

CHAPTER 4:

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book?

(Part 2)

Last chapter, we plunged into an exercise in handling the texts of Scripture. Now I would like to set out for you what I hope are some useful hints at an overall view of the texts. This is not (and could not be) a one-session gallop through the Hebrew Scriptures. It is something like an outline of some elements, a “state of the question” which scholars more or less take for granted. Of all the chapters in this book, this is the one to which I expect to have to make the most frequent revisions over time. That is partly because I am not a Scripture scholar, and so am on a constant learning curve in this sphere, and partly because the outlines here are almost too fuzzy even to be called “outlines”. In fact, over the last few decades, the whole shape of the study of the Hebrew Scriptures has completely come up for grabs.

Until relatively recently, Scripture scholars broadly accepted a linear history of Israel, roughly corresponding to the chronology outlined in the biblical books. It has become clear, however, that there is nothing like sufficient evidence for this view. We’ve also become aware of just how much the “knocks” of history—moments like the Babylonian deportation and the destruction of the Temple—had an effect on the whole business of producing and transmitting texts. Finally, we have become much more comfortable with the notion that the texts we have show signs of what we might nowadays call an “ecclesial” editing process. In other words, a process by which people keen to hold onto whatever was truest and most profound in what they had received continually reimagined the whole of their belonging by recreating a narrative that made sense not only of where they were coming from, but of where

they thought they should be going. Naturally, such acts of reimagining were hotly contested by others who thought the future direction of Israel should be quite different.

While giving you a quick overview of how some of this plays out, I'm also going to try and trace with you—through the messy process of living, writing, transmission, and editing to which the texts bear witness—some elements in the Hebrew Scriptures which point to the emergence of the “other Other”—in other words, of God.

The Final Edition

If you have ever had dealings with a newspaper or with journalists, you know that the story which the journalist originally files is not the same as the one you read on the page. First, the journalist writes and sends in the story. Then, an editor revises it, cuts it, and augments it with contributions from other journalists, ensuring it fits the available page space. Finally, when all is ready, the night editor assigns a headline to the story. When you pick up the paper, however, the first thing you see is the headline to the story. You see the most recent bit of the editing process, the bit which reflects the judgment, concerns, and need to create a splash and so on of the final editor. This most recent bit of editing will very seriously colour your perception of the story under the headline. You may indeed have experienced reading a story under a headline and wondering whether there wasn't some mistake, as what the headline shouts and what the story appears to say point in different directions. You can imagine how infuriating and humiliating it must be for the original journalist to have her nuance and research traduced by the quick-grab title.

The point I'm trying to make is simple: we don't read the story in the order in which it was written. We read the most recent piece of editing first, which guides our interpretation of the process that led up to it. This is no less true of the Scriptures than it is of newspapers. We read the texts through the eyes of the most recent editors. Which means the more we know about who edited the texts and when, the better sense we will have of the different fragments that make up the whole.

As it happens, we have a rather useful guide to an important moment in the Scriptural editing process in the form of a deliberately inserted four-thousand-year span (hence the rather fanciful longevity of some characters), which runs from Adam until the dedication of the New Altar in 164 BCE during the Maccabean period. It means that a considerable chunk of what we call Scripture (some of whose texts are very much older than 164 BCE) has reached us wrapped in the packaging—the interests and viewpoints—of its Maccabean editors. We have a glimpse, as it were, of the night editor putting his touch to the story.

This glimpse into the editing also gives away something about the sense its contemporaries made of their sacred texts. It shows that they considered them a preface to the New Israel, conceived as starting from the re-inauguration of the Temple. In other words, fully two hundred years before any of the texts of what we now call the New Testament were written, the Hebrew Scriptures were already being packaged as somewhat of an “Old Testament”—as if they were saying: “This has been the story of the Lord’s dealing with the people of Israel up until now, and what a story of defeat and disaster it has been, only occasionally punctuated by moments of stability. But all that has now been brought to a conclusion, leading up to now, when we are inaugurating the new period for which all the Scriptures have been a prologue”.

A further interesting point about this editing process is the dating system used in the Maccabean period, which persists into the current official Jewish text of the Hebrew Scriptures (called the Masoretic text). The very structure of the numbers gives us a hint at the priorities of the editors: The covenant at Sinai, for example, is established at the two-thirds point of the four-thousand-year span, 2666 years from Adam. However, there is a different organisation of most of the same texts, with a different dating scheme, in the Samaritan Pentateuch. In this other ancient compilation of many of the same texts, the figure of Abraham is made more pivotal, and the two-thirds point is the establishment of the Tabernacle and the priestly rituals rather than the covenant at Sinai. As we will see later, each group of “night editors” had quite specific reasons behind their framing of the story.

A further issue has become increasingly apparent over the last hundred years of archaeological excavations in the Middle East, excava-

tions whose interests and interpretations have themselves depended on the religious ideology of the various regional power brokers, up to and including the current State of Israel. And that is how little extra-textual backing there is for any of the purported history of Israel prior to the Babylonian period. There is, for instance, no extra-textual evidence for the existence of a King of Israel called David, or of Solomon. There is no architectural evidence from the First Temple. There are no extra-textual references to the existence of Moses prior to the Exile. Even the earliest textual references to him appear to date only from very shortly before the Exile. The first king of Israel referred to in extra-Biblical sources is Omri, who reigned around 880 BCE and appears rather ingloriously in 1 Kings 16. There is no evidence of an invasion of Canaan by a non-local people at a period that might be made to fit in with the book of Joshua. And while an Egyptian engraving from around 1200 BCE refers to a defeated collective called Israel in the land of Canaan, there is no evidence of an Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt at a time which might fit in with the chronology of the Scriptures.

Now, absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence. Who knows what wonders may yet be unearthed by archaeologists! Nevertheless, we have at least learned that the relationship between texts, historical dates, events and interpretations is a good deal more complex than meets the eye. Learning to ask in what sense these interrelated factors are bearers of something true—let alone a communication from God—also plunges us into the realisation that the ancient authors and editors were very much more sophisticated and knowing in what they were doing than we have often given them credit for.

To give just one more minor example concerning the Book of Joshua: If the book is a very ancient text, more or less contemporary with the events it describes, which reports and justifies a real conquest by a real ethnic group of lands they didn't previously occupy (and this is exceedingly improbable), then you have a powerful—and never-to-be-surrendered—divine mandate for a quite specific land grab (which is of course how it is read by modern fundamentalists in the State of Israel and elsewhere). If however, Joshua was written (or at least heavily redacted) after the Babylonian Exile by people who were planning on coming back into the land from which their forebears from

a generation or two had been deported, then maybe the purpose of the conquest story was precisely the reverse: it would have been a way of letting the current occupiers of the land know, among other things: “You needn’t fear us returning Judaeans from Babylon, for, as our text shows, so completely did Joshua extirpate the former occupiers of the land many centuries ago that, if you are there now, you must in fact be part of us already”. In other words, the account of the ancient conquest becomes a backdrop to a modern co-opting without conquest.

Having raised these points (all of which re-illustrate how we always read texts according to our hermeneutical starting point, or backwards in fulfilment of prophecy), I’d now like to rush through a few key “issues” in the Scriptures which may help make them easier for you to handle.

From Polytheism to Monolatry

Given all we’ve reviewed so far, I hope it will not come as a shock to you now to hear that the Hebrew Scriptures are not, strictly speaking, monotheistic. An absolutely clear, unadulterated monotheism only emerges in the Scriptures as late as the texts of 2nd Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), from the post-exilic period. In earlier texts, we find numerous reminiscences of a polytheistic past, in which the basic Canaanite word for God (El) is pluralised (Elohim). There are references to God among the gods (who later become “angels”). There are also hints of varied gender: traces of a mother goddess figure exist in the Hebrew imagination as recently as just prior to the Babylonian Exile, and one of the titles for God: “El-Shaddai”, may have some reference to the word “breasts” and indicate a female divinity.

What the texts do bear witness to is a movement *from* polytheism to what is called “monolatry” or “henotheism,” meaning: “plenty of gods exist, but you are to worship only one of them”. It is worth noticing that the first of the ten commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”, is a monolatrous or henotheistic commandment, not a monotheistic one. It takes for granted the existence of other gods.

We can see an interesting moment of editing in the texts when, in Exodus 6:2-4, a couple of chapters after God has revealed Godself to Moses as YHWH, this is added:

And God said to Moses: “I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El-Shaddai, but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they dwelt as sojourners.”

Ancient names fade out, and the name YHWH becomes the central name around which the worship of Israel will revolve. However, it is worth remembering that the most ancient texts we have for Deuteronomy 32 indicate that God, the Most High (El Elyon), appointed gods to all the nations, and over Israel, He appointed YHWH to be its God. So there is textual evidence of a process by which YHWH becomes not only a god among the gods, but eventually “God—there is no other” in 2nd Isaiah. What is really interesting here is the recognition, as this process developed, that “God the Most High” (of whom no image could be made, and who could not be seen in any way at all) and YHWH (who could make anthropomorphic appearances) were both identical, yet distinct. This very ancient identity and distinction persists into New Testament Judaism, where El-Elyon is the Father and YHWH is the Son. But more of that anon.

Rough History: Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom

There does seem to be ancient evidence confirming the Biblical account that there were two political entities called Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom), and that the Northern Kingdom was eventually vanquished by the Assyrian Empire around the year 720 BCE. The Northern Kingdom covered the territory in which the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) had lived and where the great theophanies of God had been reported. (The most prominent Yahwistic sanctuaries also lay in the Northern Kingdom). It may well have been in

the territory of the former Northern Kingdom that the remnants of the Northern priests and scribes began to write monuments to their religious culture and heritage, following the destruction of their sanctuaries and the deportation and forced mixing of the people, which was the result of Assyrian hegemony. In other words, the origins of a text-based religion lie in compensating for the loss of the sanctuaries. Texts are a way of producing and maintaining forms of togetherness and identity amidst the knocks of history.

Meanwhile, the Southern Kingdom, centred on Jerusalem, had its own ideological history. The choice of Jerusalem as capital (even though it was not an Israelite but a Jebusite city, and one which had no prior association with YHWH) was backed up by David's vision on the threshing floor (2 Samuel 24:16-25). The cult of God there depended on the Jerusalem Temple and the Davidic monarchy. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Judaea considered itself superior and invulnerable to whatever had gone on in the north. This invulnerability did not last long! After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 597 BCE and the destruction of the Temple ten years later, the wisdom of the Northern Kingdom in shifting to a text-based religion may have become clearer to the deportees of the Southern Kingdom. Thus, in an incident narrated as the discovery of a scroll of the Law in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah, shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, what was very probably a northern textual artefact was granted a place of privilege in the religious world of the Southern Kingdom. We have, in fact, very little idea indeed of what the day-to-day religious or cultural life of Israel or Judah would have looked like before the destruction of the Temple in 587. However, it seems that this second fall of a kingdom, after the textual precedent had already been established further north, led to the beginnings of the text-based religion whose later version we now know as Second Temple Judaism.

Two Strong Tendencies—The Priestly Vision and the Legal Program

The Scriptures, as we have them, show at least two quite strong tendencies that are often in conflict with each other. Recovering which tendency comes from where, and why, is not easy and is, of necessity,

ty, highly speculative! On the one hand, you have an ancient priestly tendency which may have been linked initially with the prophets and sanctuaries of the north but eventually became associated with the figure of Solomon and the Temple in Jerusalem, and later with part of the programme of reconstruction that led to the Second Temple. And on the other you have a somewhat less ancient tendency which saw things in terms of texts, of law, and gradually, in the Second Temple period, became associated with the figure of Moses, the Covenant of Sinai and the development of the notion that what principally defined the Hebrew experience (on its way to becoming what we now call the Jewish experience) is the living legal way of life called “Torah” or “Law”. One of the things that has been difficult for modern readers of the Bible (even Jewish readers of the Bible) until recently is that so thoroughly was Biblical Scholarship dominated by the heirs of the Protestant Reformation that the vision of the Hebrew world which was passed on to us was almost totally focussed on the second tendency, since it so flattered the Protestant critique of sacerdotal religion. It is only recently that we’ve begun to recover a sense both of how much more important the priestly element was in Hebrew religion, how fundamental in undergirding certain things we take for granted as part of what Jewish or Christian life is all about, but also how much Jesus and early Christianity saw themselves as bringing to life elements of this more archaic tendency in the face of the religious domination of the local population by the more modern “Torah” tendency.

To put things in far too brief a nutshell: it was the priestly element of ancient Hebrew religion—no doubt working through elements from surrounding cultures, sometimes completely subverting those elements, and developing from liturgies of sacrifice and praise—which gave us the notions of Creation, and of Redemption through Atonement, with the feast of the Atonement being the principal feast of this tendency. Similarly, it was the priestly tradition that gave us the notion of God bringing into being everything that is, of the things of Heaven utterly alive and occasionally perceptible to us, of God who was perceptible, close at hand and wont to put in appearances, make his face shine upon people, allow his glory to be felt. It was the priestly element that gifted us with the liturgical sense of time in which an eternal

present is always contemporary with all the happenings of the past. But it was no doubt also the priestly element that tolerated or defended child sacrifice and other weird forms of cult, and whose temple and its endlessly costly sacrificial system of beasts was to prove, in the face of foreign invasion, such a false security for those who depended on it, and on the ideology of cultic goodness which sustained it.

The more textual tradition, associated with what scholars call the Deuteronomistic school, played down the liveliness and excitement of God, turning attention away from theophanies, angels, and the things of Heaven. It focused instead on a legally and textually viable way of life, one in which the attributes of the ancient prophets and the mantle of sacred kingship were gradually transferred onto the lawgiver-prophet, Moses. However, the power of atoning priesthood was quite explicitly *not* so transferred.

In the Deuteronomistic school, it is hearing and obeying the words, not searching for the form of God (let alone contemporary interventions of God), that is important. Creation, which in the priestly tendency was constantly contemporary, became something that had happened in the distant past, to which we now relate by Torah. Atonement, where YHWH became temporarily incarnated in the High Priest in order to renew Creation by atoning for the sins of his people, was downplayed. The Passover became much more central, a lay feast celebrating the exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, and the legal way of life that was to follow from it.

The principal editors of the central texts of Torah are, of course, of this school. They sought to recreate the cultic world of their forebears through a textual and verbal religious culture, after all the visible, architectural, and political artefacts that had kept their world alive in previous centuries had collapsed. In fact, without their moral verve, we would not have the ethical monotheism associated with Judaism. And without the painstaking faithfulness of their editing, to the extent that they did not wholly remove traces of things of which they deeply disapproved, we would not have any textual insight into the priestly world that brought them into being—the world on whose shoulders the editors and their Torah somewhat uncomfortably rested.

Three Central Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel

The book of the Prophet Isaiah, in addition to being simply and of itself one of the great wonders of the world, serves as a vital backbone to the whole process by which the Hebrew people gifted authentic monotheism to the world. A school of disciples somehow kept alive over a period of three hundred years, and possibly longer, the vision that the Judean court prophet Isaiah began to elaborate around 730 BCE. This vision was so much greater than any of the power politics surrounding the royal court at the time that it led to a deeply peaceful and critical indifference to them (see Isaiah 7-8). It was associated with Isaiah's priestly vision of the Lord surrounded by cherubim in the Holy Place of the Temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole Earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:1-5)

The school of Isaiah sat with and under this vision over the next several centuries.

Over time, it enabled them to reinterpret all the ups and downs of history that befell Israel and Judah, finally leading to the extraordinary clarity we see in what is now called Second Isaiah, the post-exilic reworking of the vision. There it has become clear organically, from within the vision, that the Lord in question is not another god among the gods, but is in fact God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods—more like nothing at all than like a god. Therefore, all other forms of divinity are put to a devastating critique, and the fullest manifestation of God appears

to be the most complete atheism, as all human forms of god (which are really projections of us) wither away in the face of the discovery that we are, in fact, projections, functions of God:

Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior. All of them are put to shame and confounded, the makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus says the LORD, who created the Heavens (he is God!), who formed the Earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in chaos.' I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right. (Isaiah 45:15-19)

Even more remarkable is the way in which the richer and more profound the Isaiah vision of God became, the more it also focused on an anthropological critique. As the perception of God becomes more fully alive and full of holiness, so it also becomes possible to critique religious victim-creating mechanisms. This is where Isaiah develops the unparalleled (and to this day deeply mysterious) "servant songs", by which a separation between God and human victim-making becomes imaginable, alongside a generous process of being able to occupy the victim space on behalf of others. This leads, in the final part of Isaiah (now known as Third Isaiah), to devastating critiques of those who, after the return from exile, were rebuilding the Temple and establishing a new purity religion, marked by exclusions. Isaiah is key to understanding the way in which the utter vivacity of the apparently atheist God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods removes all religious justification from victimising. And Isaiah's vision is the most central to the development of New Testament Judaism, which sees itself entirely within the working-out of the same insight.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel (whose books also reach us through seriously complicated processes of editing, redaction, and interpretation) are also enormously important figures. We looked in our last chapter at the

ways they each handled the child-sacrifice issue: Jeremiah seems to have inherited a Northern Kingdom understanding of God offering people a “Way” that was not dependent on rules and regulations concerning sacrifice, the Temple of Jerusalem and the monarchy. Coming to live in Jerusalem, shortly before the Babylonian conquest, which would see its destruction, Jeremiah was in fact bitterly critical of the Temple ideology which regarded Jerusalem as impregnable, owing to the presence of the Lord in the Temple. Treated as a sacrilegious traitor for his pains, he had the uncomfortable experience of being proven right all along when Jerusalem fell to Babylon. He and his school seem to have been particularly important in developing what became known as the “Deuteronomistic” account of Israel, radically downplaying everything cultic and substituting instead the notion of a legal covenant, while telling the story of a people whose historical calamity was a punishment for their sins and the sins of their fathers. Yet this shift to a moral history was designed not as a form of fatalism, but as a form of inducement into becoming a living covenantal people.

(Late in his life, as told in Jeremiah 44, we see the prophet, now in exile in Egypt, meeting with a group of priests who had been exiled from Jerusalem not by the Babylonians, but by the forces of Josiah’s reforms a few decades earlier. He berates them by telling them that if it weren’t for their sinfulness in sacrificing to the Queen of Heaven—the goddess figure who had previously been cultivated in Jerusalem—then none of the disasters would have come about. They, reasonably enough, reply that he has it all backwards: While they cultivated the Great Lady, all was fine. It was only after the cult was suppressed that disaster came. Who was being punished?)

Finally, Ezekiel, the conservative Temple priest, centred on the vision of God in the Holy Place in the Temple. We can get some sense of how sheerly different the Hebrew religion was in Jerusalem before the exile by comparison with what came after it: Ezekiel’s visions of God, recognizably part of the same world as those of Isaiah from over a century previous, involve an untranslatable mixture of gender and number (indeed, the textual difficulties of Ezekiel are enormous). He reports two different Passovers of the Lord in Jerusalem. Yet, neither of these makes the slightest reference to what we understand as the Passover

linked to Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. Ezekiel was carried off into exile, and as a priest, managed the extraordinary feat of undergoing the vision of God, leaving the Holy Place, the Temple, and indeed Jerusalem, thus opening up the possibility that God's presence lived independently of a particular holy place. A New Temple might then be imagined.

Keeping the priestly vision whole in a time of exile has also proven to be one of the definitive structuring forces of the Hebrew experience. Curiously, for those of a modern temper, this strongly priestly bent—no less than the lay, legal bent of Jeremiah—was a way into what we now would call a secularising tendency: it is in Ezekiel (chapter 18) that individual ethical responsibility is clearly taught for the first time, breaking away from a sense that God might be punishing the children for the sins of their fathers. The priestly sense of the permanently and contemporarily alive nature of God caring now for each of God's children refuses to go down the road of making God the backer of moral fatalism.

So, three prophets. I've tried to represent them to you as key axles in movements of interpretation, adaptation and discovery—invention, in its richest sense—in the hopes that you might find much more richness for yourselves in each of them.

Exile, Disputed Return, Moses and Second Temple Judaism, Wisdom

We don't know what proportion of the Jerusalem population was taken off to Babylon between 597 and 587 BCE. Certainly, a considerable portion (if not all) of the courtly, political and religious leadership—the literate class. It seems that the Babylonian exile provided them with the impetus and the instruments to develop the text-based religious culture that would emerge over the next several hundred years. Key texts were written, fragments edited, and emphases altered. Much of what the Northern Kingdom had produced and which had previously been less palatable to Judaeen tastes became grafted into the Judaeen narrative. Whatever happened during the time of the Josian reform, in the decades immediately preceding the collapse of Jerusalem, it too was incorporated into the emerging story.

It may well be that the figure of Moses first acquired importance during the Josian reform, serving as a kind of local alternative to Assyrian royal ideology. As time went on, after Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem, a narrative developed around Moses, this great leader, lawgiver, and prophet whose covenant, writings, and wandering tabernacle existed prior to the world of Kings and Temples. Those who developed this new Moses-centered compendium were called Judahites, as they'd been carried into the Babylonian exile from Judah. They soon imagined a programme for creating the "true Israel" back in the Land and put it into action.

And yet, as is the case for any exiles returning to their former land after a period of absence, the "purified" story the returners tell of what they left behind, and what they now want to recreate, does not necessarily mesh well with the lives of those who have been left behind. Those who had remained had a very different story indeed of what had gone before, and very different ways of adapting to changing political and social circumstances. So, you have the Judahite attempt to reclaim hegemony and portray as original a particular religious and political programme that was not entirely familiar to the rest of their common ethnic group, the Hebrews—those who were the less literate and more traditional dwellers in the land.

Many texts in the Scriptures reveal evidence of how the return of the Judahites was disputed and negotiated. It may even be that the Song of Songs, now famous as a love story, at least partly originated as a coded discussion of the terms under which the exiled Judahite leadership might return to dwell in Jerusalem. Such a code would have been necessary in the face of the Persian authorities, and the language of "love" was, at that time, distinctly covenantal and political—not romantic and sexual as it is to our ears. Furthermore, it is also clear that the new Deuteronomistic moral ideology, which was being presented as the backbone of God's relationship with Israel, was not accepted pacifically: the book of Job, along with much of the wisdom literature found in books like Ecclesiastes, critiques the moral presumption that: "if you behave well, all will go well, and if all doesn't go well, then you must have behaved badly".

Yet as the Judahite “new evangelisation” of the land advanced, so attempts were made, alongside the Deuteronomistic moral and behavioural codes, to introduce teachings of racial purity. These were a serious novelty to those who had long considered themselves part of the Lord’s worship. It was during this period that the racial criterion for what we now call “Judaism” was developed: that one is Jewish who is born of a Jewish mother. The forcible divorce of all priests who had married (what were now presented as) “foreign” wives was hugely shocking at the time. Literary acts of protest emerged, serving as reminders that, even in the official narrative, Moses was married to a Midianitess. The very beautiful book of Ruth clearly critiques the reductionist purity party by reminding people that King David’s grandmother Ruth was a Moabitess, and furthermore that Ruth’s love for her Hebrew mother-in-law Naomi is clearly expressed in the formula proper to the Deuteronomist’s understanding of the relationship between God and Israel: Where Deuteronomy says: “You shall be my people and I will be your God”, Ruth says: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Prophetic writing from this period (which often means highly edited versions of previous prophetic writing, since the new Judahite establishment was not friendly to continuing prophetic utterance) often reinterpreted ancient cultic critiques, directing them towards the Second Temple priesthood and the religious system of purity (meaning, exclusion) which it had set up: no foreigners, no eunuchs, no handicapped people, and so on. And yet, memories existed of a prior cult of YHWH which had not excluded them. So Third Isaiah prophesies the return of such people, and the book of Malachi inveighs against the Second Temple priesthood in a way that can only delight modern hearts critical of Catholic hierarchical behaviour!

The Wisdom literature also kept alive many elements of the old priestly vision. In fact: “Wisdom” was strongly linked to the priestly understanding of God opening up Creation from the Holy Place in the Temple: everything that is, having been brought into being by God, is shot through with, undergirded by, and orchestrated by Wisdom, seen initially as a feminine figure alongside God at Creation. The loss of the

old priestly world was seen as a loss of sight and of Wisdom, so that things could no longer be seen as they were: tending towards their glory as created reflections of God. The opposite of Wisdom was vanity or futility, with things tending towards nothing and winding down pointlessly. Naturally, this Wisdom-inflected vision of things was strongly contrasted with the Deuteronomic vision in which “asking after the things that are above or below” was strongly discouraged, and a focus on listening to the words of the Law was asserted instead. Indeed, the book of Deuteronomy insisted that at Sinai the people did not see the form of God but only heard God’s words. Nevertheless, the protests were not silenced, and in the book of Proverbs, for example, there is a long and beautiful passage (1:20-33) in which Wisdom, speaking as a goddess who has been spurned and thrown out, complains against those who have rejected her and the vision she offers.

So, the beginnings of a textual religion, but also the creation of a much more moralistic Temple structure, a much more stringent and defensive sense of identity, the development of texts arguing with each other, groups editing the texts, arguments about which were in and which were out, large swathes of the population attuned to folk-memories of much earlier and more ancient understandings of what the worship of YHWH was about. All these are in the background as we approach the period when the texts begin to be collected into something like their current form.

The Development of the “Canon”, or List of Books in Scripture

We’ve discussed how we can “catch a snapshot” of the editing process of our texts in their use of the four-thousand-year dating system, which puts us squarely at 164 BCE. However, it is worth noting that the textual evidence we have for a compilation around that time comes in the form of what is now known as the Septuagint. This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, composed in Alexandria sometime between 300 and 132 BCE. It constitutes, in fact, the oldest version we have of the Hebrew Scriptures—and it is somewhat puzzling to many

people that the Greek translation we have is more ancient than any of the surviving Hebrew texts from which it was translated.

This oddity became clearer after the discovery, beginning in 1948, of an astounding treasury of ancient manuscripts at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. The surviving Hebrew text fragments, the oldest we possess, date from somewhere between 150 BCE and 70 CE. Those that are texts of Scripture often have a remarkable similarity to the modern texts we are accustomed to. In a number of places, however, they are closer to the Septuagint than they are to the more modern Hebrew text. The Hebrew text obviously underwent considerable revision between the third century before, and a century or two after, the time of Christ. After this period, the text becomes much more stable. Its current form, now referred to as the Masoretic Text, was finally fixed in the eighth or ninth century CE.

What this means is that the last three hundred years before our era were a period of very great importance for the development of an authorised list of Scripture. From both the Septuagint and the Qumran manuscripts, it is clear that there were a large number of other texts which circulated and were regarded as extremely important during this period. Some of these we possess, in whole or in part, and some we do not. Hints from these writings can be detected throughout the New Testament, which, curiously enough, serves as a textual witness to a richer Hebrew collection than the one Rabbinic Judaism inherited. For instance, the books of the Maccabees are clearly referred to in the New Testament, as is the book of Wisdom. Neither of these made it into the Masoretic Text. The books of Jubilees and Enoch were clearly well-accepted texts from before, and sometime after, the time of Christ. In fact, the range of accepted and disputed material, as well as the groups that interpreted and fostered them in Palestine before the Judaean war and the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, were extensive indeed. Although such books were not treated as part of Torah, this was not necessarily because they were regarded as heretical. In fact, they were sometimes kept separate because they contained specialised priestly or mystical knowledge. It was only over a long period of time that the list of books now known as Tanakh (Torah, Nevi'im wa Khetuvim—the Law, the Prophets and the Writings) became an exclusive list, a period

of time which was considerably foreshortened by the catastrophe of 70 CE. Suddenly, those who hadn't accepted New Testament Judaism once again experienced the urgent need to re-found the project of a Temple-less Israel with clear ideological boundaries. The list of Scriptures that made that possible—the canon held to this day to be authoritative by Rabbinic Judaism—was only closed after the advent of New Testament Judaism, and in part in reaction to it.

Thus it is that, in a modern Christian Bible as well as in many modern translations of the Hebrew Bible, you will also find the many whole or fragmentary “deutero-canonical” books which have been held in liturgical honour since very early days by different Middle-Eastern Christian Churches. Until a generation or so ago, it would have been assumed that if there was a conflict in a text between the Masoretic Hebrew and the Septuagintal Greek, then the Hebrew should be preferred, since it was assumed to be more ancient. The Greek was suspect (and possibly dependent on Christian tampering). However, now the Greek has emerged as being in many cases a better ancient textual witness, and many of the modern translations available reflect this.

Monotheism, Creation out of Nothing, and Resurrection

One of the oddities of this scriptural process is that the book which bears witness to the final consequences of Isaiah's great monotheistic breakthrough is not in the Jewish canon. Hold with me as I take you to that breakthrough text!

Far earlier, and safely in the canon, Isaiah had testified to a God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods—that is to say, a God who is more like nothing at all than like anything that is. This is the God whose utter aliveness and vivacity is not in rivalry with anything that is. Instead, everything that is, is a function of God—depends on God. Nothing in existence is God's enemy, or even capable of being God's enemy. It is rather we, whose hearts and minds are bowed down by fear and violence, who tend to attribute to God an involvement in death and in our attempts to construct order.

The final working-out of this Isaian vision leads to a double conclusion. First, Creation is not any sort of structuring order over against some form of chaos, as it tends to be for us. What we call Creation is prior to any form of order or structure, which are purely human issues, and is over against nothing at all. Thus, for God—who is not in rivalry with anything that is, Creation comes from nothing. Furthermore, death, which is so obviously part of the human experience, to the point of structuring it entirely, is one of the things that God is not in rivalry with at all. In short, God does not know death as an enemy, merely as the parameter of our biology by which God holds us in being. In short, for God, death is something that is not.

Now, the first text we have in the Hebrew tradition, which speaks unequivocally of both Creation out of nothing and of the resurrection of the dead, comes in 2nd Maccabees. There, the mother of the Maccabee brothers urges her sons to accept martyrdom at the hands of a wicked gentile king, rather than yield to his blandishments to disobey the Law of Moses. She adduces, as her evidence, an understanding of God who brings into being out of nothing and who holds in life those who are dead:

I beg you, my child, to look at the Heaven and the Earth and see everything that is in them, and recognise that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers. (2 Maccabees 7:28-29)

It is noticeable that, as in Isaiah, it is this facing-down of a persecuting human order, a moment of victimisation, that enables the fullest witness to the inexhaustible life of God. It is also clear here that when we talk about the doctrines of "Creation" or of "Resurrection from the dead" we are not talking about processes which are somehow internal to things existing in the Universe. Instead, these are aspects of God's singular vivacity.

It was, of course, in such terms that Jesus answered the Sadducees (in Mark 12:18-27 and parallels). The Sadducees were a rather elite

group which held that there is no resurrection of the dead. They invited Jesus to comment on the issue in a manner which was clearly taken from the story of the Maccabees, the “poster boys” for popular belief in the resurrection (hence the question they pose to him about seven brothers who die, one after the other). Jesus’ reply to them—“Is not this why you are gone astray, for you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?”—brings to light the fullest consequences of monotheism—Creation out of nothing, and the deathlessness which flows from God—which we have been glimpsing throughout our exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Reading the Great “I AM” Text

The Sadducees had couched their question ironically, within a familiar Maccabean backdrop. In reply, Jesus gives as his example of the Scriptures and of the Power of God the story of Moses and the bush from the book of Exodus:

Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!

Jesus’ point is that for God, who knows not death, those people—long dead in terms of the supposed historical chronology of Moses’ life—were alive. If they were alive to God—contaminated, as it were, with God’s utter aliveness, held in presence by one whose presence is beyond time—then they are, purely and simply, alive. God’s aliveness is what counts in understanding all these things.

Let us then conclude our quick attempt at befriending the Hebrew Scriptures by reading through that wonderful text of the bush from Exodus (3:1-14), so that you can get a sense of what sort of thing the Jewish monotheism which emerges from the Biblical tradition really is:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Here is Moses, a Hebrew exile from Egypt, married to a foreigner, tending to sheep.

And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush (...)

By angel, please don't understand the modern "messenger with wings". In this ancient understanding, the word "angel" was used to refer to a particular instantiation of the Lord—the Lord as becoming locally perceptible.

...and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

Please notice the extreme delicacy of the Yahwistic theophany: because God is the creator of everything that is, and thus not in rivalry with anything that is, this is an exceedingly appropriate symbol for an appearance of YHWH—something completely altered yet left entirely the same. Something so abundantly created that its destruction doesn't destroy it.

And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

Indeed! If you want a definition of God in a nutshell, it might be this: "...this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." This is the same as "something out of nothing", which is so central to the Isaiah vision.

Notice, too, that this theophany appears as something peripheral to Moses—not something straight in his face, but something towards which he must turn aside: "When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush." Once again, the delicacy is remarkable: God has had to catch Moses' attention and has managed to

do so. It is only after catching his attention that the symbol can become an act of communication, for that is what is meant when it says that God was *now* able to call to him from out of the bush:

“Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.”

God calls Moses by his name. His is a real, personal act of communication to a particular person, not a general abstract communication of divinity. And Moses’ reply—“Here am I”—sets him up for the reversal that is about to come upon him. Whatever he meant by the “I am” who is “here” is about to be turned completely upside down by the I AM in whose face he will be given to become.

Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Moses, having drawn close and hearing something which seems to smack of familiarity, is now pushed back, a sign that the opening of the communication may be familiar. Still, the full force of it will be closer to a complete turnabout in his life than to something familiar:

And he said: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Here is the verse that Jesus quotes, and we can see, first of all, that it is already uttered within the context of a past. God is showing himself as the undergirding continuity of a living narrative, into which Moses is going to find himself called and inserted:

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Again, please notice the wonderful Yahwistic delicacy. First of all, God appeals to Moses by a visible sign, which pulls Moses in by the eyes. This sign is described as “the Angel of the Lord”. But then, as the fullness of what is being communicated becomes apparent, visibility is too excessive to be bearable and Moses hides his face:

Then the LORD said, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”

God continues God’s self-revelation, one of heartfelt interest in, involvement with, and compassion for a particular group of people on the underside of a particular political and historical situation. This is far more shocking than it appears to our accustomed ears. For a god to be tied to the interests of a people, in harmony with the structures of power and authority and close to a place of sanctuary, would have been par for the course. But here was a god disclosing love for a people not tied to place or sanctuary, indeed showing itself as independent of place, subversive of political structures, and historically active in bringing something new into being from the underside of history. It immediately becomes clear that God’s personal address to Moses is not a simple communication of fact; it is a summons. It will involve Moses’ person, and the people he is to lead, in the process of becoming a new reality:

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

Moses’ response is exceedingly reasonable: he wants assurance that there is something about himself that makes him the right person for a task like this. He wants some sort of security. And of course, God does not play along with him. In fact, God’s non-answer is in itself a miracle of delicacy:

He said, “But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.”

God’s protagonism will be enough for Moses, even though Moses can’t grasp onto it. Furthermore, the sign he asks for is only going to come in the future: it’s only at the end, when Moses has brought the people to the mountain for the covenant, that he will have the assurance that it really was YHWH working all this through him. Instead of an assurance he can grasp, something from his past or his person, Moses is going to have to settle for the assurance that he is being grasped, and that he will come to be someone he can’t yet imagine—someone received from a future he doesn’t yet possess:

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

In the ancient world, a name was a source of power, something that could be grasped onto. A “he”, even an “it”, can be talked about, conjured, wielded in the face of various enemies. Reasonably enough, if the people of Israel in Egypt are to be talked into facing down Pharaoh, they will ask Moses what trump cards he has up his sleeve.

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

This, then, is the answer of answers—and at the same time, the ultimate non-answer. For the same God who is not in rivalry with anything that is—who is proposing to bring about something new through exceedingly unpromising material, quite outside standard forms of godly behaviour—is also refusing to be a “he” or an “it”. “I AM” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be” (which may well be a less misleading translation of a very mysterious phrase) cannot be grasped, even as it is coming towards you. So, the “not-being-able-to-be-grasped” is essential to what is going on. I AM turns out to be the real protagonist, the one who brings everything into being. It is thus only in the degree to which anyone stops

attempting to be the I AM in the face of God, trying to make God an “it” or a “he”, that a person or a group can begin to receive their real “self”, their real but subsidiary “I am” as a group and as individual persons.

In the face of I AM—of pure, deliberate, unhurried protagonism, creating and moving—all of us are peripheral symptoms: “its” and “theys” being turned into a “we” and an “I” through an historical process of relationships in which we find ourselves being called into worshipping the Lord.

And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, «I AM has sent me to you.»”

What a non-starter this is as a useful instruction!

Consider its grammar. The whole point of I AM is that it is not an “it” or a “he”, so a third personal singular verb makes no sense. The only possible way that Moses will be able genuinely to communicate I AM sending him will be by himself becoming ever more visibly a living sign of I AM:

God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (Exodus 3:1-14)

God adds that the people of Israel are to interpret everything that is happening to them now, at his hands, from within God’s unitary protagonism. The name I AM or “I Will Be Who I Will Be”, is revealed as the *least* misleading name for the one who has been the protagonist of their history all along, under different names and titles. These can now be shed, as the Creator of all things, working through an experience of victimisation and bringing into being a new people, provides the paradigmatic shape of the Hebrew experience.

I hope it will not have escaped your attention how much there is in common between the basic structure of the Emmaus theophany with which we began, and this story of the bush: A bush which burns,

but is not consumed; a man who is dead, but who is yet a living, communicating act of God's unitary protagonism. In both, we see the same non-rivalry between God and everything that is. The same being-guided, through interpretation into transformation, of those who thought they were protagonists but now find themselves becoming delighted symptoms of a far richer, deeper, and more powerful protagonism.

I hope that you have some hints, now, of how the "big bad book" is anything but a weapon for moralistic thugs. It can, when held in unfrightened hands, become the playground of an awe-inspiring and wonder-producing act of communication of God.