



The Land and the Book

THE HOLY Land has been “holy” for a reason. This is where a grand epic of divine salvation played out in the turbulent history of an outnumbered, beleaguered people who came to be known as the Jews. Yet much of their homeland with its stony, forbidding landscapes looks virtually indistinguishable from the lands of adjacent peoples: Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites then; Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians and Egyptians now.

So what has turned this small stretch of much-contested real estate into the object of millennial Jewish longing and the keystone of Jewish identity? The answer is that during the formative centuries of Judaism and Jewish identity, the Bible’s religious narratives became integral features of the landscape by having been painstakingly drafted onto it. This field is where David slew Goliath. This strange protrusion of limestone at the Dead Sea is the pillar of salt into which Lot’s wife turned for disobeying God. Round about here is where Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Such particulars lend the biblical stories both geographical intimacy and ostensible empirical validity. The land wasn’t just a simple backdrop for the Israelites’ tribulations and eagerly awaited redemption through their faith in God. The largely arid, rugged terrain, which they lovingly rebranded “the land of milk and honey,” became the very essence of their identity because it comprised God’s gift to them, in the form of a divine title deed, through His Covenant with them. The Jews were the *am ha’aretz*, the “people of the land,” and the people became spiritually inseparable from the land.

Yet the Bible isn’t just a national epic rooted in recognizable indigenous landmarks. It’s also a living depository of myriad ancient religious, cultural and political currents whose confluence would, in the hands of successive generations of gifted authors, give rise to the Bible as we know it.

Take Gebal (or Geval as the Torah calls it), an early capital of the ancient Phoenicians, in today’s Lebanon. Via the later Greek name of the city as Byblos, the Phoenicians gave us the very word Bible, or “book,” from the papyrus scrolls that were a major local export. They also gave us the world’s first fully formed alphabet with 22 consonants, of which the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet (the Israelites’ first written script dating back to the 10th century BCE) was a close replica. In other words, these inventive and mercantile seafaring Semites produced the raw materials of the Hebrew Bible.

Meanwhile, excavations of Ugarit, a coastal town in what is now Syria, unearthed a fine temple to the deity Ba’al Hadad (a *bête noire* of biblical authors) and, more intriguingly, cuneiform clay tablets that date from the 12th century BCE whose contents foreshadow such iconic Bible tales as that of Job. The locals’ chief deity was a creator god called El (one of Yahweh’s epithets in the Bible), who lived atop a sacred mountain, which too should ring a bell.

God has myriad names in the Bible, including *El Elyon*, *El Shaddai* and *Elohim* (a word tellingly in the plural). The reason is that the biblical writers synthesized the various rival deities of neighboring cultures into a single almighty God, who took on all their attributes:

protector, law-giver, destroyer, redeemer, guarantor of fertility.

This isn’t as controversial as it may sound. True monotheism in ancient Israel had been preceded by monolatry, the worship of a single supreme god to the exclusion of all other deities in a divine pantheon. The Bible itself attests to that. “[A]gainst all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments – I am the LORD,” Yahweh tells the Israelites, just as He is about to spring them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:12). He then instructs them, in His Ten Commandments, that “You shall have no other gods before me ... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:3-5).

The injunction clearly presupposes the existence of other deities. Later on, rabbis and exegetes, already wedded to the conservative monotheism of later religious traditions, would take God to have merely condemned idolatry in such passages, yet modern scholarship has put paid to such assumptions. Over the decades, archeologists have unearthed a myriad of cultic sites and objects dedicated to rival deities around ancient Israel, in a testament to the Israelites’ spiritual journey from flamboyant polytheists to hesitant monolatrists to staunch monotheists.

Some of that journey led via ancient Egypt, which also exerted formative influences on biblical texts. It was in Egypt that a puritanical proto-monotheism first saw the light of day during the reign of Amenhotep IV in the 14th century BCE, right around the presumed time of the Exodus. The oddball pharaoh renamed himself Akhenaten, banned all of Egypt’s old gods, and inaugurated a short-lived national cult to a sole deity, his sun god Aten. Israelite monotheism, some scholars posit, may have drawn inspiration from Akhenaten’s religious reforms, perhaps via one or some of his Semitic courtiers.

Whereas faith credits divine revelation for the religion that came to be Judaism, secular scholarship ascribes it to a long evolution of ideas through an innovative synthesis that drew heavily on the beliefs and cultural traditions of both neighboring peoples, and dominant empires across the region from Egypt to Canaan and from Mesopotamia to Greece.

The various biblical texts were products of their time, but many of them achieved their final forms after centuries of writing, rewriting, editing, collating and redacting. As a result, they ended up containing numerous historical anachronisms and internal contradictions. Yet the texts also serve as windows back into the eras of their compositions.

Clay tablets unearthed by archaeologists in today’s Iraq from the ruins of Nineveh, capital of the rapacious Assyrian Empire, offered up texts that closely matched several of the earliest tales in the Bible yet predated them by centuries. These texts, based largely on earlier Sumerian myths, bore intriguing parallels to the creation story in Genesis and the story of Noah. They spoke of a great flood unleashed by an irate deity with a righteous hero coming to the rescue of humanity.

The Bible’s authors were intimately familiar with the Assyrians, who laid waste to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE before they proceeded to besiege Jerusalem, in the rump state of Judah,

during the reign of King Hezekiah, who managed to save his own kingdom. Ancient Israel was wiped off the map, and the Jews (as locals would be known after the state of Judah) dealt with this traumatic calamity by investing all their hopes in their small southern kingdom, hitherto a provincial backwater, and turning its small capital, Jerusalem, into the centerpiece of Jewish religion and identity.

Then, a century and a half later, another twist in the tale: Judah, too, is laid waste. The culprits are the Babylonians, who destroy Jerusalem with its Temple in 586 BCE and haul away the nation's learned elite into captivity. And a good thing too, in hindsight, that they did take those Judahites, for it was in Babylon, near what is now Baghdad, that Jewish identity and theology truly began to take shape. The city's ziggurats and its cosmopolitan populace inspired the Bible's tale of the Tower of Babel with its innumerable tongues. Many biblical laws came to be modeled on King Hammurabi's famous law code (by then over a millennium old), including the ancient world's normative edict of retributive reciprocity: "an eye for an eye."

IT WAS during the Babylon Exile, scholarly consensus has it, that some of the Hebrew Bible began to be either composed or edited into a form recognizable to us today. The exiles also began to fine-tune an emerging theological insight that the fortunes of the Chosen People rose and fell in tandem with their steadfast loyalty, or lack thereof, to Yahweh. Conquering empires like Assyria and Babylon were mere tools with which God chastised His wayward children.

This notion would have two long-lasting effects on collective Jewish sentiments, I'd venture: 1) a seemingly limitless capacity for almost masochistic self-reproach, and 2) a view of God that makes him impervious to any form of censure. Namely, whatever misfortune befalls His people, it's always our fault, never His. The deuterocanonical *Book of Baruch*, which is included in the Greek Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible, spells this view out explicitly: God punishes us for sinning against Him (Chapter 2).

The Bible is full of prophetic declamations by divinely inspired seers, yet that much-vaunted prognosticatory tradition was also largely the work of later authors who wrote "prophesies" about historical events after the fact and simply attributed them to earlier prophets. Thus, when the Persian king Cyrus the Great vanquished Babylon in 538 BCE and allowed Jewish exiles to return home and rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, there arose a literary tradition that credited the prophet Isaiah, who had lived two centuries prior, with predicting all of it and even mentioning Cyrus by name (*Isaiah* 44:28).

Then came the Greeks. Their philosophers set about pondering the nature of reality and seeking to unravel its mysteries through reflection, observation, dialogue and disputation. Their collective impact on contemporary Jewish ideas, and even ideals, was formidable. Just as Canaanite, Mesopotamian and Persian traditions helped shape the earlier books of the Bible, so did Greek philosophy, mythology, drama and rhetoric mold later ones.

Spread far and wide across the Middle East with the conquests of

Alexander the Great (who is immortalized in *The Book of Daniel* as a mighty ram), Hellenistic thought and civilization became an integral part of the region with little Judea, subjugated first by the Greeks then by the Romans, in it.

With its unbridled pessimism the wisdom literature in *Ecclesiastes*, which has traditionally been attributed to Solomon but was composed during the Hellenistic period, reads as if large chunks of it had been set to papyrus by world-weary Greek stoics and cynics. It is perhaps the most delightfully idiosyncratic section in the entire biblical canon, and its bleak, level-headed assessment of the human condition presaged Existentialism by two millennia.

The book's almost nihilistic message appears to be a rejection of the underlying optimism in the rest of the Bible, which has it that faith in God is salvific. *Ecclesiastes* has a different message: We live, we die, goodbye. With wisdom comes sorrow, *Ecclesiastes* counsels. The wise man dies the same way as a fool (2:16). What is lost cannot be regained. Our earthly labors are futile. Suffering is inevitable. So is injustice. Fortune is famously blind ("the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise," 9:11). But do good and fear God. In any case, live for today as who knows what tomorrow might bring (3:13).

It was another creative synthesis of Greek and Jewish religious ideas that would give birth to Christianity. A stream invested heavily in mystical traditions, Christianity began life as but one of the myriad Jewish cults with a charismatic leader in the tumults of first-century Judea. Drawing on contemporary gentile mystery religions, Paul of Tarsus and like-minded early Christian thinkers, most of whom were Jews, would soon fashion a simple peripatetic Galilean teacher who reportedly came to an unfortunate end at the hands of Roman authorities into the risen savior of humanity, based (rather sloppily) on the concept of the Jewish messiah.

With a religious sleight of hand, Christians would then proceed to try and rob Jews of their Bible by insisting that the "Old Testament" was merely Act 1 for the apotheosis of the Gospels. Quite brazen, that. Muslims would later pull the same trick on both the Jews and the Christians by claiming to have spiritually superseded them both, thanks to the Koran.

Over time, with the increasing dominance of Christianity, the national epic (in turns stirring and heart-wrenching) of a small, frequently subjugated people in the Levant would go on to shape Western civilization, becoming part of its very DNA.

So what is the Hebrew Bible? Contrary to tradition, it wasn't God's gift to his Chosen People, much less to the world at large. Rather, it was the gift of ancient Jewish prophets, priests, poets, theologians, thinkers, writers and editors to their own long-suffering nation. In its texts, both canonical and apocryphal, they collectively paid homage to God through their evolving concepts of Him. By doing so, they would help chart not only their own people's destiny to this day, but that of the West as well.

In the process, they turned a small piece of land on the eastern Mediterranean into the religious heart of the Western world. ■