hosea (see also 4.15; 5.8; 10.5, 8) and not uncommon in other biblical texts, is clearly a product of the point-of-view of the Jerusalemite redactors of the final Hebrew text. A philological analysis of this text (limited to the first part of the short composition) is thus necessary to understand why the calf is mentioned in this context.

The composition appears as a literary unit, framed by vv. 1 and 8. The first verse compares Israel to a flourishing vine, which takes advantage of its wealth to erect altars and stelae, sacred monuments clearly disliked by the author. The final verse foresees the devastation of those holy places, called *bāmôt*, a generic definition which includes the other two. Against this background, which depicts the situation of Israel between the moment of pronouncing the prophecy and the foreseen or threatened future, we find several references to the same episode, or to a situation that nobody has yet been able to clarify. From a philological point-of-view we should notice in these verses some Masoretic readings that are linguistically unacceptable (*hālaq libbām*, with the active instead of the passive form of the verb; *kārôt*, an infinitive not justified by the context; *yāgūrū šēkan*, singular subject with a plural form of the verb; *'ōtō yūbāl*, subject treated as an object; *bošnh yiqqah*, feminine subject and masculine form of the verb; *nidmēh šōmrôn malkāh*, where Samaria is considered as a masculine noun as to the verb, but feminine as to the suffixed pronoun) and many divergences between the Hebrew and the Greek text, neither of which, anyway, make complete sense.<sup>5</sup> This is enough to justify our definition of a corrupt text, which we will try to emend as far as possible.

The first observation to make is that, since this is an ancient text, attributed to Hosea, a prophet of the eighth century BCE, we should expect later redactional interventions aiming at a specific interpretation of the text. The sentence in v. 2b, whose subject is 'he' (probably Yahweh) is clearly an

5. Borbone, *Il libro del profeta Osea*, pp. 98-101; S.P. Carbone and G. Rizzi, *Il libro di Osea secondo il testo ebraico Masoretico, secondo la traduzione greca detta dei Settanta, secondo la parafrasi aramaica del Targum* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1993), pp. 190-97.

intrusion in the original text, not only because of its position among sentences with a plural subject, but also because it anticipates the content of v. 8; moreover, its insertion made it necessary to change the reading of the verb *yšmw* (translated in Greek as *aphanisthēsontai*) into *ye 'ešāmû* 'they sinned'. It is possible to attribute to the same hand another insertion, in v. 3, 'because we feared not Yahweh'. This sentence is an explanation of the previous words, which originally meant something completely different. Also noteworthy is the use of verb *'rp*, typical of the late priestly language (Exodus, Deuteronomy, Third Isaiah), and used furthermore with an improper meaning. If we remove the two added sentences ('he shall strangle their altars, he shall spoil their images' and 'because we feared not Yahweh') the metric structure of vv. 2 and 3, which formed originally a single verse, becomes similar to that of v. 1: three stichs of two colas.

After eliminating such insertions, the meaning of vv. 2-3 also becomes clearer: 'their minds are divided (*hullaq*), now they are upset, now they say, We have no king, what will the king do to us?'. Also, if we concede that the text does not require further emendation, the sense of the sentence appears quite logical: the inhabitants of Samaria are bewildered because their king is dead and they do not know what will happen with his successor. Hosea prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (see 1.1), who according to the Bible reigned for 41 years performing great actions (see 2 Kgs 14.23-29) and whose disappearance naturally caused dismay among his subjects. Some alteration was made also in v. 4, and it is therefore difficult syntactically to link its different parts, although it is clearly referring to activities connected with kingship such as pacts, covenants and administration of justice, which now pass through a crisis. It is possible that the prophetic text, written some time after Jeroboam's death, alludes to the period of political instability that followed the disappearance of the king: according to the Bible the son and successor of Jeroboam, Zachariah, reigned only six months before being killed in a conspiracy; the usurper, Shallum, reigned only one month and then was in turn killed in a second plot, that brought to power a new king, Menahem, who reigned for ten years (2 Kgs 15.8-17). Nevertheless it cannot be ruled out that the prophet's intention was to express a negative judgment on the moral behaviour of the dead king.

In a context referring to the death of a king, nearly the whole v. 5 becomes comprehensible: 'the people shall mourn over him' does not need any explanation; the Masoretic *kmryw* 'his priests' is a corruption that the Greek version makes it possible to correct, showing a verbal form from the root *mrr* meaning, in the hiphil form, 'to lament', in parallel with *'bl* (both

verbs should be understood as participles). More uncertain is the meaning of the final part of the verse; the sentence 'that rejoiced for his glory, because he departed from them' could be an allusion to a deification of the dead king. The different interpretation of the text, which takes 'glory' (*kābôd*) as subject of the verb *glh*, introducing a clear allusion to Israel's exile, is the result of the rabbinic reading of the text, still ambiguous in the Greek version and in the Vulgate but made explicit in the Targum.<sup>6</sup> Since such an interpretation brings a logical absurdity (the Samaritans would rejoice for their own exile!) from a linguistic point of view, it is absolutely necessary that the subject of the verb *glh* is the king and that the singular suffix after the preposition *min* refers to the people. Yet any attempt to understand the exact meaning of these words is heavily conditioned by the uncertainty of the text: the consistency of the sources cannot be considered as a guarantee that the text was not corrupted before the formation of the current tradition. The subject of these texts was a very delicate one, that is a concrete manifestation of royal ideology in the Northern Kingdom. This could justify many omissions and corrections since the time of the first Judaeian redaction of the book of Hosea.

We still have not discussed the most important element in v. 5, namely the mention of the calf of Bethel. The text, corrected according to the Greek version, reads: 'To the calf of Beth Awen reside the inhabitant of Samaria'. There are two mistakes in this sentence: the plural form of the verb with a singular subject and the preposition *l-* (used to express motion) with a verb which implies the idea of staying. The second difficulty is easy to solve, if we give to *l-* the meaning of 'next to' and if we consider the verb 'reside' as a transitory condition of someone coming from far away, as is the case for Samaria. The phrase 'inhabitant of Samaria' was corrected, already in the Greek version, to 'inhabitants'. In this case, nevertheless, the Masoretic text offers a preferable *lectio difficilior*: it is not the inhabitants of Samaria, that is, all the people of Israel, who are staying next to the calf of Bethel, but only the king of Samaria, the one who 'resides in Samaria', capital of the kingdom. The entire verse is about him and we can translate it thus: 'Next to the calf of Bethel resides the inhabitant of Samaria; for him his people is mourning and for him is crying. They rejoice for his glory because he departed from them'. This sentence is

6. A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*. III. *The Latter Prophets according to Targum Jonathan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), p. 402; Carbone and Rizzi, *Il libro di Osea*, pp. 194-95.

probably referring to the solemn obsequies (which may also imply ceremonies of deification) of Jeroboam II in Bethel, in the temple of the kingship, the dynastic sanctuary of Israelite monarchy. From a stylistic point of view we notice the assonances between the words *'egel* 'calf', *yāgîlû* 'they rejoice' and *gālâ*, 'he departed'. If this last verb is to be considered original, it also suggests the idea of the exile.

The next two verses (6-7) offer many other problems of interpretation, but we will not deal with them here, where we have concentrated our interest on the presence and the significance of the calf of Bethel. If the reading we suggest for the text of Hosea is correct, we can assume that the Bethel sanctuary was the place where not only the coronation of the kings of Israel, but also their solemn funerals took place, and that the golden calf in the temple was particularly connected to the figure of the king.

## Chapter 8

### EZRA'S BIRTH

In the conception of the Hebrew Bible, which is in fact the ideology of the Jerusalem priesthood of the Hellenistic age, history as a succession of real events and organic narration of them is tightly and exclusively connected to the age of the monarchy. As we have seen in the first chapter of this book, the narrative complex Genesis–2 Kings places the time of origins in the sphere of myth. After the ambiguous period of the Judges, the age of history begins with Samuel and Saul and ends, in the text we read today, towards 560 BCE, with the delivering of king Jehoiachin, who remained nevertheless in exile in Babylon. The author of Chronicles delineates the history of Israel, from its origins to Saul's death, only by genealogies: the narration begins with Saul's death (1 Chron. 10), which marks the beginning of the kingdom of David, and ends, in the extant text, with Cyrus's edict. Since these final verses are identical to the opening of the book of Ezra and nothing is said about the years of the exile, it is highly probable that the book originally ended with v. 21, immediately after the description of Jerusalem's fall, the destruction of the temple and the deportation of the survivors to Babylon. An indirect confirmation of this kind of historical vision of the priests of Jerusalem is offered by the Dead Sea Scrolls, which do not include any historiographic work about a period following the end of the monarchy: the presence of some fragments of texts which appear generically narrative does not change the situation. However, the structure of the Bible itself leads to this conclusion, a structure which arises from the two major blocks of the holy text, the Law and the Prophets; the 'Writings', because of their heterogeneous origin, remain inevitably of secondary importance.

In the extant state of documentation the period of the exile is not described in any contemporaneous, or even later text. The period which immediately follows it, that is the return to Palestine, was narrated for the first time in a writing mentioned in 2 Macc. 2.13 as 'Letters of the Kings on the Votive Offerings', the great part of which was later included in the

books of Ezra.<sup>1</sup> Composed towards the end of fourth century BCE to reaffirm the rights of the Jerusalem temple against the eventual pretensions of the one on Mt. Garizim reconstructed by Alexander the Great, the writing appears as a collection of letters by several Persian kings (Cyrus, Artaxerxes and Darius) to their high officers in Palestine and of the relative answers, about the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This correspondence is inserted in a weak narrative plot, which gives to the writing a historiographic appearance. In fact the narrative is a political pamphlet, built on invented letters, where a completely incredible reconstruction of the events of the first postexilic years is depicted. The logical absurdities, the narrative ingenuity and the manifest apologetic flavour are so evident that one finds it hard to believe that so many scholars could affirm, in good faith, that the letters are authentic and the part of the writing we find today in the canonical Ezra is to be considered a fully historiographic source.

The 'Letters', an instrument of the propaganda of a religious policy whose aims are clearly perceivable, inaugurate a literary genre that had several imitators. The most ancient we know is the author of 'Nehemiah's Memoirs', probably composed at the beginning of the third century BCE, an evident imitation of the 'Letters of the Kings',<sup>2</sup> even if its ideological purposes are not so manifest. In fact, the purpose of a book, composed at the beginning of the Hellenistic age, describing in many details the reconstruction of Jerusalem walls by a character who apparently lived in the fourth century BCE (but the historical setting of the book is in the half of fifth century) remains obscure. From what emerges from these two works, and also from a third we will discuss later, the period between the end of sixth and the first decades of the fifth century BCE, that is the initial phase of the postexilic age, became, with the beginning of Hellenistic age, the 'mythical' period of postexilic Judah. Then all the political, social and religious institutions of postmonarchic Jerusalem, administered by the priestly class, were founded. All the minor and major events that happened in Judah for several centuries are ignored, or deliberately neglected; almost all the ideological developments that characterize the Hellenistic age look ideally back to the first decades of the fifth century BCE. It is therefore natural that in this period also was placed a new character, destined for great success: Ezra.

Ezra appears for the first time as one of the main characters of a book called *Esdras A* (*1 Esdras*) in the LXX text and *3 Esdras* in the Vulgate (but

1. See Garbini, *Il ritorno*.
2. Garbini, *Il ritorno*, pp. 96-102.



outside the canon). Following an unfortunate hypothesis framed by J.D. Michaelis in 1783, this book was considered for a long time a 'fragment' of the Greek translation of a hypothetical unitary work including Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah. This interpretation is absurd for many reasons, but it will be sufficient to mention the most obvious: why the supposed translator of such a huge book would have added, by his own initiative, the rather long episode of the three pages (*1 Esdras* 3–4), lacking in the Hebrew original? As many studies have already shown, *1 Esdras* is an autonomous book, which has been partly utilized in the first century CE for the redaction of the canonical Ezra, which represents thus a sort of *editio minor*, revised and 'incorrect', of the more ancient work<sup>3</sup>.

The dating of *1 Esdras*, and consequently of its main character, can be easily determined from some external data. The book is later than Chronicles, since the first chapter consists in the last two chapters of that book; it is more ancient than Flavius Josephus, who paraphrases it in *Ant.* 6.1-158. The historical character of Ezra is unknown to Ben Sira, who presumably writes in the third decade of the second century BCE, and to his nephew-translator, who lived about 50 years afterwards, while they both knew Nehemiah (*Ben Sira* 49.13). We can therefore imagine that *1 Esdras* was not written before the middle of the second century BCE; though a much later dating remains possible, I personally think that the work was composed towards the middle of the second century.<sup>4</sup> It is also very important that the author of the second of the letters that opens 2 Maccabees, and thus also the author of the book, mentions Nehemiah but not Ezra, even if he writes after the middle of the second century BCE. Apparently these writers did not know, or they did not want to quote, a book that probably already existed.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the story of a character who lived towards the

3. P. Sacchi, *Apocrifi dell'Antico Testamento*, I (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1981), p. 110; Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 158-59; A. Schenker, *La relation d'Esdras A au texte massorétique d'Esdras-Néhémie*, in G.J. Norton and S. Pisano (eds.), *Tradition of the Text: Studies Offered to D. Barthélemy* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), pp. 218-48, P. Sacchi, *La questione di Ezra*, in G. Busi (ed.), *We-zo 't le-Angelo. Raccolta di studi giudaici in memoria di A. Vivian* (Bologna: AISG, 1993), pp. 461-70.

4. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 160-64.

5. The book of Ezra in the form it has in the Hebrew Bible is very late and is probably to be considered the most recent book of the Old Testament (not by accident does the Jewish tradition close the canon with Ezra's work). This statement can be confirmed by several elements: Ezra starts to be quoted by the Fathers of the Church, both Latin and Greek ones, only in the fifth century and is still unknown to Josephus,

middle of the fifth century BCE was written only three centuries later and moreover in a very vague historical setting, does not constitute a problem in itself. The problem of Ezra is rather the fact that a figure who was supposed to be central in postexilic Judaism, and as such has been considered from a certain period onwards, is unknown to Ben Sira, who at the end of his book writes a series of portraits of the most important characters of Jewish history, from Enoch to the high priest Simon (chs. 44–50). This last figure is sometimes identified with Simon the Just of rabbinic tradition, who occupied his position towards 200 BCE,<sup>6</sup> but is probably the high priest Simon II, a contemporary of Seleucus IV (in the second decade of second century CE). This silence is even more significant if we note the inexplicable combination of contemporaneity, mutual ignorance and historical superimposition between the characters of Ezra and Nehemiah. We should not forget that Nehemiah, who in the 'Memoirs' in Ben Sira (49.13) and in Josephus (*Ant.* 11.159.83) is described as the one who rebuilt the walls and repopulated Jerusalem, in the second letter in 2 Macc. 1.10–2.18 appears as the restorer of the cult in the Jerusalem temple and founder of a library of Jewish history. This clearly indicates that during the second and first centuries BCE the figure of Nehemiah acquired the character of the sole protagonist of the postexilic restoration. In the same text, in fact, the Law of Moses was kept by Jeremiah, and not by Ezra.

After such considerations we cannot be surprised if someone should consider Ezra a merely literary creation, rather than a historical character. Famous scholars, such as Ernest Renan, Theodore Nöldeke and Alfred

who writes towards the end of the first century CE and utilizes *1 Esdras*. Apart from these external data, there are some internal elements which point to a dating not earlier than the first century CE. The most significant of them is the mention of the 'Water Gate' of the temple and of the square before it, where the people gathered (Neh. 8.1). This topographic indication is a textual variant of the 'Eastern Gate' of the source (*1 Esdras* 9.38). They were two different places, since the 'Eastern Gate' was obviously to the East, while the 'Water Gate' was in the southern part of the Jerusalem temple, as is indicated in the Mishnah, where it is mentioned several times as the place where the people met (*m. Mid.* 1.4; 2.1, 6). The correspondence between the Masoretic Ezra and the Mishnah makes us think, without doubt, that the Water Gate and its square were part of Herod's temple. This means that the actual book of Ezra was written after 30 CE, when the temple of Herod was probably completed (Jn 2.20), and certainly after 10 BCE, when its essential structure had already been completed (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.420-21). See E. Schürer, *Storia del popolo giudaico al tempo di Gesù Cristo*, I (Brescia: Paideia, 1985), pp. 367-68, 386-87.

6. E. Nodet, *Essai sur les origines du judaïsme* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992), pp. 211-22.

Loisy adopted this conclusion more than a century ago, and the same position was affirmed with several arguments by others.<sup>7</sup> Real or fictional, the character of Ezra became somehow 'historical' when some started to believe in the existence of the protagonist of this literary work.

From the point of view of the history of religion, which is our main interest, we must now examine the phenomenon of Ezra, or rather the two different purposes of the two works that write about him.

The more ancient writing begins and ends with the description of the two major Jewish feasts, Passover and Sukkoth, immediately revealing its religious nature, in spite of the narrative scheme that recalls a historiographical writing. Ezra appears as the last protagonist of the narrative and he is officially described as 'priest and reader of the Law of the Lord' (*1 Esdras* 8.8-9 and 19). Let us examine, now, his predecessors in their order of succession: Josiah, the king who celebrates the Passover; Zerubbabel (now we know that he was the last king of Judah), alone and later together, but in a subordinate role, with the high priest Joshua, who rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem. After them, we find Ezra, priest and promulgator of the Law of Moses. It is easy to recognize in this sequence the successive passages of religious power, strictly connected to the political. At first the high priest is the king himself; with Zerubbabel, whom the Bible depicts as a simple governor, and Joshua, the power is transferred from the king to the priesthood; with Ezra we have the passage from the priestly class to the scribes, the doctors of the Law. In this general background, some particular tendency can be noticed: the prevalence of the Levites over the proper priests, the discredit thrown on some groups of the priesthood, a reform of the liturgy that includes a larger participation of the people, a clear hostility against the Samaritans, an ideological stiffening over the problem of ethnic identity (with the abolition of mixed marriages), the exaltation of the truth (the *alētheia*, a typical Greek concept) and its

7. C.C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910; reprint by W.F. Stinespring, New York, 1970); J.C.H. Lebram, *Die Traditionsgeschichte der Ezrageschichte und die Frage nach dem historischen Ezra*, in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (ed.), *Achaemenid History*, I (Proceedings of the Groningen Achaemenid History Group 1983; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), pp. 103-38; Garbini, *History and Ideology*, pp. 151-69. Also L.L. Grabbe appears very sceptical on the validity of traditional approach: see 'Reconstructing History from the Book of Ezra', in P.R. Davies (ed.), *Second Temple Studies. I. Persian Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 98-106; 'What Was Ezra's Mission?', in T. Eskenazi, C. Richards and K.H. Richards (eds.), *Second Temple Studies. II. Temple Community in the Persian Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 286-99.

substantial identification with God (*1 Esdras* 4.40), another element that cannot be more ancient than the second century BCE.<sup>8</sup> This predominates over the importance of the Law of Moses, which seems to be promulgated for the first time, quite peculiarly, by a returnee from the exile. In the vision of the author of *1 Esdras*, Moses was the one who inaugurated the Jewish cult in its sacrificial aspects (*1 Esdras* 1.6; 5.48 and 50), but only Ezra introduced the religious Law. This is not the moment to examine what this Law really consisted of, but probably it was not very concerned with sacrifices and religious feasts. It is hard to believe that the Jews could have cried and mourned (*1 Esdras* 9.50) listening to the reading of Leviticus! I rather think that the Law read and explained to the people by the Levites (9.48) constituted probably the archetype of the second, oral Law that, according to the initial words of *Pirke Abot*, was given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai and then transmitted to 'the men of the Great Assembly'.

The canonical book of Ezra brings us into a quite different climate. At the beginning of first century CE the problem of the political power of the high priests had been eliminated by the Roman government (see Neh. 9.36), while the religious authority of the doctors of the Law, who could issue precepts which diverged from those of the Torah (see Mk 7.1-13 and Mt. 15.1-9), was not discussed anymore. Ezra now did not need any legitimization, while a reduction of Nehemiah's role, which was being superimposed on Ezra's, was urgently required. Hence their fusion in a single book, with the necessary modifications of the biographies of the two characters, presented in a way that was clearly intended to exalt Ezra. New contrasts within the priestly groups and their need for ulterior financing are the reason for the final pages of the book. In the same passage, where the prohibition on mixed marriages is reiterated, the necessity of respecting the Sabbatical rest is underlined. The introduction of the collective day of fasting and of the long penitential prayer (Neh. 9) seems to anticipate the future celebration of *Yom Kippur*.

Ezra's story is thus the story of a symbolic character, originating in a book narrating events that never happened, in a time that is the age of origins. In other words, Ezra's is a 'myth' not different from, and no less 'true' than, Abraham's, Moses' and maybe also David's. The only difference lies in the fact that we can determine a precise date of birth for this myth and place it in a well-defined historical period. In fact, the religious reform supported by *1 Esdras* was not an isolated phenomenon in the priestly milieu of Jerusalem during the half of second century BCE. On the

8. Sacchi, *Apocrifi*, pp. 118-20.

contrary, it became an essential element in a wider and deeper transformation of Jewish culture, which in few years gave to Judaism a new aspect, the one it has kept until now.

In the history of ancient Hebrew civilization it is easy to isolate an archaic phase, which we largely ignore, corresponding to the period of the kingdoms and ending with the beginning of the fifth century BCE with the death of Zerubbabel. We know hardly anything about the following phase, marked by the hierocratic power in Jerusalem, which can be considered as finished in 152 BCE, when Jonathan Maccabee was declared high priest. Between this date and 135 CE, when any form of Jewish autonomy was cancelled by the Romans, can be identified a third phase characterized by a complexity of political events and religious developments. In the middle of the second century BCE, which marked the passage from the second to the third phase and when 1 Esdras was composed, a political and cultural process that had started with Alexander's conquest came to its maturation. Direct contact with the domination and the culture of the Greeks caused amongst Jews and other Oriental people a phenomenon of simultaneous attraction and rejection, with a prevalence of the former in the initial moment and of the latter when the success of the first provoked a conservative backlash (incidentally, the same thing has happened during the last two centuries with the impact of Western culture on the Arab world). The Jewish reaction, motivated by strictly interconnected political and religious ideals, found a political and military realization in the Maccabean revolt, started in December 167 BCE and continued with the formation of a powerful and independent Jewish state. The basis for such events was, of course, a strong nationalistic spirit, strictly Judaic. The destruction of the Gerizim temple and the conquest of Samaria by John Hyrcanus are eloquent signs of the lack of any real Hebrew national consciousness that went beyond the territory of Jerusalem. On the ideological level, the reaction to Hellenism was instead much more articulated.

The priestly class, which in its various components represented the most important part of the cultural Jewish élite, was divided, according to the texts preserved for us, into several different ideological currents. The group that expressed its position in *1 Esdras*, strongly sustained by the Levites, approved the liturgical reform promoted by Alcimus (who had died in 159 BCE) and the progressive ideas of a priesthood that intended to be closer to the people. The doctors of the Law encouraged this nationalist current, which came close to racist prejudice (1 Macc. 7.12). The development of successive positions leads us to think that later Jonathan Maccabee joined

this group. Deeply hostile to this pro-Levitic group, which could be defined as 'national-progressive', were the ultra-conservative priests, the 'sons of Zadok' of Ezek. 40–48, of the *Damascus Document* (3.21–4.2: quotation of Ezek. 44.15) and of the Qumran literature. These priests even undertook a physical secession from the Jerusalem temple, which they considered profaned.<sup>9</sup> The Ezran priesthood suffered also the opposition of other groups, sustaining more liberal positions: from the author of 2 Maccabees, who writes in Greek and appears very critical of the high priests of his time, to the author of 1 Maccabees, who was more moderate. The way in which the two books describe Alcimus leaves no doubt about it (2 Macc. 14.3–13, 26–27; 1 Macc. 7.5–25; 9.54–57).<sup>10</sup> From this brief review emerges the first point of interest for the history of Jewish thought: none of the writings mentioned, which oppose the position of 1 Esdras, has been included in the rabbinical canon and even 1 Esdras has suffered radical revisions. The ideological position that was in a small minority at the middle of the second century BCE became the only recognized valid view just three centuries later.

In this picture of strong ideological and religious tensions, what were the official keepers of the Holy Scriptures that is, of the Hebrew religious heritage, doing and how were they reacting? When someone affirmed that the Law of Moses had been revealed for the first time to Ezra, what should the priests who for centuries were behaving according to the rules of that

9. Because of the attitude of the group that produced the Qumran literature, it is very improbable that the collection of texts found in the Dead Sea caves could include a 'Prayer' for the welfare of a 'King Jonathan', as the fragment 4Q448 is usually interpreted (E. Eshel, H. Eshel, and A. Yardeni, 'A Qumran Composition Containing Part of Ps. 154 and a Prayer for the Welfare of King Jonathan and his Kingdom', *IEJ* 42 [1992], pp. 199–229; see also C. Martone, 'Un inno di Qumran dedicato a "Re Gionata" [4Q448]', *Henoch* 19 [1997], pp. 131–41). No matter what the real identity of the character mentioned was, the expression *'lywntn* in column B should be translated, in my opinion, as 'against Jonathan': 'the Holy City against King Jonathan; and all the assembly of your people Israel, which is in the four winds of the Heaven, peace be to them all'. In these words it is possible to read a contraposition between the peace invoked over the people of Israel and the hostility of the Holy City, Jerusalem, against King Jonathan. The same concept appears again in fragment C, unfortunately incomplete, where the love of God (*'hbtk*) and his blessed kingdom (*mmlkh lhbrk*) are opposed to the war (*mlh'mh*) that somehow concerns king Jonathan (*lywntn hmlk*).

10. The fact that 2 Maccabees ends its narration just before the death of Judah Maccabee (160 BCE), in spite of the initial promise to narrate the deeds of Judah and his brothers (2.19), can perhaps be explained by the author's intention of not mentioning Jonathan, Judah's immediate successor.

Law think? According to the view of current scholarship, which considers the Pentateuch and the books of Samuel and Kings as already redacted in their actual form in the third century BCE, if not before, the stormy political and intellectual events that upset Judaism in the central and final part of second century BCE left no trace on the bulk of the writings we call biblical. However, if we consider, from a historical point of view, how deep and large such events were, our judgment will be more cautious. In fact, in that period not only was a new Hebrew state created, with reforms and religious schisms, and high priests assuming the role of kings, other things also happened which cannot be underestimated. A new form of Hebrew language was born, used by the teachers of the Law (Mishnaic Hebrew); a new writing was created, inspired by the Phoenician one in use during the age of the monarchy; a new religious literature was started, the so-called 'apocrypha of the Old Testament'. Considering these facts, which all concern more or less directly the learned priestly class it is highly improbable that the most important Hebrew religious writings passed through the turbulent second century BCE without consequences.

We have just seen the importance of the witness of Ben Sira for the dating of 1 Esdras. It is now appropriate to examine once again the chapters of that book that delineate the ideal history of Israel through its more distinguished personalities. The long celebration of Aaron, more highly esteemed than Moses, and of the high priest Simon, indicate an ideological position similar to that of 1 Esdras; but if we consider the gallery of the 'Fathers' as a whole, we notice some interesting elements. The first character we find is Enoch immediately followed by Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is important to point out that the land promised to Abraham goes 'from one sea to the other'. Then Moses is mentioned, but without any reference to the events of the long exodus from Egypt. On the same level as Joshua we find Caleb, and as for Samuel, the Hebrew text affirms that he was 'Nazirite of Yahweh' and priest (46.13),<sup>11</sup> while all ancient versions agree in describing him as valiant conqueror of Tyrians and Philistines (46.18). After David, Solomon, Rehoboam and Jeroboam are mentioned Elijah, Elisha, Hezekiah with Isaiah and Josiah; only a few words are devoted to Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 'twelve prophets'. For the postexilic period the author nominates Zerubbabel, Joshua and Nehemiah. Chapter 49 ends in a puzzling way: after Nehemiah comes again the name of Enoch, and then Joseph, Shem, Seth and Adam. The

11. See A. Catastini, '4QSam<sup>a</sup>: I. Samuele il "nazireo"', *Henoch* 9 (1987), pp. 161-95.

final verses (14-16) seem to be a sort of appendix to the composition. If we reflect on this point and consider the order in which the characters are presented, opposed to the chronological one, we will easily come to a conclusion: Adam, Seth, Shem and Joseph are the key characters of the book of Genesis, which was written during the period between the composition of Ben Sira's work and the revision-translation made by the author's nephew. The latter wanted to add a reference not only to Genesis, but also to another book he regarded as important, composed in that same period: the book of Enoch. The difference between the 'historical' patriarch of the beginning of Genesis and the 'apocalyptic' one, protagonist of the books that bear his name, justifies the double mention of Enoch at the beginning and at the end of the catalogue of the Fathers.

If one accepts this explanation of the final verses of Ben Sira 49, which to me appears as the only possible one, the differences between the data of Ben Sira and those of the extant Bible are also easily explained. This means, though, that at the time of the first redaction of Ben Sira, in the first decades of the second century BCE, not only had Genesis still to be written, but the long narrative of the Exodus (excluding the episode of the plagues) also did not exist. As for Caleb and Samuel, stories circulated about them that were quite different from those we read today. Finally Ben Sira, like Josephus, knew Nehemiah's 'Memoirs' but not the present text. We may conclude that at the beginning of the second century BCE the literary complex Genesis-2 Kings did not yet exist, but there were only the writings from which its author would take part of the material he would later modify and adapt to his own point of view. The texts, unfortunately very fragmentary, which were discovered at Qumran and are often defined as 'apocrypha' or 'para-biblical', were probably, in many cases, simply 'pre-biblical' (and therefore many of them will probably remain unknown to us).

It is not necessary to examine now the ideological position of the influential priestly group that was behind the redaction of Genesis-2 Kings and probably, even if we have no possibility of verifying it, also of the 'latter prophets'—in other words, those who have in fact written almost all of the Bible. All the previous chapters were dedicated to problems related to that literary complex and pointed out several important aspects of the thought of the priesthood we could call 'Sadducee' and that occupied an intermediate but not equidistant position between the 'Ezran' and the 'Zadokite' (Qumran). The New Testament writings and the final redaction of Ezra-Nehemiah testify how near the Sadducee faction had come to the points-of-view of the teachers of the Law, of Pharisaic inspiration, during the first



century CE. There is, however, a text that documents a noteworthy proximity of thought between those two groups already in the second half of the second century BCE.

As I had the possibility of pointing out recently,<sup>12</sup> the *Letter of Aristeas* originated in a priestly milieu very close to 1 Esdras, which was partly utilized as a literary model. As is well-known, the narrative setting of the book is constituted by the narration of the translation of the Law into Greek, projected by the author to the time of Ptolemy II, and more precisely to the years between 278 and 270 BCE. For the dating of the *Letter* it is nevertheless very important to consider the long philosophical discussion on the monarchy. Such a subject could be afforded by an author whose main interest was the Jerusalem temple only after the beginning of the Maccabean high priesthood and, probably, after the advent of John Hyrcanus (134 BCE). The writing addressed to the Jews of Alexandria, if rightly assigned to this moment and to this historical climate, when referring to a new, more correct form of the Law to be translated into Greek, could only allude to the new Pentateuch starting with the book of Genesis. The *Letter* was thus a work of propaganda by which the Jerusalem priesthood intended to inform, covertly, the Alexandrine Diaspora of the latest news concerning the Holy Writings.

In conclusion, the character of Ezra, created from a literary text, constitutes a fundamental dividing line for the history of Judaism, because it marked the supremacy of the teachers of the Law over the priests and became a point of reference for all Judaism from then up to now. But at this point of our research we can add something more. It is obvious that the Law of Moses announced by Ezra had to correspond, substantially, to that established by the priestly hierarchy at the return from exile. And I have also said in the previous pages, that in Ezra's promulgation was also included the non-written Law, which was the object of Pharisaic interpretations. From what I have just affirmed, it is hard not to see in the Law read and commented on by Ezra a reference to the new redaction of the Pentateuch, realized in that same period, contemporaneous to the Prophet's own. In this way, the new 'Sadducee' Bible found its herald in 1 Esdras, thus showing the substantial agreement between 'Sadducees' and 'Ezrans'. 1 Esdras announced a new kind of religion, while Genesis–2 Kings offered the definitive model of the new *Weltanschauung*.

12. Garbini, *Il ritorno*, pp. 109-14.

## Chapter 9

### BIRTH AND DEATH OF A MESSIAH

In this chapter I do not intend to deal, even briefly, with the many problems of Messianism in its various aspects (origins, developments, outcomes; characters and interpretations of the figure of the Messiah, and so on); I shall only try to outline the profile of the particular kind of Messiah which emerges from some texts of the Old Testament and to examine how such texts have been interpreted by a Jewish group particularly sensible to the suggestions of Messianic ideology existing at the beginning of the first century CE.

The birthplace of the future Messiah is indicated in Mic. 5.1: 'But you, Bethlehem Ephratah, too little to be among the thousands of Judah, out of you shall he come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel'. The birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem will take place through a woman ('until the time that she who labours has brought forth'), but this birth will not be a normal one, following a human conception, because the Messiah's origins are 'from the Orient, from everlasting'. The Hebrew expression *miqqedem* is usually intended, already in the ancient version (*ap'archēs, ab initio*), in a temporal sense, 'from an ancient time', but in this way the word would be a useless anticipation of the following *mimê 'ōlām*. The presence of the latter expression indicates that *qedem* should be intended in the geographic meaning of 'Orient'. We find a confirmation for this interpretation in Ps. 110.3, which we will now examine. This text also talks about the origin of the Messiah, with a reference to Canaanite mythology that the revisers of the biblical text tried to hide by altering the text. The Masoretic text reads: 'from the womb, from the dawn to you the dew of your youth', a completely meaningless sentence. The Greek version reads more logically, 'from the womb before the dawn I generated you', which omits the reference to the dew, tries to give a sense to the preposition preceding the word 'dawn', but offers the correct reading of the final word. To understand the meaning of the sentence and reconstruct its original formulation, we must

use two passages of Isaiah. In Isa. 14.4-21 the subject is apparently the death of the king of Babylon;<sup>1</sup> the dead king is compared, at a certain point in the passage, to the morning star 'Lucifer (*Hêlêl*) son of the dawn'. From this text it is clear that the Messiah was compared to an existing mythological character, generated by the dawn. We find a confirmation of this in the term *môšā'ôt*, a *hapax* used by Micah (5.1) to indicate the 'origins' of the Messiah: this word belongs in fact to the semantic sphere of astronomy and its literal meaning is connected to the 'rising' of a star. In Phoenician *mš' šmš* 'the rising of the sun' indicates the 'east', while in biblical Hebrew the equivalent expression is *mizrah šemeš*. Since in Hos. 6.3 the 'going forth' of Yahweh is compared to the coming of the dawn and the word used is *môšā'*, it is legitimate to think that the substitution of *môšā'* with *mizrah* in the biblical text is not a simple lexical divergence between Hebrew and Phoenician, but the result of an intentional censure of a term too strictly connected with Canaanite mythology, which was moreover largely shared by the Israelites. The reference to the dew, omitted by the Greek text and made incomprehensible in the Hebrew one, is explained by a clue in Isa. 26.19, where Yahweh's dew, 'a shining dew' (*tal 'ôrôt*) is mentioned. This particular dew has the power to give new life to the dead. Thus, the sentence in Ps. 110 should be read *mrhm šhr ktl yldtk* 'from the womb of the dawn, like dew, I generated you'. Consequently the correct translation for the sentence from Micah, with which we started, would be: 'out of you shall one come forth for me to be the ruler in Israel, but his origins are in the East, from everlasting'.

There is a certain ambiguity in Micah's words, which characterizes all three verses in the double definition of the Messiah, who is on the one hand described as a warrior descending from David, with evident reference to the most recent historiography concerning the ancient king.<sup>2</sup> This aspect is accentuated by the words used by the text: the 'thousands' indicate a military rather than an administrative structure and also the title *mešel* has a military connotation. From the other side, the eschatological

1. The attribution of the passage of Isaiah to the king of Babylon is certainly secondary; apart from the anachronism of a prophet of the eighth century BCE speaking about the end of the exile, there are many mythological and geographical details which point to a Canaanite milieu: the dawn recalls the Ugaritic god *Shahar*, the mount Zaphon, the cedars and cypresses of Lebanon with their woodcutters. The passage, which has the same literary typology as Ezek. 28.2-19, probably had been composed against the king of Tyre.

2. See Chapter 6.

dimension of a Messiah who is supposed to grant to Israel the peace 'unto the ends of the earth' cannot be denied.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to Bethlehem and to the Davidic descent of the Messiah (see 1 Sam. 16.1; as for 17.12 we must consider that vv. 12-31 are missing from the LXX) is to be integrated with another text, Amos 9.11, where we read: 'In that day I will raise up the hut of David (*sukkat Dāwīd*) that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up its ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old'. The following verse is very important for understanding the real nature and function of the new 'hut', but it appears heavily corrupted in the Masoretic text, which presents the impossible sense: 'That they may possess the remnant of Edom and of all the peoples over which my name was invoked'. In this sentence several elements remain unexplained: first of all there is no logical connection between David's hut and the possession of the 'remnant of Edom' and of the other nations; moreover, the subject of the verb *yšr* is enigmatic. The reference to Edom is completely out of place, not to mention its 'remnant', even on the hypothesis of an allusion to a future new accomplishment of David's empire. Finally, it is not clear why the nation over which Yahweh's name was invoked should be conquered: in fact the eschatological projection of the passage makes us exclude the possibility that the invocation of Yahweh should be intended as an allusion to the *herem*, that is to the physical elimination of such nations.<sup>4</sup> The Amos text becomes slightly clearer in the Greek version 'that the rest of the men and all the peoples over which your name has been invoked may seek...' (*hopōs ekzētēsōsin hoi kataloipoi tōn anthrōpōn...*). The Greek text clarifies some essential points: the 'rest' and the 'nations' are the subject rather than the object of the verb; '*dm*' indicates 'the man', or 'Adam', but not 'Edom'. It is not easy

3. Notice the strange position of the reference to peace, at the beginning of v. 4 instead of at the end of v. 3, where one would expect to find it.

4. Though mainly dedicated to the history of the interpretation of the passage, the monograph of S. Nägele, *Laubhütte Davids und Welkensohn. Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Studie zu Amos 9, 11 in der jüdischen und christlichen Exegese* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) broadly discusses the textual problems, with an analysis of the Masoretic text, Qumranic quotation, ancient versions and the quotation in Acts 15.13-21. The results from the point of view of textual criticism are, nevertheless, quite modest: the solution of the problem of the different pronominal suffixes in the Masoretic text is hardly convincing (pp. 168-71). The impression is that the Masoretic text, though incomprehensible, remains untouchable, while the important variants in the Greek text are defined as 'innergriechische Änderungen' (pp. 162-63), not to mention the form of the text attested in the Acts (vv. 16-18), considered a secondary development.

to determine what ‘the remnant of the men’ exactly means; in the preceding verses (7-10) Yahweh threatens to destroy Israel and in this perspective the meaning of the expression becomes clear. The Amos text presents some contradictions which it is impossible to evaluate with certainty: they could be additions inserted by the revisers of the biblical text in order to mitigate the prophet’s words, but one cannot exclude the possibility that the idea of an incomplete destruction was already present in the original text.<sup>5</sup> Even if the philological analysis makes the first possibility more plausible,<sup>6</sup> considering the fact that for Amos ‘Israel’ was only the Northern Kingdom and not ‘all the Jewish people’, as in the writings which later became ‘biblical’, some obscurities remain even in the Greek version, where the verb *ekzētēsōsin* is clearly the result of a secondary correction of the Hebrew *yrš* to *drš*. We can finally conclude that the original text of Amos 9.11-12 was probably the following: ‘In that day I will raise up the hut of David that is fallen, and close up its breaches (*piršêhen*); and I will raise up its ruins (*h<sup>a</sup>rīsōtâw*), and I will build it<sup>7</sup> as in the days of old, that

5. MT: ‘Behold, the eyes of the Lord Yahweh are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob... All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say “The evil shall not overtake us nor fall upon us”’ (vv. 8 and 10).

6. The Greek text corresponds substantially to the MT, which speaks of a partial destruction. It must be noticed, though, that the two textual forms do not literally correspond. In Hebrew the use of the absolute infinitive (*hašmed* ‘*ašmid*’) contrasts, from a logical point of view, with the limitative particles ‘*epes kī lē*’, while the Greek translates, more coherently, *ouk eis telos exarō* ‘I will not destroy completely’. Even more relevant is the fact that the *Vorlage* of the Greek version had replaced the verb *šmd*, ‘exterminate’, with a milder verb, translated in Greek as *exairō* ‘remove, take (off)’. If we verify how the root *šmd* has been translated in other passages of the LXX, such as Isa. 13.9 and 14.23, we find a confirmation of this impression: in that case the verb is correctly translated with *apollumi* ‘exterminate’ and *apōleia* ‘destruction’. It is hard to deny that the attenuation in Amos’ passage is the result of secondary interventions in the text and that in the thought of the prophet, who used the word ‘exterminate’ strengthened by the construction with the absolute infinitive and talked about a ‘remnant’ without mentioning Israel, the destruction was intended as complete.

7. The suffixes *-hen* (feminine plural), *-(y)w* (masculine singular) and *-hā* (feminine singular), all referring to the ‘hut’, are only apparently inexplicable; they point in fact in an allusive way to the correct exegesis of the expression ‘hut of David’. The verb *gdr*, which may not be original, suggests a building of brick and consequently the breaches refer to his ‘walls’ (*hōmôt*); the masculine singular suffix following the word ‘breaches’ can be easily explained as an ideal allusion to the ‘temple’ (*bayit*). The late reviser of the biblical text, who of course rejected the Christian interpretation of the

the rest of men may possess it (*yîršûhâ š'e 'ērît 'ādām*), all the men by whom (*mēhem*) my name was invoked'.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly these words of the book of Amos contained a message of Messianic inspiration—extraneous to the original message of the eighth century prophet—with an universalistic vision which invited all the people of the earth to enter and dwell in the 'hut of David'. Exactly in this sense the passage has been quoted literally, of course in its Greek form, in Acts 15.13-21: James starts his speech in defence of the 'Gentiles', converted to Judaism in its new Messianic form with the words of Amos. It must be noted, by the way, that proselytism among the Gentiles was practised by all Judaic groups, as James himself recalls: 'From the old times, Moses has in every city them that preach him in the synagogues, where he is read every Sabbath day' (Acts 15.21).

The expectation of a Messiah descended from David who will be born in Bethlehem from a woman in a miraculous way and who will incarnate the reconstruction of the 'hut of David' where all humanity will be gathered, found fulfilment in the narrative of Lk. 1.26-38; 2, 1-20. Mary, virgin and betrothed to Joseph of the house of David, miraculously conceived a child, Jesus, who 'shall be called the Son of the Highest', and the god Yahweh (*Kurios ho Theos*) 'shall give unto him the throne of his father David'; conceived in Nazareth of Galilee, the child was born in Bethlehem, where Joseph and Mary had gone for a census of the population. The evangelist gives here another very important detail: Jesus was not born in a house, but in a room with a 'manger' (*phatnē*), that is in a stable. If we consider the narrative in Gen. 33.17, where Jacob builds booths for his cattle (stables, rather than 'huts'), we see that the Hebrew word *sukkâ* does not mean only 'hut', but also 'stable' (*sukkôt* is the toponym derived

Messiah, wanted to express his own point of view, i.e. the identification of the 'hut of David' with the temple, already destroyed.

8. It is understandable that Amos' words, which announced the destruction of Israel and of the subsequent reconstruction by Yahweh of the 'hut of David' to welcome all the peoples who recognized his name, could sound too harsh for many Jews who shared the position of the Pharisaic priesthood, more and more influential from the second half of the second century BCE. The text of the prophetic book was, therefore, altered in different ways: more radically, with an openly nationalistic orientation, in the tradition that will produce the Masoretic text; more discretely, in the milieu which will produce the *Vorlage* of the LXX text, where the idea that the *goyim* should seek, through meditation, something which was not specified; the addition of *ton kurion* in the text quoted in Acts, clarifies the object of such research, according to the sentence, clearly not original, of Amos 5.6: *diršû 'et Yhwh*.

from Jacob's stables). Describing Jesus' birth in a stable, Luke has established a direct connection between the Messiah and the *sukkâ* of David.

The Messiah is a very special person, generated by god; 'from the womb of the dawn, as dew, I generated you' (Ps. 110.3); 'Decree of Yahweh; he has said to me: You are my Son, today I have begotten you' (Ps. 2.7); 'He shall say to me: You are my father, my god, and the rock of my salvation; and I will make him my firstborn, exalted over the kings of the earth' (Ps. 89.27-28). This divine begetting, where the boundary between divinity and humanity is hardly perceptible,<sup>9</sup> has a certain finality and the Psalms we have just quoted give us a clue as to the reason why Yahweh wanted a Son-Messiah. Let us consider again Psalm 89:

My arm will be with him and the enemy will not prevail over him nor the son of wickedness afflict him. I will beat down his foes before him and strike them that hate him. My faithfulness and my mercy shall be with him and in my name shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand upon the sea and his right hand over the rivers (vv. 22-26).

The Messiah is destined to fight and the battle seems to be a very hard one, since he will need the constant help of God. Other indications can be found in Ps. 110, v. 5: 'Yahweh (LXX reading) at your right hand has struck the kings in the days of his wrath'. Also in this passage the credit for the victory over his enemies is attributed to God, but the Messiah is the actual fighter. At a first glance one has the impression that the wars engaged in by the Messiah are normal political conflicts between kingdoms which struggle for the possession of a more or less extended piece of land: according to the typical ideology of the ancient Near East, it was impossible to win this kind of war without the decisive intervention of the god. Also at the beginning of Ps. 2 we find a description of a scene that looks like a situation of political conspiracy, with an alliance between kings assembled to fight a common enemy: 'The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and against his Messiah: "Let us break their chains and cast away their bonds from

9. Without any pretension of discussing the general problem of the persistence of mythological elements in the Jewish religion of the postexilic age (we must not forget that the Jews of Elephantine to the end of the fifth century BCE still attributed a female consort to their god), we can nevertheless observe that the mingling of divinity and humanity, also present in the narrative of Gen. 6.2-4, constitutes a compromise between polytheist mythology and the exigencies of a monotheism that, like the Hebrew one, never conceived—at least in ancient times—the idea of a sole divine entity with absolute powers.

us” (vv. 2-3). However, the mention of Yahweh and of his Messiah makes it clear that the ‘kings’ of the Psalm are not earthly sovereigns, even if the ‘chains’ could be intended in a metaphorical sense. The rest of the Psalm supports, in fact, a mythological interpretation: ‘He that dwells in the heavens shall laugh, Yahweh (LXX) shall have them in derision; he speaks to them in his wrath, and vexes them in his anger: “I have set my king upon Zion, my holy mountain”. Decree of Yahweh; he has said to me: You are my Son, today I have begotten you; ask me and I shall give you the nations for your inheritance and the boundaries of the earth for your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, you shall dash them in pieces like pottery vessels’ (vv. 4-9). The enemies are not human beings, but divine creatures: they are demons, the ‘kings of the earth’, who organize a rebellion against Yahweh; but the god derides and threatens them, saying that his Messiah has been anointed. Then, he starts speaking to the latter and announces to him his intention of making him possessor of the ‘boundaries of the earth’ and of destroying all his enemies.

It is clear that the scene here depicted is a mythological one, with some ironical features, which reveal the late date of the composition. But here another element can be observed: God generates his Messiah ‘today’, that is immediately after having discovered the attempt of rebellion by the princes of the Underworld.<sup>10</sup> The mythological allusions, such as the sea and the rivers in Ps. 89, become here more explicit; when we read in Ps. 110, ‘Sit on my right hand, so that I make your enemies your footstool’ (v. 1), it is clear that the enemies are not earthly ones, since they are thrown under the feet of the Messiah, who is sitting ‘at the right hand’ of Yahweh. This is the final scene of the battle, the moment of the glory of the conqueror: ‘Spread<sup>11</sup> the rod of your strength out of Zion, rule in the midst of your enemies; with you are the princes of your army in the day of your holy glory’<sup>12</sup> (vv. 2-3a). After the victory of the Messiah, Yahweh will

10. This chronological specification can be intended in two ways: since the struggle against chaos is continuous, ‘today’ could reflect a daily liturgy or the annual celebration of the New Year. For the problem of the struggle between Yahweh and the god of death, I found useful the doctoral dissertation (now in print by Paideia) *Il regno del Nemico. La morte nella religione di Canaan* by Chiara Peri, with whom I also had some interesting exchanges of ideas.

11. Since vv. 2-3 report the words pronounced directly by Yahweh to the Messiah, the presence of the name Yahweh as the subject of the verb *šlh* and the consequent third person of the verb are to be considered a secondary correction, aiming to avoid an excessive exaltation of the Messiah.

12. The Masoretic *‘ammw<sup>e</sup>ka n<sup>e</sup>dābōt* ‘your people is voluntary offerings’ is an



finally assume the power over the kingdom of death, where he will reign and will calm their thirst.<sup>13</sup>

The data we have deduced from Pss. 2; 89; 110—to which many other biblical texts may be added—lead us to several considerations. First, there appears the literary persistency of a Canaanite mythological heritage, which finds numerous correspondences in the texts from Ugarit: the sea (the god Yam), the rivers, the judge (*špt nhr* ‘judge River’ is one of the epithets of Yam), the source of the rivers (*mbk nhrm*). There is not, of course, a perfect coincidence between the biblical data and those documented in the Syrian town one millennium earlier. In Ugarit only one god of death existed, Mot, and Baal fought against him and succumbed; the Hebrew texts talk about kings and princes whom the Messiah confronts, with Yahweh’s help. It is important to remember that the ‘earth’, in the mythological contexts of the Bible, does not indicate the surface of the planet, but the Netherworld, the subterranean dwelling of the dead. A confirmation can be found in Job 1.7, where Satan states that he is coming ‘from the earth’ and he has gone to and fro in ‘the one under the sun’, making a distinction between the land of living and the land of death. Such a distinction is preserved in the Greek text, but has been eliminated from the MT, where only one ‘earth’ appears. This semantic use was so widespread that in the Aramaic spoken by the Jews (as attested in biblical and later writings) the word ‘*ar ‘ā*’ ‘earth’ is used to mean ‘inferior’, that is ‘what lies under’.

The second consideration to be made is that in these Psalms the war of Yahweh and his son, the Messiah, against the kingdom of death cannot be

evident corruption of *‘mk ndbym* ‘with you are the nobles’, i.e. the ‘princes’. This mythological reference to the leaders of the heavenly ranks which fought together with the Messiah has been masked not only in the Hebrew text but also, more subtly, in the Greek one, whose *Vorlage* only corrected *ndbym* to *ndbh, hē archē*. The sense of the sentence and the mention of the princes require the moving of the word *bēyom* to the beginning of the next stichos, where the preposition *b* should be eliminated. The rewriting of the text does not allow reconstruction of the original, which perhaps sounded like *bywm hdr qdšk*.

13. The two final verses of the Psalm, which describe what will happen in the Netherworld after the Messiah’s victory, have obviously suffered substantial scribal changes, which made the original meaning incomprehensible. Hypothetically, I could suggest the announcement of a future judgment (*yadin*) that will include all the dead (see *Enoch* 90.20–91), the demolition of the gate (*š r*, to be read instead of *r š*) marking the entrance to the land of the death, a river which calms the thirst; the final stichos is incomprehensible.

considered simply the reflex of a different reality, expressed in mythological form: such reality, in fact, did not exist. Which historical event, or socio-political situation could be described as 'Yahweh's war', which had to be fought against non-human enemies, like the kings of the Netherworld, instead of against human ones, as the kings of Arad, Ammon, Moab, Ai and the five Amorite kings? These are not literary images, but a mythical reality, still perceived as fully vital. The battle of Yahweh and of his Messiah is a real one, indispensable for the god of Israel to become the only lord of Heaven, earth and Netherworld.<sup>14</sup> For the Judaeans of the first century CE the kingdom of death did not yet belong to Yahweh, and for this reason scribes and Pharisees accused Jesus of casting demons in the name of 'Beelzebul the prince of the devils' (Mt. 12.24-27; Mk 3.22-26; Lk. 11.14-20). The most ancient version of the *Paternoster*, still preserved in the liturgy of Oriental churches, contains a clear reference to deliverance from the 'Evil One, for yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory' (Mt. 6.13: the addition to the text adopted by the Roman Church is present in many Greek manuscripts). This Christian prayer implies that the victorious battle of the Messiah against the king of Death is already over.

Differently from other currents in Judaism, a group formed just before the middle of the first century CE thought that the moment of the advent of the Messiah had already arrived, some decades before. As we have already examined, the Gospel by Luke narrated the birth of a Galilean thaumaturge called Jesus, whom so many people considered the Messiah that he was currently known with this epithet: *Iēsous ho legomenos Christos* (Mt. 1.16). This Messiah was hardly famous for his military virtues or political ambitions to restore the kingdom of his forefather David: he rather wanted to improve the living conditions of humans, and especially of women, in this world. In order to do this, he was ready to make some modification, if

14. The existence of a Kingdom of Darkness opposed to the Kingdom of Light controlled by Yahweh and the essential importance of the eternal conflict between the two reveal a substantially dualistic idea of the world. Even more than in biblical writings, with clearly different aspects, such a conception emerges in the religious literature discovered at Qumran, where also some Psalms against the demons (11Q11, 4Q510 and 511), part of which are attributed to David, have been found. These compositions clearly show that the conflict against the powers of the Darkness does not belong only to the eschatological sphere, but it takes place in everyday life. The priestly origin of the group which wrote this kind of text makes us think that also in the writings which later become biblical the Netherworld, now mentioned only in incomprehensible allusions, had originally a more important role than appears in the actual text, which is the result of a systematic *dammatio memoriae*.

not to the Torah, then at least to the interpretation that the Pharisean party of the priesthood, then preponderant in Jerusalem, gave to it. The clash with the priestly class was unavoidable and found its conclusion with a death sentence for the 'Messiah'. The reactions of those who had seen in Jesus the Messiah described by the Scriptures were certainly various and contrasting, but of many of them we know nothing because of the lack of documentation. When a couple of generations had passed after Jesus' death, some texts started to diffuse the interpretation that some of the Messiah's disciples gave for the violent death of their master: the Messiah who announced the advent of Yahweh's reign had to suffer death in order to descend to Beelzebul's kingdom<sup>15</sup> and, once there, defeat his enemy. In the old Canaanite myth, Baal fought alone against Mot, Death, and he succumbed; then, somehow, he was brought to life again. In the Hebrew myth, Yahweh had to support his Messiah-Son to be glorified with him, one to the right of the other, through his victory. But Jesus died alone and alone he was resurrected, while Yahweh, according to the picture given by his priests, not only did not glorify the Messiah but, having provoked his death, now persecuted his disciples. Thus, the myth had to be modified: the victorious Messiah was still the executor of the will of his father-god, but his descent to the Netherworld was not intended to fight in his place, but had a completely different reason.

A few moments before his death on the cross, Jesus cries loudly: '*eloi eloi lama sabachtani?*', interpreted as 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15.34; see also Mt. 27.46). After what we have said so far, the sense of these words appears clear enough: in the supreme moment, the Messiah perceives that Yahweh is not at his side and therefore he has to confront the Kingdom of Death alone. In order to express this, the Evangelist puts in Jesus' mouth a quotation from the Bible and, more exactly, the initial words of Ps. 22 (v. 2). This quotation is essential to understand the religious elaboration of primitive Christianity, but it poses serious problems of a philological nature that, in my opinion, have not been explained satisfactorily. Before we move on to examine them, it is necessary to discuss briefly the nature of the composition.

We will not examine here the Psalm in its complexity, because we have several reasons to think that its second part, vv. 24-32, was originally independent from the first. In this latter part, the psalmist complains that God, who does not listen to his words, has abandoned him (vv. 2-12). Then he

15. The name of this god has a Phoenician origin: 'Baal (Lord) Prince'.

passes on to describe vividly his present situation (vv. 13-19). An invocation of help concludes this section (vv. 20-23). Our attention will be concentrated on vv. 13-22 which describe the psalmist's desperate condition: far from God, abandoned in a hostile world, which is depicted, with subtle literary ability, on the lines of a chiasmic scheme. We find first the calves and bulls of Bashan (v. 13), to which correspond, in v. 22b, to the horns of buffaloes; then a devouring lion (vv. 14 and 22a). The bones and heart of the psalmist seem to melt (v. 15), while his mouth is dried up from the thirst caused by the dust of death (v. 16). Then again we find images of animals: dogs (vv. 17a and 21b) and the 'wicked' (vv. 17a and 21a, 'the sword') who dig up<sup>16</sup> the bones in the earth (vv. 17b-18). The centre of the first scheme of images is v. 16, with the dusty drought of the Netherworld, while the centre of the second one may be found in v. 19, where quite suddenly divided garments are mentioned, upon which lots are cast. This concise schematization of the most important part of Ps. 22 is sufficient to show that the psalmist has described his condition of misery through the images commonly used to describe the Netherworld, *šē'ōl*. Apart from the explicit mention of the 'dust of death' ('*āpār māwet*) and of Bashan, a region of mythical geography,<sup>17</sup> it is the presence of menacing animals and the 'wicked' armed with swords (i.e. devils), that gives the impression of a terrifying world, more similar to the Egyptian hell, prototype of the Christian one,<sup>18</sup> than to the shadowy Mesopotamian Underworld. In this picture of afterlife sufferings the mention of garments appears completely out of place: but this detail, too, has a precise function, as we will now see.

It is not necessary to insist on the well-known fact that Ps. 22 represented one of the most important direct models for the narrative of the 'passion' of the Messiah (Mt. 27, Mk 15; Lk. 23; Jn 19), with the explicit quotation of v. 2 and v. 19. The 'infernal' interpretation of vv. 13-22 is fully confirmed by the quotation of the initial words of the psalm at the

16. The Masoretic text *ka'arī* in v. 17, taken from Isa. 38.13 'as a lion' is completely meaningless, even if also in the prophetic text some broken bones are mentioned; the Vulgate reading *foderunt* 'they have dig up' follows the Greek *ōrušan*, which presupposes an Hebrew *krw* or *hprw*. The image depicts the dogs which uncover the buried bones of a corpse; Christian interpretation which saw in it an allusion to the holes caused by the nails during the crucifixion appears quite groundless to me.

17. See G. del Olmo Lete, 'Bašan o el "Infierno" cananeo', *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico* 5 (1988), pp. 51-60.

18. G. Scandone Matthiae, 'L'aldilà nell'antico Egitto', in P. Xella (ed.), *Archeologia dell'inferno* (Verona: Essedue Edizioni, 1987), pp. 11-47.

moment of Jesus' death: the Messiah, who is about to descend to the Netherworld, repeats the first sentence of the composition and in this way alludes to all the section of the psalm that described the horrors waiting for him in the Kingdom of Death. At this point we must direct our attention to an important element that distinguishes Ps. 22 from the other psalms previously examined that are also about the Netherworld. In this case, not only is the Messiah ready to descend into the Netherworld alone, without his father-god, but also the scenery that attends him is completely different from the one we have seen in Pss. 2, 89 and 110. He will not face crowds of dead people guided in the battle by princes and kings; rather he will find himself in an arid desert, populated by monstrous animals ready to kill and devour him, leaving none of his bones. In other words, the Messiah mentioned in Ps. 22 will not descend into a 'kingdom', whose king he will have to fight, but into a dusty land, without water, infested by mythical beasts. It is not a 'land' ruled by a king, but simply the desolate *šēōl*, similar to the desert where Baal goes to fight the 'voracious' (*'klm*), who have horns like bulls and humps like bullocks.<sup>19</sup> In order to explain this different vision of the Netherworld, where the Messiah has to descend because of his god-father's will, we must conduct a careful philological analysis of the first verses of Ps. 22.

The Masoretic text reads, literally: 'My god, my god, why have you forsaken me? The words of my roaring are far from the salvation. O my god, I called by day and you did not answer, by night and I have no silence. You dwell holy, prayers of Israel' (vv. 2-4). From this translation it is clear enough that what we read cannot be the original text, because it has no logical meaning. What kind of connection does the word 'roaring' (*š'gh*), usually intended in the sense of 'lament', have with 'salvation'? The word 'silence' (*dūmiyyā*), even if translated by 'rest', has a meaning that contrasts with the one required by the poetic parallelism. The final verse is absolutely meaningless. The Greek version is very different: 'My god, my god, turn to me; why have you forsaken me? The words of my errors are far from my salvation. O my god, I called by day and you did not answer, by night and not because of foolishness to me. You dwell among the holy ones, glory of Israel'. The *Vetus Latina* presents two interesting variants: *verba labiorum meorum* (v. 2) and *in sancto habitas* (v. 4). The textual

19. They are mysterious mythical animals, often hypothetically identified with locusts, mentioned in the Ugaritic text KTU 1.12 (vv. 30-32). Unfortunately the text is seriously damaged and almost incomprehensible.

situation of the beginning of the psalm is further and substantially complicated by the form of its quotation in Mark and Matthew (which are not identical). We will examine this latter later; let us now consider vv. 2b-4.

The starting point for our analysis is the comparison between *dibrê ša'agati* in the Masoretic text and *hoi logoi tōn paraptōmatōn mou* in the Greek one. It is clear that the 'errors' of this latter give a sense to the sentence (the 'error', i.e. the sin, has kept the psalmist from salvation) and can be considered the right reading. The Masoretic *š'gty* is only a corruption of *šggty*, preserved in the *Vorlage* of the Greek text. The Hebrew word *šēgagâ* means, 'sin of error, inadvertence' and it represents the key to the understanding of the whole composition. By this term was meant involuntary sin and the psalmist, who was obviously a priest, composed this psalm to express his repentance for a sin, even if he has committed it unintentionally. Recognising his condition of sin, he feels that God has abandoned him until he has expiated his sin. This expiation leads us to the second part of the psalm. Leviticus 4 lists the necessary prescriptions for the expiation of involuntary sin, the *šēgagâ*, even if committed by priests. If the sinner is a simple priest, a bullock has to be sacrificed; but if it is a chief Levite (see Num. 3.32) (*nāšî'*) who commits the *šēgagâ*, a sacrifice of a goat (*še'ir 'izzîm*) will be necessary (vv. 22-26). Since in v. 23 of Ps. 22, which was originally the conclusion of the composition, we find the psalmist reintegrated into his sacerdotal functions, this means that the sacrifice of expiation has been fulfilled. With noteworthy poetical intuition the author, who was a high priest, imagines being the sacrificed goat; but at this point, for a reason that remains unclear to us, he identifies himself not with the goat of Lev. 4.22-26, but with that of Lev. 16.7-10, 20-22, that is with the scapegoat destined for Azazel.<sup>20</sup> This identification gave the psalmist the opportunity for the description of the Netherworld and gives us the key to understanding the reference to the (priestly) clothes and, in particular, to the garment on which, because of its great value, lots are cast. It is, clearly, the *ephod* described in Exod. 28.6-14 and vv. 31-35. In v. 19 of the psalm, we find the description of the high priest in the land of death, deprived of all his priestly insignia; for this reason, in the following verses, he invokes god, who should come to his aid because the psalmist was destined to his high office from birth (vv. 10-11).

The audacious literary image used by the psalmist, which turns the figure of a high priest involuntarily guilty into a scapegoat to be sent to the

20. On this aspect I limit myself to quote the measured analysis by G. Deiana, *Il giorno dell'espiazione* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1995), pp. 169-76.

Netherworld, may be something more than a simple rhetorical expedient. The revisers of the biblical text probably had other reasons to make incomprehensible the first verses of the psalm. It is no coincidence that this minimal intelligibility also characterizes the Greek version, even if in different passages. The expression *eis anoian* in v. 3, corresponding to the Hebrew *dumiyyûâ*, remains mysterious: the probable Hebrew *Vorlage šiggā'ôn* is so similar to *š'egōgâ* that one is tempted to suspect a voluntary alteration of the text. But the most important question in Ps. 22 remains the sense of the initial words.

As we have already noticed, Mk 15.34 quotes the beginning of the psalm in this form: *eloi eloi lama sabachtani*? Mt. 27.46 has instead: *'ēlī ēlī lema sabachtani*. The strange thing is that this text does not correspond to the Hebrew one we know, which is: *'ēlī 'ēlī lāmâ 'azabtānī*. But even more surprising is the fact that in Hebrew a root *šbq* (or another, phonetically similar) does not exist. We find it, instead, in Aramaic, where it has the meaning of 'to leave, to abandon'. Now the problem is determining which language was used for the quotation of the psalm: Hebrew or Aramaic? I confess my ignorance of the discussion among New Testament scholars on this point: I only know that the prevalent opinion is that the quotation is in Aramaic, on the basis of the verb *šbq*. Apart from the quite amazing fact that the Messiah would have quoted a sacred text translated into the vernacular instead of in its original form, the words *eloi* (or *ēli*) and *lama* (or *lema*) are certainly in Hebrew and not in Aramaic. The same sentence, in Aramaic, would have been: *'il 'il lēmānā' š'ebaqtānī* (Peshitta), *'elāhī 'elāhī meṭul mā š'ebaqtani* (Targum).<sup>21</sup> We have, thus, the problematic situation of a biblical sentence quoted in the Gospel partly in Hebrew and partly in Aramaic. We will look for a solution for this riddle first of all in the linguistic analysis.

The Aramaic form *šbqtn* appears in textual tradition with a series of interesting variations. The first consonant, which should render the palatalized sibilant *š* (lacking in Greek and Latin), is attested as *s* (sigma), in alternation with *z*, both in Greek (*zabaphthani*, *zaphthani*) and in Latin (*zabachthani*, *zabethani*, *zaphthani*). An adaptation of *š* with *z* is linguistically impossible. While there are no problems for the consonant *b*, we find other difficulties for the consonant *q*, not always rendered how one would

21. This is the reading found in the manuscript Villa-Amil n. 5, edited by L. Díez Merino, *Targum de Salmo* (Biblia Poliglota Complutense; Madrid, 1982), p. 92. In the *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta* by B. Walton, III, p. 114 and in the edition by P. de Lagarde, *Hagiographa Chaldaice* (Lipsiae 1873), pp. 11-12 we find *'ly 'ly* instead of *'lhy 'lhy*.

expect, as a *k* in Greek and *c* in Latin. Such a form is, on the contrary, quite rare: the most important manuscripts have, instead, the letter *chi* (*ch* in Latin), while others omit completely the consonant, both in Greek (*zaphthani*) and in Latin (*zabethani*, *zaphthani*). The two final consonants, which are two morphemes, do not present any difficulty. To sum up, the manuscript tradition concerning the verbal form *šbq*, linguistically analysed, does not confirm this root, but a completely different verb, which has *z* as first consonant, *b* as second one and, as final consonant, a fricative velar, which could be rendered in Greek with *ch*, or simply omitted. The Hebrew consonant with all these characteristics is the pharyngeal *ḥ*. The verb originally transcribed by Mark and Matthew was not the Aramaic *šbq*, but the Hebrew *zbḥ* ‘to sacrifice’.

The recovery of the root *zbḥ* through linguistic analysis allows us to reconstruct the original form of the initial words of Ps. 22: *'ēli 'ēli lāmā z<sup>a</sup>baḥtānī* ‘My god, my god, why have you sacrificed me?’ With this reading, the literary composition of the section vv. 2-23 of the psalm becomes clearer. Our hypothesis on the possible identification of the psalmist with the scapegoat, on the basis of the description of the Netherworld, is fully confirmed: from the beginning of the composition, the author introduces himself as a sacrificial victim. Not only does this interpretation restore the original meaning and the literary unity of the psalm, but gives to the quotation in Mark and Matthew a more pregnant and evocative sense than the one usually attributed to the passage. Before we examine the consequences of the new reading on the scheme of the history of religions, it is necessary to consider briefly the significant story of the textual modifications that affected the Hebrew text of the Psalm and its quotation in the Gospels. This is a field where, of course, we are obliged to confine ourselves to conjectures. Anyway the difference between the starting point and the conclusion indicates quite clearly, at least on general lines, what was the process of the transformation. Initially the Hebrew psalm had the form ‘you have sacrificed me’ (*zbḥtny*) and as such it is quoted in Mark and Matthew. The revisers of the Hebrew text of the Bible probably disliked the Christian use of the passage and changed it in their usual way, using only slight modifications: the unvoiced laryngeal *ḥeth* was transformed into the voiced one *‘ayin* and was moved from the third to the first position. Thus the verb *zbḥ* became *‘zb*, whose meaning was quite appropriate to the context (which probably had already been somehow altered): any reference to the concept of ‘sacrifice’, largely exploited by the Christians, disappeared from the text. Less comprehensible is the attitude of the Christians, who wanted to adopt the new Hebrew text, out of a kind of respect for the *hebraica veritas*. The



system they used is very similar to the rabbinic one: the original transcription *zabachtani* could be used also for the Aramaic verb *šbq*, introduced in the text through an artificial translation of the Hebrew words. Few readers of the New Testament would have been able to notice the linguistic pastiche that resulted from this operation on the text. However, the problem of the correct transcription of Semitic terms was considered also in Christian milieus, as is proved by the fact that more recent manuscripts testify more correct renderings of the verb *šbq* than those we find in the most ancient testimonies.

After this long but necessary philological digression, we can turn again to the point of our study, the Messiah. The last words pronounced by Jesus before his death did not express the desperation of the Messiah who had to descend alone to the Netherworld, contrary to the promises formulated by God in Psalms 2, 89 and 110. The Messiah was instead reproaching God for having forced him to the immolation, an action that was not expected for the Davidic Messiah (the same is true for several other things).

Once again I want to clarify that this study does not discuss Messianism in general, nor pretends to solve the problems of Christian Messianism. Its scope is deliberately restricted to the analysis of some texts. We are now facing an unforeseen situation: some of the psalms speaking of the Messiah's birth and of his future activity found their historical realization, at least as far as the birth is concerned, in the Gospel of Luke; but the Messiah-Jesus dies in a completely different situation from the one depicted by those same psalms. The mode for the narrative of his death was taken instead from Psalm 22, which cannot be considered Messianic, at least in the form we read today. It is thus clear that the theological elaboration conceived by the first Christians brought to the definition of a Messiah several new elements, without abandoning completely the traditional scriptural Messiah-type.

The constitutive elements of the Christian Messiah can be summarized in the following points: he is presented as David's descendant, but he does not seem to completely agree on this lineage (discussion on the beginning of Ps. 110 in Mt. 22.41-46; Mk 12.35-37; Lk. 20.41-44); the Synoptics insist instead on the divine paternity (episodes of the Baptism received from John and of the Transfiguration); the Messiah has to die in order to vanquish death (Jesus' passion and resurrection), but he descends to the Netherworld as sacrificial victim (quotation of Ps. 22) and not as Messiah-warrior helped by Yahweh; as an expiatory animal he takes upon himself the sins of the world (*qui tollit peccatum mundi*: Jn 1.29) but, being the

firstborn of God immolated during the days of Passover, he becomes the *agnus dei* (Jn 1.29): *Pascha*<sup>22</sup> *nostrum immolatus est Christus* (1 Cor. 5.7).

Christian interpretation presents a substantial innovation in comparison to the Messiah described in the Old Testament: the Messiah has become the paschal victim *par excellence*. This transformation, which gave to Christian Easter a very different meaning from the Jewish Passover festival, poses a serious problem from the point-of-view of the history of religion. Many years ago I dedicated a study<sup>23</sup> to the fact that the conception of Christian sacrifice, especially in the form it assumes in the liturgy of Catholic mass, reveals deep and precise structural affinities with the *mlk* sacrifice of Phoenician origin. The same term *missa* (i.e. *hostia*) is nothing but the translation of the Phoenician word *molk* (passive participle of the causative form of the verb *hlk*: *quod missum est*). The *molk* had been practised by Phoenician and Israelites in the first centuries of the first millennium BCE, but was abandoned by both in favour of other forms of cult towards the seventh century BCE; Josiah was the first to celebrate a different form of Passover. Only in the ancient Punic colonies in North Africa was the rite preserved until the Roman period.<sup>24</sup> Now the question is: from where did the first Christians draw the complex religious ideology underlying the Paschal sacrifice that they applied to their Messiah? The Messiah's last supper took place by night, but those who took part in it did not know that in Tunisia a religious ceremony whose chief figure was a lamb was defined *sacrum magnum nocturnum*. Looking at this from a historical point-of-view, it is natural to think that the Christian Easter was directly inspired by the Jewish Passover, not only in the exterior rite of the lamb eaten by night, but in its ideological elements. The Paschal lamb was

22. In the study quoted in note 25 I could not suggest any etymology for the Hebrew word *pesah*; now I think probable that the term is an artificial linguistic creation (how ancient?) as phonetic variant of *zabah*.

23. 'Influenze nordafricane sulla liturgia del cristianesimo primitivo', *Studi Magrebini* 7 (1975), pp. 41-54; reprint in *I Fenici. Storia e religione* (Napoli, 1980), pp. 187-201 with several additions.

24. On the *molk* see G.C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985); J. Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); S. Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in the Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991). I have expressed my position on the subject in *La religione dei Fenici in Occidente* (Rome: Università di Roma 'La Sapienza', 1994), pp. 67-81 and in the article 'Milkashtart, il re dell'Elisio fenicio', *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 62 (1996), pp. 179-87.

not only the substitution for the firstborn which had to be sacrificed (the unfulfilled sacrifice of Isaac is the mythical antecedent of the Paschal ritual), but was also, especially in the origins, the substitute of the king's son (and Abraham behaves as a king in Genesis), who has to die in order to secure his father a pleasant dwelling in the Netherworld, as we find well expressed in the Ugaritic poem of *Daniel and Aqhat*. It is clear that these elements of the ancient rite had remained substantially the same after so many centuries, also in the Jewish milieu, in spite of all the attempts to give to the feast a different meaning, linking it to an imagined exodus from the land of Egypt. This is not the first time that Hebrew religion appears to be very different from the picture that is presented and supported by the Old Testament's authors. In conclusion we could recall that, while the Book of Revelation described the triumph of the Lamb-Messiah, the Rabbis were eliminating the word 'lamb' (Semitic root 'mr) from the text of their Bible.<sup>25</sup>

25. See Garbini, *Note di lessicografia*, pp. 105-11 (*pesah*).

## Chapter 10

### THE END OF MYTH

In the first chapter of this book we talked about the mythic projection by which the origins of the different components of biblical Israel have been located. Abraham is the forefather of Hebrew people, Moses is the founder of its religion, Joshua is the conqueror of Palestine. This is the historical-mythological reconstruction presented by the Hexateuch, or rather by the author who conceived and realized, using pre-existent material, the large narrative complex Genesis–2 Kings. Looking at the picture shown to us, it is natural to think that so clear a perception of what we define ‘mythical time’ (when God speaks directly to humans) in contrast with a supposed ‘historical’ one (when God communicates with humans in an indirect way) supposes the overcoming of mythopoeic thought and a full mastery of a different instrument of intellectual, consciously rational analysis. In other words, the long historical narrative of the Bible has been written by someone who knew Greek philosophy perfectly. Now, we intend to resume our initial argument in the light of this consideration, which will help us to understand better some narrative details as well as the complexity of the thought of the biblical author.

The choice of Abraham as founder of Hebrew people appears quite peculiar, since the Jews defined themselves as ‘sons of Israel’ or ‘sons of Jacob’, while Abraham was considered also the forefather of the Ishmaelites. Moreover, the identification of Israel and Jacob in a single character (see Gen. 32.29) is no less artificial than the identification of Daniel with Belteshazzar (Dan. 2.26). The most obvious thing that comes to mind is that we have here a deliberate *damnatio memoriae* of a historical Israel to Jacob’s advantage. We ignore the most ancient Hebrew traditions, which are echoed here and there in the biblical writings and were certainly very different from the ones the Bible hands down, as a result of often-incomprehensible choices. Moses gave a religion to Israel, but his death outside the Promised Land and his stammer throw a ‘shadow’ on his otherwise imposing figure. Evidently, the limits imposed on the man who more than

anyone else had come near to Yahweh somehow had to influence his work too. Maybe the Law transmitted by such an imperfect man could not, in its turn, be absolutely perfect and it was therefore possible to improve it. Joshua remains a dim figure, eclipsed by Moses and the elders. We cannot even be sure that his deeds, derived from the 'Book of Yahweh's Wars' (*Sir.* 46.3), were not originally attributed to other characters.

After such imperfect mythic figures, no wonder that the historical ones are far from perfection in many substantial respects. A fundamental institution like the monarchy obviously lacks a mythical founder, but the Bible leaves doubts also about the historical one: Yahweh makes his solemn promise to Saul *and* to David as well, but later seems to forget the former. It is impossible to determine which of the two should be considered the first king of Israel, and the biblical text itself implies that Saul was already reigning in Jerusalem (1 Sam. 17.54). The same uncertainty regards the builder of Jerusalem temple, which was projected by David, but realised by Solomon, according to a narrative that is full of ambiguities (see Chapter 6), probably motivated by the political situation in the time of the redaction of the actual text (the Maccabaeon-Hasmonaeon age). It is important to stress that David and, even more than him, Solomon, the official builder of the temple, are depicted as highly blameworthy figures from a moral point of view. Finally, we cannot omit the temple itself: built in historical time, it belongs to myth because it was chosen directly by God, as the Bible incessantly repeats ('For now I have chosen and sanctified this house, that my name may be there forever' 2 Chron. 7.16). Realized, but often defiled, by human hands, the temple also reveals its imperfect nature: destined to stay 'forever', its destruction is placed together with the end of the Davidic monarchy, to which eternity had been promised too. With these tragic events the narrative starting with the creation of the universe comes to its end: the year 586 BCE marks the end of Israel's 'holy history' and if no more than five centuries afterwards that 'history' was perceived as a complete failure, this means that the Israel described in the Law and the Prophets did not have much in common with the one destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

### *The New Myth of Yahweh*

In the poetic books of the Bible many allusions can be found to the ancient Canaanite mythological repertory, and in particular to the tie that bound Yahweh to monstrous animals such as Leviathan, Rahab and Tannin. Those mythical characters represented the *primaeval* chaos and are all defeated

and subjugated by Yahweh, the god of cosmic order.<sup>1</sup> The Bible preserves only faint echoes of this material and they have become even fainter after the work of revisers who have completed the process of demythologization of the text, already started by the biblical authors. Thus the figure of the archaic Yahweh, who was one of El's sons, is today very feeble; on the contrary, the new Yahweh, protagonist of the continuous narration that runs from Genesis to Kings, appears very powerful and imposing, especially in the first two books, where the properly mythic period of Israel's history is narrated. It is a new myth, told in language only apparently simple, which deliberately imitates a kind of popular narrative, which today we would call folkloric, very well-documented in the narrative production of the Near East and Greece in the second half of the first millennium BCE.

After the suggestive narration of the creation of the world, which gives the mythical foundation of the Sabbath (Gen. 1.1–2.4a), Yahweh put Adam in Eden as a gardener. The first words he says to the man are a prohibition ('you will not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge') and contain a lie: as the snake will rightly remark in its conversation with Eve, it is not true that the fruit of that tree causes the death of whoever eats it. Like all other living creatures, Adam was created mortal: he could have avoided this destiny only by eating the fruit of the other tree in the garden, the tree of life. After his disobedience, Yahweh drives Adam and Eve out of Eden, not to punish them, but rather because he fears that humans, having reached his own level of knowledge (Gen. 3.22), could become immortal like him, eating of the fruit of the tree of life. Insincere and envious of humans, Yahweh manifests all his unfairness when he refuses to punish Cain and even puts him under his own protection; the fact that he discovers human wickedness (Gen. 6.5) reveals his deficient foresight, not to mention the fact that he appears proud of himself for the goodness of the human creature (Gen. 1.31), made in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1.27). Yahweh's envy for the man appears again in the episode of the tower of Babylon (Gen. 11.6), while his irascibility, which impelled him to destroy almost all humanity with the deluge, comes out again, in a more limited form, against Sodom and Gomorrah: perhaps all the adult males of the two towns were sinners, but what reason had Yahweh for destroying also women, children and vegetation (Gen. 19.25)?

What we have schematically described here is Yahweh's attitude towards

1. I mention here only the monograph by J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

humanity in general, but his behaviour is no less negative where Israel is concerned. The reiterated promises made to Abraham (Gen. 12.1-3, 7; 13.14-17; 15.1-7, 18-21; 17.1-8; 22.17-18), Isaac (Gen. 26.1-7, 24) and Jacob (Gen. 35.9-12) about their numerous descendants and the possession of the land are ambiguous. At least from Israel's point of view, God never fulfilled them; but since both Abraham and Isaac are considered forefathers of other peoples, the Arab Ishmaelites and Edomites, we can affirm that Yahweh has kept his word, but not in the sense expected by Abraham and Isaac, who had promptly driven out in the desert, respectively, Hagar with her child Ismael and Esau. Later, at the time of the monarchy, Yahweh appoints Saul to be anointed, but then regrets what he has done and passes the kingdom to David (1 Sam. 16.1). To the latter he promises an eternal reign (2 Sam. 7.8-16), which, however, will never be realised.

The figure of Yahweh as it emerges from his behaviour, described by the author of Israel's 'holy history', appears at least disconcerting: a liar, irascible, improvident god, who does not respect his given word (the '*emet Yahweh*', the *veritas Domini* so exalted by the Psalmist appears ironical) and does not hide his envy for the human. The fact that he boasts of his terribleness and ferocity even in friendly situations, such as the Sinai theophanies (Exod. 19.22, 24; 33.20) does not contribute to improving his image. It is clear that this negative portrait traced by the great theologian who wrote the complex Genesis–2 Kings hides a deeper thought, a different message addressed to those who were used to thinking in philosophical terms, and not only religious in a traditional sense.<sup>2</sup> The real sense of Yahweh's myth as Genesis created it is revealed by a famous but equally obscure passage (Gen. 32.25-33), whose general meaning is quite clear: the nocturnal fight between God and Jacob, at the end of which the man is the winner. It is therefore necessary to analyse this passage, which offers several linguistic and philological problems.

The episode narrated in Genesis finds a schematic anticipation in Hos. 12.4-5 and a close parallel, with an important addition, in the Qumranic text 4Q158. On the philological plane the relationship between the three texts is not as clear as it may appear at first sight because the Hosea text has been modified in line with the Genesis one, while the latter could be a

2. The negative traits of Yahweh I have stressed here are substantially the same as those that have been fully analysed by the great psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung in his book *Antwort auf Hiob* (Zurich: Rascher, 1952) (English translation: *Answer to Job*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton, 1973).

reduced version of the text attested by the Qumranic fragment.<sup>3</sup> From a linguistic point of view, two verbs present some difficulties: *'abaq*, a *hapax* without parallels in any Semitic language, and *šarah*, whose meaning is usually derived from the context, not indeed very clear, of the two passages where it is attested.

For our analysis it is useful to start with the Hosea text, which reads: *babbēten 'āqab 'et- 'ahîw ûbē 'ônô šārâ 'et- 'elōhîm wayyāšar 'el-mal'āk wayyukāl bākā wayyithannen lô bēt- 'el yimšā'ennu wēšam yēdabber 'immānû*. The subject of all the actions is Jacob, who 'in the womb followed at the heels<sup>4</sup> of his brother, and in his maturity *šārâh* a god and "fought" against an angel and prevailed, cried and asked for mercy from him. Bethel found him and there he talks with us.' The first thing to notice is that the words *wayyāšar 'el-mal'āk wayyukāl* are a repetition of *šārâ 'et- 'elōhîm* as well as an echo of the phraseology of Gen. 32.29. They are therefore to be considered a secondary addition, which had the function of binding more tightly the Hosea passage to the Genesis one: they both allude to the same episode, but there are important differences between them. In the prophetic text, which is certainly more ancient, one of the characters of the story 'cries' and 'asks for mercy'. This detail is missing in the Genesis version. The absence of a subject apart from the one implied by all the verbs in vv. 4 and 5 implies that it is Jacob himself who cries and asks for mercy. This is confirmed logically if we consider that in a probably pre-exilic text it is difficult to imagine a god, or at least the spirit of a dead person (*'elōhîm*), imploring a human being's mercy. To give full sense to the Hosea text it would be necessary to know the exact meaning of the verb *šārâ*, attested twice with two different syntactic constructions (*'et* and *'el*), evidently for the precise purpose of giving to the more ancient form (*šārâ 'et*) the new meaning deduced from the context of Genesis. This kind of linguistic operation, quite common in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>5</sup> in

3. The text from Qumran, inexplicably followed by long passages from Exodus, certainly derives from the Genesis text, as it is demonstrated by the presence of the verb *'bq* which, as we will now show, is a creation of the author of that book. The interesting thing is that the Qumranic fragment offers the text of the blessing requested by Jacob, followed by the words: 'and he went his way, after having blessed him there'. This detail probably indicates that this longer text corresponds to the original Genesis text, later omitted by the revisers of biblical text.

4. The translation 'superseded' for this verb, derived from the Vulgate (*supplantavit*), is incorrect, since Esau was the first to come out of the maternal womb.

5. See G. Garbini, *Note di lessicografia*, pp. 56-65, 92-93, 179-82.



the present case leaves us the possibility of determining the original meaning of the verb *šārâ*. The *lectio difficilior šārâ 'et*, if confronted with the recent *šārâ 'im* of Gen. 32.29 and the equivalent *šārâ 'el* in Hosea, reveals that *šārâ 'et* is used in parallel with the immediately preceding expression '*āqab 'et*: *šārâ* should therefore belong to the same semantic field as '*āqab*. Leaving aside the meanings attributed to this verb in the two contexts we are examining, which are derived *ad sensum* from the general meaning of the passages, it is clear that '*āqab*, the denominative verb from the name '*āqēb* 'heel', indicates a series of actions connected with the condition of being near to someone's heels (the Italian verb 'tallonare', from 'tallone' = 'heel', means in fact 'to pursue closely'). According to the Hosea text, Jacob immediately followed his twin Esau, even holding him by his heel, as is explained in Gen. 25.26. Later he found himself in an analogous situation with an *elohim* who wandered in the night. The parallel implies that, somehow, Jacob 'followed' or 'chased' a divine spirit, who presumably ran away from his pursuer. Since the latter was as fast as he was, the *elohim* had to strike Jacob, in a way that prevented him from running. This was, then, the real explanation for the wound at the joining of the thigh.

The Hosea text alludes to two different traditions about popular etymologies of the name Jacob; the first one is exposed in Gen. 25 without major changes, while the second is substantially altered in Gen. 32. Probably the place of the nocturnal episode has also been changed: the presence of the name Bethel, in a certainly anomalous context that suggests heavy interventions in the text (the Greek version is even more corrupted), adds to the hypothesis that the meeting of Jacob with the *elohim* originally took place in Bethel.

Let us now consider the Genesis text. As we have already noticed, the major linguistic difficulty consists in the verb '*ābaq*. This form is a *hapax* and its root is not attested in any other Semitic language. It should probably be considered an artificial creation of the author of Genesis, who wanted to use a verb that could be put in parallelism with *šarah*, as in Hosea, carefully avoiding '*āqab*, whose meaning was too well-known to be adapted to the new sense he intended to give to the episode. The invention of '*ābaq*, a non-existent verb, created a new word phonetically near to '*āqab* and somehow derivable from it, which could be conveniently introduced amongst the assonances that characterize the biblical passage and, at the same time, could assume any semantic value. The author's intent was to turn Jacob's 'pursuit' of the godly spirit into a victorious struggle of undetermined nature. This had to be done with minimal changes in texts

that were already in circulation, such as Hosea and probably another (unknown) one, in which Jacob's story was narrated. Since, as we have seen in Hosea, Jacob's action was described with the verb *šārā* in parallel with *'aqab*, the author of Genesis created a new pair of verbs, *'abaq* and *šārā 'im*. The lack of other attestations of *šārā*, apart from the name *Yiśrā'ēl*, shows that it derived from an archaic root, used only in the poetic language and therefore scarcely known. The semantic polyvalence of the root *šrw/y* in the Semitic languages in which it is attested (Akkadian, Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic, Ethiopic) is the consequence of a complex homophony; thus, next to *šārā* meaning 'to chase' (or something analogous) in Hosea could easily be introduced a *šārā* with a different meaning, which would be also used in the explanation of Israel's name. The meanings of the new word *'abaq* and of its parallel *šārā 'im* are determined by the context of Gen. 32.25-33, where the only possible translation is 'to fight': the Greek translator in fact has rendered *'abaq* with *palaiō*.<sup>6</sup> Adding to the Hosea text a sentence containing the new meaning assigned to verb *šārā*, the compiler of the Law and the Prophets managed to hide completely the original semantic value of the word.

Now that we have examined the linguistic and philological problems, we can turn to the narrative of Gen. 32.25-33 from a more informed perspective. In this case the author of Genesis has drawn on Hebrew tradition, describing an episode already familiar to the compiler of Hosea. We can nevertheless notice some important differences between the two versions, in spite of the brevity of the latter. The encounter between Jacob and a supernatural being, probably a sort of nocturnal demon, originally ended with the defeat of the patriarch (as his physical disablement shows); but in any case Jacob escaped quite honourably, since he survived. This episode was transformed into a hand-to-hand fight, in which the supernatural being, though he has wounded his adversary, implores Jacob to set him free. The substantial difference between the Hosea and the Genesis version consist in the fact that in the latter the divine rival recognizes Jacob's victory; the way in which the verb *yākōl* is used leaves no doubt about the meaning 'to prevail, to win' that it assumes in this context. In spite of the ambiguity over the identity of the figure who fought with Jacob, the request for blessing and its concession reveal that the adversary is Yahweh—and the rigid biblical monotheism could not admit any other divine presence. Who else,

6. Probably following some rabbinic speculation, the Targum translates *'abaq*, intended in the sense of 'to fight', with *'šdl: šdl* in Aramaic means 'to entice'.

apart from God, could bless Jacob and decide to change his name? At this point, the only possible conclusion is: Yahweh is a god who was beaten by a man.

This fundamental theological point, apparently neglected by modern scholars, was clearly perceived by the ancient translators of Genesis, both by the Jews who translated it in Greek and by the Christians who realized the Latin version. Jacob's victory over God, explicitly affirmed in the Hebrew text, appears attenuated or disappears in the translations. The verb *ykl*, which indicated the superiority of the strongest, becomes *dunamai* 'to be powerful, to value' in Greek, losing any idea of supremacy. The final sentence of the description of the fighting is not translated literally, perhaps due to a scruple of the translator, or maybe because of a variant in the Hebrew *Vorlage*, which read a verbal name (not attested in the Bible) instead of the verb *wattukāl*. The Greek text is: 'Your name will be Israel because you have been strong (*enischusas*) with God and with men powerful (*dunatos*)'. The strange asyndetic position of the final word and the use of verbs should be noted: *dunamai* translates *yākōl*, *enischuō* (also meaning 'to prevail') renders *šārā*. In Greek the idea of superiority is not completely absent, but is hidden by a verb of ambiguous meaning and in any case transferred to a different verb. Apparently, the translator did not have the courage to translate the Hebrew text literally. Even more positive is the position of St Jerome: in spite of his fondness for the *hebraica veritas*, in this case he did not intend to admit the defeat of God and therefore created his personal *targum*: *Nequaquam, inquit, Iacob appellabitur nomen tuum, sed Israel: quoniam si contra Deum fortis fuisti, quanto magis contra homines praevaleris?* ('Therefore', he said, 'your name shall be called not Jacob, but Israel: since if you have been strong against God, how much more will you prevail against humans?').

A last remark, before leaving Jacob's fight. In the short narrative there are two mentions of the dawn (*šahar*), which is the time when the adversary should disappear, if Jacob allows him to do that; then, when Jacob resumes his way, alone and limping, 'the sun rose for him' (*wayyizrah-lō ha-šemeš*). The narrative ends with this highly poetic image, but the author probably intended much more than this: why does the sun rise 'for' Jacob (*lo*)? Yahweh goes out from the scene before the sun rises and the dawn is only for Jacob, the true 'son of the dawn', limping Messiah.<sup>7</sup>

7. See Chapter 9.

*A Religion for the Future*

The examination of some aspects, usually neglected, though evident and essential, of the mythic reconstruction of Israel's past<sup>8</sup> and of the figure of its God as the Hebrew religious thought presented them in the Bible presents us an apparently paradoxical situation. The Law and the Prophets from one side codify and exalt a kind of religion centred on the cult of Yahweh, national and sole true god, who established the Jerusalem temple as his only seat; from the other, they reveal explicitly the moral inconsistency of that god (well perceivable in the book of Job, already circulating when the corpus that would form the first two parts of the *Tanak* had been redacted), his unfulfilled promises and the vacuity of all the practices related to his cult. The first chapter of Isaiah, which opens the section of Latter Prophets and, as all the writings placed at the beginning of a collection, gives the key to its interpretation, cannot be more explicit in this regard. The chiefs of Jerusalem, that is the high priests, are called 'rulers of Sodom' and its population 'people of Gomorrah' (Isa. 1.10). Against them, in the following verses, God refuses all the cultic practices (and this is a confirmation that the priests, and not kings with their ministers, are intended): sacrifices, burnt offerings, visits to the temple, oblations, incense, new moon, Sabbath, readings, fastings, assemblies, feasts, prayers (vv. 11-14). It is not pointless to ask ourselves what was the effect on the priests of the obsessive motif, present in all the Bible, of gratitude to Yahweh for the deliverance of Israel from Egypt: such a deliverance never took place and was invented by themselves to allude, probably, to their return from Babylon.

The Law and the Prophets appear now in a twofold perspective. In the greater part of the writings of which they are formed, they represent the religion of Yahweh in the form it had assumed in Persian times, with the hierocratic regime established in Jerusalem. The norms that regulate the liturgical activities, and especially the behaviour the people should display in all that concerned the religious sphere, are minutely described. However, the interesting thing is that, apart from the many details concerning the external activities of the priesthood (which any Jew in Jerusalem could easily see with his own eyes), the texts do not contain any information

8. On this subject we must refer to the important book by T.L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

about the structures, the organization and the other activities of the priestly class; it is like seeing only the front of a building. In these biblical writings we find not only a description of the religious practices, but often also their history, their meaning and their mythic origin, and since the religion of Israel is the expression of its relationship with Yahweh, all Israel's history becomes the history of this religion. In other words, these books fix a precise moment in the history of Hebrew religion, when a deep reflection on its nature was carried out. On the basis of this reflection, the entire past was reinterpreted (not as it was, but rather as they wanted it to be) and the future imagined, a glorious future with Jerusalem at the centre of the world.

Next to this 'real' religion, practised in the Jerusalem temple and on which the most traditional priests meditated, the author, or the milieu, who conceived and realized the Law and the Prophets created a different religion, sometimes affirming it explicitly (as in the case of the verses from Isaiah mentioned earlier), sometimes implicitly, narrating its 'myth' of Yahweh. This second religion is not based on public or private acts of cult, or on the observance of specific religious laws (such as those concerning purity), but exclusively on moral conduct suggested by the conscience of the individual, who, with Jacob, has prevailed over God himself (in the fragment of 4Q 158, with Jacob's blessing, we read: 'May Yahweh...fill you with knowledge and intelligence') and therefore does not need any mythic entities, inherited from his far Neolithic past. Also the relationship between man and god that in Hebrew historical thought had progressively become a special tie between Yahweh and Israel is substantially repudiated, with the insistence on the total failure of divine promises. God is far away and does not care about men, as Job (and Qoheleth) had affirmed and Yahweh himself had confirmed, admitting that his servant was right: that is like saying that he does not exist. In fact, the ancient prophetic image of Israel as bride, even if an unfaithful one, was not particularly gratifying for a god: apart from the many adulteries suffered, Yahweh, having sexual intercourse with a human, somehow renounced his own divine nature. The new religion deletes any trace of myth; with the well-chosen expression of Hermann Cohen, we could define it a 'religion of reason';<sup>9</sup> the complex philosophical elaboration of this scholar, together with the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible offered by Erich Fromm in a fascinating

9. H. Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, II (Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1929) (*Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, translated by S. Kaplan; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1972).

book,<sup>10</sup> are somehow the best comment to the over-hasty description of the Sadducees written by Flavius Josephus: 'the Sadducees...affirm that men have the power of choice between good and evil and that, according to his own will, each one goes towards the former or the latter'.<sup>11</sup> The Bible, expression of the priestly thought and thus 'Sadducee' *par excellence*, should be read also in this non-confessional perspective, in particular nowadays. Only in this way it is possible to understand its message of freedom for humans, which the more receptive part of the Jewish priesthood had learned from Greek Epicureanism.<sup>12</sup>

10. *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

11. Josephus, *War*, II, pp. 164-65.

12. I have analysed the substantially Epicurean positions of a perhaps consistent section of the Jerusalem priesthood in my essay *Letteratura e politica: consenso e dissenso nell'Antico Israele*, in *Cedant arma. Letteratura, parole d'ordine e organizzazione del consenso nel mondo antico* (Incontri del Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità dell'Università di Pavia, IV; Pavia 21 marzo 1991; Como: Edizioni New Press, 1991), pp. 15-21. On the direct relationship between *Job* and Epicurus, see my article *La meteorologia di Giobbe*, *RivBib* 43 (1995), pp. 85-91.

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