BELONGING IN GENESIS:
BIBLICAL ISRAEL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNAL IDENTITY

by

Amanda Beckenstein Mbuvi

Department of Religion
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
Ellen F. Davis, Supervisor
___________________________
Willie James Jennings
___________________________
Joel S. Kaminsky
___________________________
Ranjana Khanna
___________________________
Anathea Portier-Young

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University

2008
ABSTRACT

BELONGING IN GENESIS:

BIBLICAL ISRAEL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNAL IDENTITY

by

Amanda Becketstein Mbuvi

Department of Religion
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Ellen F. Davis, Supervisor

___________________________
Willie James Jennings

___________________________
Joel S. Kaminsky

___________________________
Ranjana Khanna

___________________________
Anathea Portier-Young

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University

2008
Abstract

Genesis is central to both hegemonic and counterhegemonic conceptions of communal identity. Read one way, the book undergirds contemporary assumptions about the nature of communality and the categories through which it is constructed. Read another way, however, it undermines them. This project considers these two readings of Genesis, their asymmetrical approaches to the book, and the intersection between them.

Using family storytelling as an approach to biblical interpretation allows this study to hold together the constitution of the reading community and the interpretation of the biblical text. In a Eurocentric reading of Genesis, the constitution of the reading community governs engagement of the biblical text. Conversely, in the YHWH-centric reading advocated here, the biblical text governs the constitution of the reading community. This study reopens the question of what it means to be an “us” rather than leaving participation in an “us” as an (often unacknowledged) a priori condition of all interpretation. In doing so it does not deny the existence or the significance of such preexisting commitments, but rather it refuses to regard those commitments as fixed and final.

From an exegetical standpoint, this study challenges Eurocentrism by finding in Genesis a vision of communality that, in emphasizing the importance of living out the relatedness of all humans to one another and to God, holds the potential for more fruitful
relationships between communities. From a methodological standpoint, it offers a reading
of Genesis that incorporates features of the text that have been neglected by colonizing
readings and avoids the difficulties and internal inconsistencies from which they suffer.
Making use of Benedict Anderson’s account of the relationship between the imagined
community of the nation and religiously imagined communities, as well as Jonathan
Sheehan’s account of the Enlightenment Bible, this study argues that certain ways of
reading the Bible arose to help the West articulate its sense of itself and its others.
Drawing attention to the text’s reception and the way in which Eurocentric approaches
displace Jews and marginalize (the West’s) others, this project considers alternative ways
of conceptualizing the relationship between the Bible and those who call it their own.
Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iv
1. Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1
2. Reading the Self in Scripture ....................................................................................... 13
   2.1 “Ourselves as Elements in its Structure”: Overcoming Readers’ Reality .......... 15
   2.2 Adam and Eve as the Couple Next Door: Reaffirming Readers’ Reality ....... 18
      2.2.1 Sacred Literature and Secular Norms: Conflict................................. 19
      2.2.2 Sacred Literature and Secular Norms: Blurring the Boundaries .......... 23
      2.1.2.1 Mediating the Bible and Constructing Community Through Language 24
      2.1.2.2 Ways of Reading Others: Contrast, Identification and Biblical Interpretation .... 28
   2.3 Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 35
3. Family Storytelling: Constructing Community Through Story ....................... 37
   3.1 Family Storytelling ................................................................................................. 38
   3.2 The Relevance of Family Storytelling for Biblical Scholarship ................. 46
   3.3 Story and Biology in the Making of the Family .............................................. 54
   3.4 Narrative and the Construction of Identity in the Bible and Beyond ....... 58
   3.5 Reading Genesis as Family Narrative .............................................................. 66
      3.5.1 Genealogy as Family Story ........................................................................ 66
      3.5.2 Interpretive Implications ............................................................................. 76
4. Recreating Family ......................................................................................................... 82
   4.1 Creating Family: Kinship in the Cosmos ......................................................... 85
   4.2 Recreating Family: Generation and Degeneration ....................................... 92
   4.3 Reading Family: Genesis as Family Narrative .............................................. 115
5. Peoplehood ................................................................................................................... 118
5.1 A People Without A Profane History ......................................................... 120
5.2 Noah’s Bad Seed: A Curse and its Aftermath ............................................. 130
  5.2.1 The Social Ladder and the Family Tree ............................................. 132
  5.2.2 Configuring Collectivity .................................................................. 147
  5.2.3 The Aftermath of Noah’s Curse ....................................................... 167
5.3 The Family Business: From Noah’s Curse to Abra(ha)m’s Blessing .......... 194

6. Fruitfulness .............................................................................................. 197
  6.1 The Other Patriarch ............................................................................ 198

6.2 Mother Outsider .................................................................................... 206
  6.2.1 An Ambiguous Narrative .............................................................. 207
  6.2.2 Trible’s Text of Terror ................................................................. 212
  6.2.3 Weems’ Text of Succor ............................................................... 240
  6.2.4 Hagar and Sarai Beyond Black and White ..................................... 247

6.3 Imitation of Covenant Life ..................................................................... 256

6.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................. 275

7. The Genesis of the Western Reader: Nationalism, Theology, and Culture ........................................................................................................ 280
  7.1 Translating Biblical Authority .............................................................. 285

7.2 Reimagining Scripture for a Reimagined Community ............................. 290
  7.2.1 The Philological Bible: “From Text to Document” ............................ 290
  7.2.2 The Pedagogical Bible: Universalizing Scripture ............................. 291
  7.2.3 The Poetic Bible: Identification and the Politics of National Literature . 293
  7.2.4 The Historical Bible: Sacrality and Objectivity ............................... 297
7.3 The Cultural Bible: We Who Are Heirs of Sarah and Abraham by Flesh and Spirit ................................................................. 307
7.4 Eurocentrism and the Individual Scholar............................................. 310

8. Postscript................................................................................................. 317
Bibliography ............................................................................................... 323
Biography..................................................................................................... 333
A Note on Terminology and Translation

“Biblical Israel” refers to the textual construction. “Ancient Israel” refers to the people in antiquity. The modern state of Israel is always named accordingly. In my own usage (but not necessarily that of my sources), “Israel” without an identifying modifier refers to the concept of Israel, that which is invoked by the many Israels mentioned here but not equivalent to any of them. (On occasion, I also use “Israel” without a modifier when I have just referred to biblical Israel and do not wish to be overly repetitive.)

In keeping with the Jewish tradition of not uttering the divine name, it appears without vowels here. I have also devocalized it when citing sources in which it originally appeared with vowels.

The translations from Hebrew are generally my own except as indicated. In some instances I note that I have made use of the translation made by Everett Fox (The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes [Schocken Bible 1; New York: Schocken, 1997]).
Acknowledgements

As a mentor and an adviser Ellen Davis has gone above and beyond the call of duty, giving herself abundantly to my work and me. I am deeply grateful for the way that she has seen me through the challenges of the last several years. Willie Jennings has been tireless in sharing his uncommon wisdom with me. I regret that his name does not appear on these pages in proportion to his influence on my thinking. From these two, and from all my teachers and colleagues, I have learned a great deal. I also appreciate those who were never officially my teachers, but who have taught and encouraged me nevertheless, especially Jay Carter and Amy-Laura Hall. Special thanks are due to Gay Trotter and Diane Decker, whose help has made such a difference to me.

Rabbi Steven Sager and the congregation at Beth El Synagogue have deepened my understanding of and love for Jewish community. They have contributed so much to whatever insight this study attains on that score. Thanks also to my grandparents Irv and Rae Beckenstein for bequeathing to me such a rich legacy, and to my Aunt Judie and my cousins Carol and Barbara for helping me lay hold of it.

Other communities that have nourished, sustained, and inspired me through this process include Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church, the Fund for Theological Education, the University Scholars, the Duke Symphony Orchestra, Duke Organizing, and the unofficial community of mothers that welcomed me so readily when my son was born. Thanks especially to Rev. William C. Turner, Rabbi Michael Goldman, Sharon

x
Watson Fluker, Tori Lodewick, Harry Davidson, Eleanor Richardson, Kristina de los Santos, Sarah Musser, Laura Grattan, Christian Peele, Jane Redmont, Eric Mortensen, my students at Guilford College, and everyone who prayed.

I would like to express my ongoing gratitude to those who helped me get to this point. That includes mentors Virginia Curtis, Quinn Eli, Linda-Susan Beard, Mark Potter, Alex Anderson, and Craig Keener. The love and support of my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins have made so many things possible. In particular, my parents, Myron and Charlotte Beckenstein, have always been there for me. And last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my very patient son Elijah and my husband Andrew Mūtūa, who has shared with me every step of this journey and held me up until I felt like I had wings.
1. Introduction

What distinguishes political opposition today--racial or otherwise--is its insistence on identifying itself and speaking for itself, its determined demand for the transformation of the social structure, its refusal of the ‘common sense’ understandings which the hegemonic order imposes. Nowhere is this refusal of ‘common sense’ more needed, or more imperiled, than in our understanding of racism.¹

--Michael Omi and Howard Winant

I am convinced that in every place the Bible is pushing us to think in ways that do not come naturally.²

--Ellen Davis

Omi and Winant suggest that resisting racism goes beyond simply taking a stance against its manifestations. Rather, “political opposition today” confronts racism at its roots: the terms in which it conceives identity and the social structures through which it enacts this vision. In other words, such resistance engages racism as a problem deriving from the typical ways in which identity is thought and lived out, not one confined to a few renegade people or institutions. It rejects the “common sense” that assumes that The Way Things Are is the only way they can be. As developed by Antonio Gramsci and invoked by Omi and Winant, “common sense” refers to ways of thinking that are so pervasive as to be invisible and so deeply ingrained as to appear incontestable, requiring (or admitting) no discussion. In their opinion, communal identity represents the greatest stronghold of this outlook.


Davis suggests that the Bible disturbs patterns of thought that “the hegemonic order” presents as natural. This disruptive power means that it can serve as a resource for social change in the way described by Omi and Winant. It can frame political opposition that recasts debate rather than simply entering into it, reimagining communality rather than renegotiating extant understandings of it.

However, such a characterization of the Bible seems to contradict its long history in the service of common sense. For example, documents describing the promulgation of colonialism in Africa and slavery in the Americas attest to the role of biblical interpretation in the construction and maintenance of (an earlier version of) the hegemonic order. The conflict between Davis’ remark and this history suggests that the Bible represents an important vantage point from which to consider communal identity. In particular, the book of Genesis proves central to both hegemonic and counterhegemonic perspectives. Read one way, Genesis offers theological grounding for the idea that human existence is inherently circumscribed by such categories as race, ethnicity, and nationality. Read another way, however, it undermines those categories and offers an alternative perspective on communal identity. This study will argue that modern readings of Genesis generally reconfigure the book to conform to common sense but that, apart from this process, it offers a radically different vision.

Israelite identity attracts considerable interest because of the various ways in which it is paradigmatic for other identities. Biblical Israel functions as an important reference point for many people, whether they are asking what it means to be a Jew, what it means to be a Christian, or what it means to be an heir of Western Civilization, to name only a few examples. It is not without significance that biblical Israel gave rise to three such different loci of identification. In part, this development reflects a tension already
present within biblical Israel, a group that could be described in “national” terms (“Israelites,” as opposed to “Jebusites” or “Hittites”) or in theological terms (“the people among whom YHWH dwells”).

Studies of Israelite identity often privilege the “national” characterization of Israel, viewing the theological characterization as its byproduct. However, this study follows Jon Levenson in insisting that Israel’s religion should not be understood as an outgrowth of its history, but rather that Israel’s history should be understood as an outgrowth of its religion. This claim concerns logical, not historical, priority. Levenson attaches particular importance to the fact that the biblical depiction of Israel’s history presents the promise to Abra(ha)m as predating an Israelite people, “making the theology earlier than the people”3 and making it necessary always to consider the people in relation to God. In biblical perspective, Israel begins not with a people and their experience, but with the call of God.

Historical examinations of Israelite identity attempt a faithful rendering of the developments experienced by ancient Israelites, but in the process, they neutralize the text’s subversion of the received categories of identity by restoring the “national” to prominence. While such studies often yield important insights, their need to situate the biblical texts historically inevitably leads them to disregard the Bible’s making the “national” and the cultural contingent on the theological. Instead, they proceed from the opposite assumption: that some sort of “national,” cultural, or ethnic identity was in place prior to the opening words of Genesis and provides the foundation for understanding that

text. Although this study wants to avoid anachronism and forcing the biblical texts into the categories of (post)modernity, it also wants to take seriously the Bible’s intervention into the construction of identity.

This study reverses a long-standing trend in biblical studies by taking Genesis as the starting point for Israel’s story, and doing so because of a changed approach to the text, not a reconsideration of the history. At issue is not so much what happened as how it should be understood, the meaning of history and not its details. It is significant that Levenson’s perspective on Israelite identity grows from his Jewish commitment to canon. In biblical studies, history frequently functions as the default paradigm. Many assume that explaining the features of a text by reference to the experience of the people involved in its production/transmission serves as a necessary aspect of any study. The history of ancient Israel/Judah/Yehud thus becomes the story into which the biblical texts fit, the framing narrative in light of which scholars encounter them as meaningful. But this choice is not obvious. One may frame the text another way, or, like Levenson, let the text itself function as part of a frame. This study attributes considerable significance to the placement of Genesis at the head of the biblical canon(s). While it is interesting to consider the circumstances underlying such a text, it is also important to appreciate the book as a way of framing Israel’s story and not simply an episode in it.

This insistence on beginning with Genesis should not be taken as reflecting the naive assumption that readers can come to the text as blank slates. Rather, it implies that the community is (re)created through the (re)telling of its foundational stories. Neither should this study’s emphasis on the text’s role in governing this process be taken as reflecting a reification of its meaning. As understood here, the act of reading involves a certain circularity. This study gives priority to the divine word, but the word does its
work as it is received. Observing that the biblical text has been conflated with the common sense of one community of readers (Western Civilization), displacing another such community (Jews), this study recognizes that the question of how the community around the text is constituted cannot be separated from the reading of the text itself.

Genesis depicts Israel as, so to speak, arriving late to its own story. The book repeatedly employs a gesture of deferral. Creation postpones a focus on Israel, coming before any form of election. The centrality of family in Genesis puts off a focus on “nations,” although they remain within view. The recurrence of geographical displacement delays the existence of a settled, stable community. Together, creation, family, and displacement present identity as something contingent and in progress. If, as Steven Grosby argues, “nationality” consists especially of “the belief in the existence of a designated trans-local territory which ‘belongs to’ a specific trans-tribal/clan/city-kingdom people,” then Genesis anticipates but systematically withholds nationality from Israel. The book concludes with Israel not yet a people, not yet in its place.

It is significant that Grosby has to look to the Deuteronomic literature to demonstrate Israel’s status as a nation. Even a study like Mark Brett’s *Genesis and the Politics of Procreation* reads Genesis through the lens of later Israelite/Judean history, juxtaposing it with Ezra-Nehemiah. Genesis proves a decidedly unsuitable starting point for a modern study of identity because it lacks those features moderns consider

---

4 This formulation should not be understood as implying that “Western Civilization” and “Jews” are mutually exclusive categories. The two have a complex and contradictory relationship.


6 In using the phrase “later Israelite/Judean history,” I am not making a claim about the historicity of Genesis, but rather referencing Israel’s story from a narrative/canonical point of view.
most important to community self-definition. Accordingly, studies that do work with
Genesis generally recontextualize it and import those elements from elsewhere. While
such a perspective is helpful for thinking about how Genesis interacts with and nuances
an established national or ethnic identity, it does not engage the ways that Genesis
subverts such an identity precisely through its primacy and through its lacks.

The second chapter of this study considers the contradiction between, on the one
hand, the Bible’s prominence in the formation and maintenance of the common sense of
communal identity, and, on the other hand, the subversive potential that Davis and others
find in it. It identifies two divergent approaches to the interpretation of Genesis
coexisting in the pages of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, each with different implications for
communal identity. One of Auerbach’s chapters develops a YHWH-centric approach that
takes certain features of the biblical text to suggest that the Bible pushes to overcome its
readers’ reality. From this perspective, Genesis depicts identity as contingent. Auerbach
describes the Bible’s universal scope and particular focus on Israel as challenging Gentile
readers, pressing them to situate their histories within its all-encompassing structure.
Likewise, Jon Levenson describes the shape of Genesis as challenging Israel. He attaches
special importance to the fact that the promise to Abra(ha)m predated an Israelite people,
“making the theology earlier than the people”7 and making it necessary always to
consider the people in relation to God. Accordingly, “Israel exists only because of God’s
choice, and apart from God, it has no existence at all. . . . Israel has no profane history,
only a sacred history.”8

---

In sharp contrast, another chapter of *Mimesis* adopts what might be termed a Eurocentric approach, one that takes the West’s common sense as its starting point and reads the Bible as reinforcing that reality. Auerbach’s discussion of the twelfth-century French Christmas play *Mystère d’Adam* demonstrates the way in which a reworking of the Adam and Eve story functions to organize and transform a non-European “area” into a fundamentally European construct, to paraphrase V. Y. Mudimbe’s definition of colonialism. This appropriation precludes the identity crisis the Bible might otherwise provoke, ensuring that Gentile readers no longer have to contend with the problem posed by the centrality of Israel within the Bible’s universal history.

The third chapter of this study advances a constructive proposal that attempts to recover Bible reading as a transformative undertaking and thereby to find in Genesis a challenge to the common sense of communal identity. It introduces family storytelling as a rubric for biblical interpretation. Identifying Genesis as a family narrative brings to bear the insights of scholarly literature specially attuned to the ways narrative and the act of storytelling function to define and create a community. While recognizing the salience of family in both the biblical texts and the societies that produced them, biblical scholarship has stopped just short of reading biblical texts as family narratives. However, the study of family storytelling has a great deal in common with the study of the Bible, often resembling established approaches in biblical studies. Accordingly, this study will use that literature in concert with biblical scholarship to engage the construction of communal identity in Genesis and its appropriation by readers. Such an approach has the advantage of highlighting the role of identification in biblical interpretation. It cultivates sensitivities

---

that can be used to decolonize the biblical text, clarifying Eurocentric approaches and facilitating the emergence of a YHWH-centric reading of Genesis. As a constructive proposal, however, its response to the Eurocentric reconfiguration of the Bible does not claim to provide “the” model for others to follow. The shape of this study reflects its particular concerns; other concerns may be addressed in another equally or more profitable way.

The exegetical portion of this study begins with an observation about the way in which certain exegetical decisions shape perceptions of the theological significance of Genesis, finding that dominant approaches to the book constitute another reason why its distinctive view of communality becomes obscured. Reading communal identity in the Bible depends not only on whether or not one begins with Genesis, but also on how one begins with Genesis and where in Genesis one begins. In contrast to the tendency to bracket the first eleven chapters as constituting a preface to the book rather than its starting point, this study emphasizes their foundational role. Highlighting the importance of reading the book as a continuous, though stylistically diverse whole, it also regards the genealogies and narratives in Genesis as inextricably intertwined.

Devoting special attention to the first nine chapters of Genesis, the fourth chapter argues that the theme of kinship/family constitutes the centerpiece of the book’s presentation of communal identity. A reluctance to accept the book’s expansive view has diminished the salience of this theme, however. Genesis uses kinship language in ways that go well beyond the understanding of family as a biologically affiliated group of people in a nuclear or slightly larger unit. However, many scholars regard aspects of biblical usage that do not conform to this common sense as having no substantive connection to the notion of family. Together, the reductionist approach to family and the
piecemeal approach to the book have ensured that, as Claus Westermann observes, “there is scarcely ever any discussion of the meaning of the genealogies for the whole.” This chapter enters into such a discussion.

The fifth chapter deals with Gen 9:18-12:7, a pivotal portion of the book (and the Bible) that has been central to both YHWH-centric and Eurocentric constructions of communality. Using Levenson’s essay “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism” as a point of entry, it identifies confrontation between divergent approaches to communal identity as a hermeneutical issue mirrored in the text itself. Building on the work of the previous chapter, it continues to highlight the theological significance of the genealogies, arguing that they should not be dismissed as a superficial feature of the text or as a reflection of the biblical writers’ lack of sophistication. The use of genealogy to organize the world’s peoples has ethical implications, functioning in Genesis as part of a subversive process of community formation. However, the neglect of the rubric of family and its central role in Genesis has blunted this impact, enabling the biblical text to be taken up as an expression of modern constructions of communality.

In particular, the book’s use of a family tree has been subsumed under the modern emphasis on a social ladder. As explicated by Kenan Malik, the idea of the social ladder relates the overt racial hierarchies frequently articulated in the past to the more positive statements about human difference that now hold sway. Together with this concept, Benedict Anderson’s account of the origin and spread of nationalism helps clarify the contours of the currently regnant paradigm of communal identity and the ways that it shapes biblical interpretation, allowing the differences between that perspective on human diversity and the one that emerges in Gen 1-12:7 to become apparent.
The story of the Curse of Ham encapsulates the way in which Genesis has been read as an account of the origins of racial difference as understood by moderns. Although that reading owes more to externally arising ideas than to the text itself, Genesis does trace the hierarchies that characterize human relationships to that episode. Noah’s cursing of his grandson Canaan marks a turning point in the biblical story, ordaining a new mode of relationship among his descendants. Subsequently, this new dynamic develops into a powerful alternative to the rubric of family, reaching a climactic point in the confrontation over the Tower of Babel in Gen 11:1-9. These events provide the immediate context for the call of Abram in Gen 12:1-7, helping clarify the meaning of that event.

The sixth chapter uses Isaac’s speech in naming a well (Gen 26:22) as a vantage point from which to consider the family of Abraham, exploring the way in which the book promotes its own version of what Musa Dube calls “liberating interdependence.” Discussions of this part of Genesis tend to focus on connections expressed in vertical relationships of descent and on conflicts expressed in lateral relationships of difference. However, the book does not construct its family of focus through such neat dichotomies of inside and outside. Instead, it assigns great importance to connections across lateral relationships of difference. When considered from this perspective, certain aspects of these texts that have often been dismissed as haphazard emerge as very much a part of a larger narrative movement.

The seventh chapter completes the argument by considering the way in which the Eurocentric exegetical tendencies identified here converge. Using Jonathan Sheehan’s account of the Enlightenment Bible, it develops an analysis of the current moment in
Sheehan argues that the problem of identification with biblical Israel has exercised a defining influence over academic biblical studies, driving the development of its now characteristic methods. He explains that the Bible played a central role in the development of contemporary assumptions about identity, rather than serving as just another site for their application. Nevertheless, the resulting construction remains Eurocentric; it arises not from the biblical texts, but rather alongside them. In contrast to the Patristic view that saw the Bible provoking an identity crisis in its readers because of its tendency to create its own norms, the Enlightenment view saw the Bible as a means to resolve the identity crisis precipitated by shifting social tides. Israel’s profane history has been constructed as a template for narrating the story of the West (or its constituent parts). As a result, concerns about communal identity are never far from biblical scholarship, even when it claims to be most disinterested. The tendency to prioritize biblical Israel’s “national” identity over its theological identity reflects the way in which the nation has been conceived as a way to consolidate the identity of the Western reader and articulate the Bible’s relevance to a post-Christian Christendom.

This process of reconceiving biblical interpretation and rereading Genesis has more relevance than just its potential to yield a fresh perspective not governed by the common sense of communal identity. Such an endeavor renegotiates the path along which that common sense developed, undermining the considerable authority that it enjoys by demonstrating that its assumptions are not self-evident and universal. In this way, this study seeks to pose a more effective challenge to the hegemonic order than
methods of resistance that focus dissent on its conclusions while continuing to accept its premises.
2. Reading the Self in Scripture

For obviously, under all that he says, lie three convictions: that wealth is the greatest good, and the more of it the better . . . ; that the good things of life are simply a superfluity of articles of the best quality and the opportunity to enjoy them in the most vulgar manner possible; and that, in this sense, everyone quite naturally acts for his own material advantage. Yet withal he himself is doubtless only a small or middling man, who looks upon the truly rich with honest awe. Thus the good fellow describes not only Fortunata, Trimalchio, and their guests, but without being aware of it, himself.1

--Erich Auerbach

In this excerpt, Auerbach explains that a character reveals himself through his description of others. The categories he employs in viewing them and the assumptions he makes in assessing them convey information about his own perspective on the world and position in it, even as he directs attention away from himself by focusing exclusively on others. In a similar way, biblical interpretation tells a story not only about the biblical text, but also about the readers who engage it, even when those readers are only aware of describing the text.

For this reason, a work such as Auerbach’s Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, which examines both the biblical text itself and the formation of (one of) the context(s) in which it is read, proves particularly illuminating. The book chronicles not only a literary history, but also a conceptual one, relating mimesis to the understandings of reality that undergird it. As Auerbach explains, the work engages “the European way of seeing and representing reality.”2 Accordingly, in

2 Auerbach, Mimesis, 521.
the course of tracing the development of Western literature, it explores emerging and competing conceptions of space, time, and the nature of reality, and it ventures into the construction of the West itself. Of particular relevance for the present study, it both describes and reflects the complicated role that the Bible and Christianity play in this construction. Auerbach devotes considerable attention to biblical mimesis, to the Christian theological reflection proceeding from scripture, and to their impact on “Western literature.”

Auerbach deals with Genesis in two very different chapters advancing contradictory perspectives on the relationship between the Bible and its readers. “Odysseus’ Scar,” the well-known comparison of biblical and Homeric storytelling that begins Mimesis, engages the Bible directly, describing it as a text that seeks to “overcome our reality.” A subsequent chapter, “Adam and Eve,” focuses on Mystère d’Adam, a twelfth-century French Christmas play based on the biblical story. In Auerbach’s reading of this play, the biblical text merges with and reinforces its readers’ reality. Although such an occurrence stands in the sharpest contrast to the findings of “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach does not remark on it. This lacuna in his analysis proves as revealing as his explicit statements. Accordingly, through its perceptiveness and through its blindness, through its argumentation and through its presuppositions, Mimesis offers considerable insight into both the formation of the context in which modern biblical scholars operate and the perspectives and assumptions that govern the ways they read the biblical texts.

An examination of Mimesis helps lay the groundwork for the present study because the book both describes and demonstrates the complex ways in which Bible reading is involved in identity formation, providing a clear exposition/illustration of the

---

3 Auerbach, Mimesis, 15.
tension between dominant reading strategies and certain tendencies in the text.

Considered together, “Odysseus’ Scar” and “Adam and Eve” illustrate the fundamental contrast that underlies this study: readers have long observed that, rather than abiding by externally established norms, the Bible creates its own conceptual framework that renders all human realities contingent, including communal identity; however, the currently regnant scholarly approach to biblical interpretation interprets the text in accordance with a preexisting conceptual framework that corresponds to and enacts a certain understanding of communal identity.

2.1 “Ourselves as Elements in its Structure”: Overcoming Readers’ Reality

In “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach identifies a defining characteristic of biblical literature. He writes, “far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the Biblical narrative] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”4 In his view, the Homeric poems situate themselves within an externally existing history and make no claims upon other, parallel histories. They provide a diversion, taking place in a story world that may be visited by the reader without impinging on his or her real world. In contrast, the Bible sets itself up as the center of all history. Auerbach explains,

The Old Testament . . . presents universal history: it begins with the beginning of time, with the creation of the world, and will end with the Last Days, the fulfilling of the Covenant, with which the world will come to an end. Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world, or at least everything that touches upon the history of the Jews, must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan . . . .5

4 Auerbach, Mimesis, 15.
5 Auerbach, Mimesis, 16.
Since the Bible’s “universal history” claims to provide the overarching structure into which everything must fit, Auerbach therefore concludes that “interpretation in a determined direction becomes a general method of comprehending reality.”  

Susan Handelman articulates a similar view of the Bible as a framework that uniquely encompasses reality. In *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, she contrasts Greek and Hebraic understandings of language, divine encounter, and the relationship of words to reality (in a somewhat overstated way). She argues that the rabbis considered words to be constitutive of reality, a perspective that finds its supreme illustration in the biblical creation story. Handelman emphasizes a sharp break with “the classical tradition of Western metaphysics” in the presentation of the natural world as contingent upon the divine word.  

*Genesis* leaves no room for any reality that stands outside or above God’s creative word, including any laws of nature or premises of thought. Handelman builds on Auerbach, highlighting an important epistemological consequence of this primacy of the divine word: understanding the world begins not with observation of the world, but rather with biblical interpretation. The Book of Books takes priority over the Book of Nature, the particular (word of God) over the universal (independently existing foundational principles).

---

6 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 16.

7 Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1982), 27. This is not a historical argument that the biblical creation story deliberately engages Greek philosophy, but rather the type of move Handelman describes as characteristic of rabbinic thought—creating conversation that disregards the temporal distance between partners, instead addressing them all as contemporaries of one another and of oneself. The move could also be interpreted as reading the Bible with the rabbis, who did interact directly with “the classical tradition of Western metaphysics.”
While Handelman highlights Genesis’ implications for the contingency of reality, Jon Levenson highlights its implications for the contingency of identity. In his essay “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” he attaches special importance to the fact that the promise to Abram/Abraham predated an Israelite people, “making the theology earlier than the people”\textsuperscript{8} and making it necessary always to consider the people in relation to God. Accordingly, “Israel exists only because of God’s choice, and apart from God, it has no existence at all. . . . Israel has no profane history, only a sacred history. . . .”\textsuperscript{9} To draw Levenson into closer conversation with Handelman, we could say that just as she describes the divine word as the starting point for epistemology, he describes it as the starting point for identity. Israel begins not with a people and their experience, but with the call of God.

As its title indicates, Levenson’s essay examines the relationship between the universal and the particular strands in the Hebrew Bible. The struggle to reconcile these tendencies plays a significant role in \textit{Mimesis} (and the literature it discusses) as well, despite never receiving direct attention there. Although the tension will not make itself felt in Auerbach’s work for some time yet, the problem emerges as early as “Odysseus’ Scar.” Auerbach has described the Bible as presenting a “universal history” spanning the creation of the world to the Last Days. It quite naturally follows that “Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world . . . must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.” However, in the course of articulating this, Auerbach corrects himself and specifies, “at least everything that touches upon the history of the Jews.”

---


hand, he recognizes the Bible’s scope as unrelentingly universal, but on the other hand, he also recognizes its stubbornly particular focus on (the people who eventually became) the Jews. The Bible refuses to allow for any reality outside its own, so that all people must find their place in its history, yet it assigns pride of place unmistakably to Israel. Accordingly, the Bible pushes its readers to find a way to articulate themselves in relation to biblical Israel and connect their stories to Israel’s own. This problem emerges more forcefully in relation to the next chapter to be discussed here, in which Auerbach moves into a more direct consideration of the Bible’s impact on the West.

2.2 Adam and Eve as the Couple Next Door: Reaffirming Readers’ Reality

Auerbach’s chapter “Adam and Eve,” focusing primarily on the twelfth-century Christmas play Mystère d’Adam, shows “interpretation in a determined direction” at work. However, the discussion reveals a Bible that does not so much overcome the reality of its readers as reflect that reality back to them and imbue it with divine sanction. This permutation reflects the different undertakings of the two chapters: in “Odysseus’ Scar” Auerbach examines the Bible itself, while in “Adam and Eve” he examines the Bible as mediated to later “Western” audiences. The domineering Bible of “Odysseus’ Scar” is made to negotiate with its readers’ reality in “Adam and Eve,” so that the two realities confer authority upon one another as they become ever more indissolubly linked. “Adam and Eve” teems with contradiction between Auerbach’s articulations of biblical and Christian theological principles and of the operations of the texts that mediate the Bible to a popular audience. That this tension goes unremarked reveals Auerbach’s own investment in this merger.

10 I am using the designation “readers” loosely, referring to audience more generally rather than those who specifically encounter the text by reading.
2.2.1 Sacred Literature and Secular Norms: Conflict

Auerbach characterizes the excerpt from the Mystère d’Adam under discussion (the events surrounding Adam and Eve’s eating the forbidden fruit) in this way:

The episode which is here presented to us in dramatic form is the starting point of the Christian drama of redemption, and hence is a subject of the utmost importance and the utmost sublimity from the point of view of the author and his audience. However, the presentation aims to be popular. The ancient and sublime occurrence is to become immediate and present; it is to be a current event which could happen at any time, which every listener can imagine and is familiar with; it is to strike deep roots in the mind and the emotions of any random French contemporary. Adam talks and acts in a manner any member of the audience is accustomed to from his own or his neighbor’s house; things would go exactly the same way in any townsman’s home or on any farm where an upright but not very brilliant husband was tempted into a foolish and fateful act by his vain and ambitious wife who had been deceived by an unscrupulous swindler. The dialogue between Adam and Eve--this first man-woman dialogue of universal historical import--is turned into a scene of simplest everyday reality. Sublime as it is, it becomes a scene in simple, low style.¹¹

The relationship between the sublime and the low, both in literary style and more generally understood, serves as one of the central issues in “Adam and Eve,” and in Mimesis as a whole. Auerbach argues that “antique theory” had mandated a strict separation between elevated and low styles (sermo gravis or sublimis and sermo remissus or humilis). He frequently relates this separation of styles to the even more deeply rooted separation of social classes.¹² However, “In the world of Christianity... the two are merged, especially in Christ’s Incarnation and Passion, which realize and combine sublimitas and humilitas in overwhelming measure.”¹³ Earlier in Mimesis, Auerbach introduced this shift in terms of literary style, discussing the construction of the gospels. His language here, comparing “antique [rhetorical] theory” with Christian doctrine,

¹¹ Auerbach, Mimesis, 151.
¹² E.g., Auerbach, Mimesis, 121, 139.
¹³ Auerbach, Mimesis, 151.
reflects his view of the Bible as having its style informed by the view of reality it presents. Christian theology has direct stylistic implications, a point Auerbach traces back to the Church Fathers, particularly Augustine.\(^{14}\)

Auerbach finds in Christ’s Incarnation and Passion the basis for literary works that engage “subject[s] of the utmost importance and the utmost sublimity” in a style designed to resonate with a popular audience, in contrast to the otherwise more common assumption that a “sublime” subject should be treated in an elevated style. If the Most High God could assume a human form to become known to humanity, an exalted theme could justly be presented in simple rather than elevated language. Indeed, such an approach would be the best way to proceed, as it taps into something deep in the nature of reality. As Auerbach explains in an earlier part of the book,

\[
\text{That the King of Kings was treated as a low criminal, that he was mocked, spat upon, whipped, and nailed to the cross--that story no sooner comes to dominate the consciousness of the people than it completely destroys the aesthetics of the separation of styles; it engenders a new elevated style, which does not scorn everyday life and which is ready to absorb the sensorily realistic, even the ugly, the undignified, the physically base. Or--if anyone prefers to have it the other way around--a new sermo humilis is born, a low style, such as would properly only be applicable to comedy, but which now reaches out far beyond its original domain, and encroaches upon the deepest and the highest, the sublime and the eternal.}\(^{15}\)
\]

On a fundamental level, then, the Christian gospel explodes the boundaries erected between the exalted and the scorned, whether subjects, aspects of experience, or groups of people. It therefore produces a certain dissonance in people steeped in the conventions that establish and maintain those boundaries. However, an awareness of the discrepancy between dominant convention and the implications of the Christian story does not

\(^{14}\) Auerbach, \textit{Mimesis}, 153-4.  
\(^{15}\) Auerbach, \textit{Mimesis}, 72.
guarantee a smooth or simple resolution. Auerbach observes a certain ambivalence in the Church Fathers, who felt the conflict keenly even as they recognized “the true and distinctive greatness of Holy Scripture”:

. . . the question of style became really acute when the spread of Christianity exposed Holy Scripture, and Christian literature in general, to the aesthetic criticism of highly educated pagans. They were horrified at the claim that the highest truths were contained in writings composed in a language to their minds impossibly uncivilized and in total ignorance of the stylistic categories. This criticism did not go unheeded, and the Fathers were generally far more concerned with the traditional standards of classical style than were the earliest Christian documents. But the same criticism also opened their eyes to the true and distinctive greatness of Holy Scripture—namely, that it had created an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the everyday and the low were included, not excluded, so that, in style as in content, it directly connected the lowest with the highest.  

In general, the discussion of Christ’s Incarnation and Passion builds toward a reversal of conventional hierarchies and a rejection of prevailing ideas about what is great, what is exalted, and what is civilized. Auerbach highlights the Church Fathers’ insistence that the Bible could not rightly be measured against existing norms because it undertook to create its own norms. And because these norms located sublimity in humility, they readily embraced that which had hitherto been despised. In the course of its dissemination, scripture presents its recipients with the challenge of reconciling the deeply ingrained dictates of social convention with authoritative writings that often display little regard for them. In other words, it triggers an identity crisis, not only effacing the conventional distinctions that provide the most basic understanding of everyone’s and everything’s proper place, but also imposing its own conception of human reality.

Auerbach depicts a relationship between ideas about the Bible’s style and ideas about its accessibility. Rather than adopting an elevated style as a means of designating an elite audience, the Bible utilizes a different principle of selectivity. The Church Fathers find great significance in Jesus’s saying, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Matt 11:25 KJV; cf. Luke 10:21). Again, a reversal of conventional hierarchy is at work and a new standard is instituted. When it comes to comprehending difficult passages of scripture, the elite may be at a disadvantage while the humble possess privilege; rather than an elite education, faith and purity of heart are the guarantee of success in biblical interpretation. Success in biblical interpretation also has a distinctive meaning. Auerbach summarizes his examination of the Church Fathers in this way:

Several thoughts in complex interdependence are expressed in these passages: that Holy Scripture favors those whose hearts are simple and filled with faith; that such a heart is a prerequisite to “sharing” in it, for sharing and not a purely rational understanding is what it seeks to offer; that the occult and obscure elements it contains are likewise not couched in an “elevated style” (eloquio superbo) but in simple words, so that anyone can ascend quasi gradatim from the simple to the sublime and divine, or, as Augustine puts it in the Confessions, that one must read it as a child would. . . . And the idea that it differs in all these respects from the great secular writers of antiquity is likewise one that survived all through the Middle Ages.17

Auerbach’s conclusion is clear: in both its composition and its conception of the act of reading, scripture operates in accordance with norms decidedly different from those employed by “secular” literature.18

17 Auerbach, Mimesis, 155.
18 “Reading” is again used loosely to designate a wide variety of ways in which people may encounter the text.
2.2.2 Sacred Literature and Secular Norms: Blurring the Boundaries

Auerbach’s careful analysis of the differences between biblical and “secular” literature does not translate into a sensitivity to the ways that a text such as the Mystère d’Adam constitutes a kind of hybrid, a “secular” presentation of biblical stories. Instead, he places the Mystère d’Adam wholly within the category of Christian literature, ignoring the ways it diverges from the characteristics he attributes to this type and more closely resembles the “secular.” This lack of precision represents more than a gap in his discussion. In failing to distinguish between the play and the biblical story it mediates, so that the two speak with the one voice of “common sense,” Auerbach repeats a move foundational to the construction of (the idea of) the West.19

In his discussion, Auerbach both distinguishes between and relates “ethico-theological” categories and “aesthetico-stylistic” ones.20 This distinction is useful for evaluating the Mystère d’Adam as Christian literature. In general, although the “aesthetico-stylistic” implications of the doctrines of Incarnation and Passion play out in the Mystère d’Adam, the “ethico-theological” ones do not. As reflected in the description of the play quoted above, Auerbach frequently draws parallels between the Genesis story as presented in Mystère d’Adam and the everyday life of the play’s original audience. Some of his language on that point bears repeating. He writes, “the ancient and sublime occurrence is to become immediate and present; it is to be a current event which could happen at any time, which every listener can imagine and is familiar with; it is to strike deep roots in the mind and the emotions of any random French contemporary.” Note that

---

19 This point will be developed more fully in the seventh chapter.
20 Auerbach, Mimesis, 153.
the “listener” is already identified as French. Indeed, the listener’s sharing “the mind and the emotions of any random French contemporary” becomes his (or her?) point of connection with “the ancient and sublime occurrence.” Adam and Eve become the couple next door. In Auerbach’s terms, theirs is “a scene of simplest everyday reality.” The Mystère d’Adam achieves “simple, low style” not only through its use of one kind of language rather than another, but also through its appeal to the norms and standards most familiar to a “popular” audience. In this it makes a decisive departure from the idea of scripture as “overwhelming its readers’ reality,” upsetting prevailing hierarchies, and establishing its own norms.

2.1.2.1 Mediating the Bible and Constructing Community Through Language

Auerbach’s summary of the play is both useful and revealing:

The Fall, which occupies the greater part of it (after which there is still room for the murder of Abel and the procession of the prophets announcing Christ’s coming), begins with an unsuccessful attempt by the Devil to lead Adam astray. The Devil then approaches Eve, and this time has better luck. Immediately afterward, he runs off (to Hell), but as he does so, Adam gets a glimpse of him. The scene reprinted above begins after his disappearance. No such scene in the form of a dialogue occurs in Genesis, nor does any preceding attempt on the Devil’s part to lead Adam astray. In dialogue form, Genesis gives only the scene between Eve and the serpent, which, according to a very old tradition, is identical with the Devil (see Rev. 12:9); the passage that follows is entirely narrative: vidit igitur mulier quod bonum esset lignum ad vescendum, et pulchrum oculis, aspectuque delectabile; et tulit de fructu illius, et comedit; deditque viro suo, qui comedit. It is from these last words that our scene developed.21

21 Auerbach, Mimesis, 146.
These remarks illustrate the complicated relationship between Genesis and *Mystère d’Adam*. The rough outline of the plot derives from the biblical narrative. However, even taking the biblical book as the earliest attested textual unit and not delineating prior strata of texts or traditions within it, several layers of construction are already in play here. The connection made with the book of Revelation reflects not only the incorporation of Genesis into a scriptural canon consisting of Old and New Testaments, but also the tradition of figural reading that takes those Testaments as a unified whole. The Latin translation contributes to that unity (by removing the linguistic distinctions among the biblical texts), adding a layer of interpretation and linking the biblical texts to a broader stream of tradition in that language. In utilizing French, *Mystère d’Adam* adds yet another layer of interpretation and situates the play in a new context of shared language and idiom. Moreover, beyond its (comparatively) direct use of Genesis, the play also freely invents scenes to communicate more effectively its understanding of the events found in the biblical narrative. These extrabiblical contributions pack the greatest interpretive punch, perhaps suggesting that the Genesis narrative as it stands proves ill-suited to the interpretation given it here.

All of these observations draw attention to the process by which the biblical text is mediated to the play’s audience, a process in which language emerges with singular importance. How does Hebrew fit into all of this? It doesn’t. In his introduction to the fiftieth anniversary English edition of *Mimesis*, Edward W. Said lists it among the

\[\text{22 These remarks are of literary rather than historical import--the point is not to specifically deny the existence of a multiplicity of sources and/or traditions behind the “final form” of Genesis, but rather to emphasize that texts acquire meaning from their narrative context and that it is important to consider such narrative contexts as have been attested rather than focusing on those that exist only as a matter of speculation. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 19.}\]
languages a German Romance philologist would have to know in order to “do the basic reading.” However, while *Mimesis* teems with such languages as French, Latin, English, and Italian, Hebrew makes only the briefest of appearances despite extended discussion of narratives from Genesis. Its presence is limited to a single word in the “Odysseus’ Scar” chapter (יִהְנִי), and even that word appears transliterated phonetically into Roman characters (*Hinne-ni*). By the “Adam and Eve” chapter, the Hebrew originals underlying the Genesis story have been completely effaced. The story enters French by way of Latin.

Whether undertaken deliberately or arising solely as a byproduct of the pursuit of some other purpose(s), this unmooring of the text from its Hebrew roots has significant consequences. At one time, “highly educated pagans” confronted the Church Fathers with the scandal of the Christian “claim that the highest truths were contained in writings composed in a language to their minds impossibly uncivilized.” (The reference here is probably to Greek rather than Hebrew, but it is still a Greek not independent of Hebrew and Aramaic, rather than classical, literary Greek.) Although this point is not stated explicitly, such a challenge reflects the idea that the nobility of the language somehow corresponds to the nobility of the people who speak it; languages are implicated in the power dynamics that govern their speakers. The recourse to Latin “originals” therefore eliminates the scandal, severing the Bible’s connection to a subject people and investing

---

24 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 9; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der Abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Verlag, 1946), 13. The English edition marks the word’s difference by rendering it in italics, but the German does not distinguish the word from its surrounding context. By contrast, citations from Greek appear in Greek characters (e.g., English, 109; German, 109).
26 I am using “speakers” in a general way to indicate all those who use a language, not specifically designating those for whom the language serves as a basis of everyday verbal communication.
it with the authority of the Roman empire. At the time of the play’s composition, Latin continued to function as the common language of an international elite, a position now guaranteed by its affiliation with Christianity.

The erasure of Hebrew and the special privileging of Latin also redefine the problem posed by the Bible’s universal scope and particular focus on Israel. The use of Israel’s language to present the Bible’s universal history constitutes a major aspect of Israel’s centrality within that history. Eliminating Hebrew serves to diminish the particularity of biblical Israel and its stories, paving the way for their absorption into other peoples and enabling the transformation of Adam and Eve into a (stereo)typical French couple. Only when it has been loosed from Hebrew and resituated in French can the play present such a profound unity between the Bible and “French” social norms.27

Those norms are highlighted in a later chapter, when Auerbach cites a “lack of historical consciousness and perspective” as responsible for the easy identification of Mystère d’Adam’s audience with the biblical characters. He remarks,

Although two past cultures--the antique and the Judaeo-Christian--were of great importance within the frame of medieval civilization, and although both of them, especially the Judaeo-Christian, were often portrayed in art, there was yet such a lack of historical consciousness and perspective that the events and characters of those distant epochs were simply transferred to the present forms and conditions of life: Caesar, Aeneas, Pilate became knights, Joseph of Arimathea a burgher, and Adam a farmer, of twelfth or thirteenth century France, England, or Germany.28

Like many scholars, he contrasts the medieval disregard for historical specificity with the sensitivity of later periods: “With the first dawn of humanism, there began to be a sense

27 Given Latin’s role in medieval Christendom, the play’s dependence on texts in that language serves to anchor it in relation to the cosmic center, undergirding rather than undermining the play’s equation of spiritual and sociopolitical formation.
28 Auerbach, Mimesis, 320-21.
that the events of classical history and legend and also those of the Bible were not separated from the present simply by an extent of time but also by completely different conditions of life.”

Whatever the merits of this perspective, the dynamics explicated above suggest that if identification with the Bible was not felt as a problem in medieval Christendom, perhaps that was because it had been so thoroughly handled. Auerbach does not need to make special mention of the Jews in this chapter as he had in describing the Bible’s universal history; the reorienting of the biblical texts around a Latin center ensures that they no longer matter.

2.1.2.2 Ways of Reading Others: Contrast, Identification and Biblical Interpretation

Auerbach therefore refers to a Bible that belongs unreservedly to Christendom and its mores and no longer threatens its readers with an identity crisis. He depicts Eve and Adam as familiar characters beyond their association with either the biblical narrative or the play. As in the description cited above, his references to them are liberally seasoned with allusions to the types they represent. For example, Eve “falls back on an insincere and impertinent but embarrassed question, the sort of question which has been asked a thousand times in similar situations by naive, impetuous people who are governed by their instincts. . . .”

Adam “. . . is a good man, a French peasant or burgher. In the normal course of life he is reliable and sure of himself.”

29 Auerbach, Mimesis, 321.
31 Auerbach, Mimesis, 147.
32 Auerbach, Mimesis, 149.
The respective characters of Eve and Adam both reflect and require the hierarchical relationship between them. Auerbach explains,

For without the Devil’s special help she is but a weak—though curious and hence sinful—creature, far inferior to her husband and easily guided by him. That is how God created her from Adam’s rib. And God explicitly ordered Adam to guide her, and Eve to obey and serve him. Confronted with Adam, Eve is fearful, submissive, self-conscious. She feels she cannot cope with his clear and reasonable and manly will. The serpent alone changes all this. It upsets the order of things established by God, it makes the woman the man’s master, and so leads both to ruin.33

_Mystère d’Adam_ clearly depicts a disruption of the social hierarchy as bringing about humanity’s downfall. Lest the exact nature of Adam’s error be missed, in the fateful moment of his capitulation he says to Eve, “I shall believe you. You are my equal” (Jo t’en crerrai, tu es ma per).34 This emphasis on preserving the social hierarchy represents a dramatic departure from the understanding of Incarnation and Passion described above. My point is not that it is the tendency of the biblical texts automatically to upend hierarchies wherever they occur. Rather, because the Bible is in the business of creating its own norms, it cannot be assumed that it will demurely abide by those in place in any given context. In the _Mystère d’Adam_, there is no question of any potential difference between biblical and “secular” norms. The norms governing French farmers and burghers merge with the biblical text so absolutely as to become indistinguishable from it.

The _Mystère d’Adam_ thus goes well beyond simply utilizing its readers’ reality as a launching point for its own distinctive communication. The familiar norms are now enshrined as part of God’s original creative intent. In approaching the story in this way, _Mystère d’Adam_ participates in an extensive tradition. Carol Meyers observes,

---

33 Auerbach, _Mimesis_, 149.
34 Auerbach, _Mimesis_, 145 (English); 144 (French).
In both religious texts and standard translations dating to the centuries following the formation of the Hebrew canon, interpretations of the Hebrew narrative of Genesis 2-3 became common. The themes of female sin and inferiority were introduced, although they were not...part of the original text. Thereafter, variations on those themes became endless. Western literature and art are replete with expressions of the Eve story cast so as to express the author’s or artist’s own social views.35

Together with Auerbach’s analysis, the Mystère d’Adam provides a rich glimpse into this interpretive trajectory, demonstrating the ways in which it reflects biases more pervasive than the prejudices of individual scholars.

Although the Adam and Eve story has most commonly been the occasion for reflection on the nature and destiny of men and women, more than gender roles are at stake in Mystère d’Adam and in the entire “Adam and Eve” chapter. Auerbach and the sources he cites locate particular rhetorical styles, languages, social classes, and even skin colors on the spectrum of the divine/sublime and the human/humble/low.36 Sometimes Auerbach explains these characterizations, particularly when they involve literary style. However, he more often assumes that the logic behind them is readily apparent to his readers and does not require interpretation. Of particular interest is his handling of Mystère d’Adam. Although he describes the play as depicting Eve and Adam as stock characters from its own milieu, he provides very little information about that milieu.


36 In addition to some of the material already cited, there is this excerpt from Bernard of Clairvaux’s commentary on the Song of Songs that takes black skin as a symbol of degradation and abasement: “She is black but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem: though the toil and pain of a long exile discolor her, yet a heavenly beauty adorns her...If you shudder at her blackness, admire too her beauty; if you despise her humbleness, behold her sublimity. How provident it is, how full of discretion and congruence, that this very degradation and this very exaltation of the bride compensate each other in this temporal world...” (qtd. in Auerbach, Mimesis, 153).
Instead, he takes for granted that the types they represent are, for the most part, as familiar and accessible to his readers as they were to the play’s earliest audiences. Despite an emphasis on national and historical particularity, *Mimesis* thus presupposes a certain continuity in social convention between its readers and the various texts it engages. This shared convention apparently reflects Auerbach’s understanding of what it means to be Western.

The depiction of Adam and Eve in *Mystère d’Adam* thus resonates beyond discussions of either sex and gender or medieval Christendom. In characterizing the pair by alluding to familiar types, Auerbach draws upon the substantial history behind that particular set of dichotomies. To Eve are attributed the characteristics Westerners assign all people designed to be dominated, while Adam embodies the born master. The contrast between them recurs almost identically in very different contexts. For example, in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Declan Kiberd describes the ways in which England constructed Ireland as its own opposite, characterizing the population in ways strikingly similar to *Mystère d’Adam’s* Eve. He remarks,

> By [Matthew] Arnold’s day, the image of Ireland as not-England had been well and truly formed. Victorian imperialists attributed to the Irish all those emotions and impulses which a harsh mercantile code had led them to suppress in themselves. Thus, if John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the English were adult and manly, the Irish must be childish and feminine.37

Compare Auerbach:

[Adam] is a good man, a French peasant or burgher. In the normal course of life he is reliable and sure of himself. He knows what he is supposed to do and what not. God’s orders were clear, and his honest decency is rooted in this unambiguous certainty which guards him against dubious entanglements. He also knows that he has his wife under his thumb. He is not afraid of her occasional whims, which he regards as childish and not at all dangerous.38

Likewise, Edward Said’s description of Orientalist discourse also echoes Mystère d’Adam’s depiction of the first human pair: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’”39 V. Y. Mudimbe finds a similar portrait drawn of the Bantu people of Africa. He cites the writings of Placide Frans Tempels who describes the Bantu as not “capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary” and therefore requiring Europeans to do that interpretive work on their behalf.40 Compare Auerbach, “Eve knows all about [the Serpent/Devil] too, but it has never occurred to her that such a thing could be called treason. There is no moral consciousness in her as there is in Adam; in its place she has a naive, childishly hardy, and unreflectingly sinful curiosity.”41 The wide-ranging application of the characteristics Auerbach finds in Mystère d’Adam’s Eve and the consistent tendency of Westerners to claim those traits

38 Auerbach, Mimesis, 149-50.
39 Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1979), 40. He further observes, “On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things,” 49.
40 V. Y. Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988), 138. According to Mudimbe, Tempels was a Belgian Franciscan who “was fully committed to a mission, that of leading the black person (to whom he did not yet give the status of being a complete human) along the road to civilization, knowledge, and true religion” (compare Adam’s mandate in Mystère d’Adam) (Invention of Africa, 137).
41 Auerbach, Mimesis, 147.
given to Adam demonstrates the extent to which the play reflects the West’s perception of itself and its Others.

Elsewhere, as cited above, Auerbach refers to “the episode which is here presented to us in dramatic form” as “the starting point of the Christian drama of redemption.” This means that the social order and the socially constructed self become part and parcel of “the starting point of the Christian drama of redemption,” making it impossible for the Bible or Christianity to reach beyond them, let alone challenge them. The Bible cannot play any fundamental role in interpelling its readers into a socially constructed identity because having such an identity already in place becomes the precondition for approaching the text. One is already Western before one encounters the Bible, and it is as a Westerner that one engages everything therein. The Mystère d’Adam presents a biblical narrative that has been not only dramatized, but also domesticated.

Auerbach’s silence concerning the accommodation of the social context in the Mystère d’Adam appears all the more striking given that later in Mimesis he attributes considerable importance to a “fluid historical background” as a hallmark of modern realism, differentiating between texts that take the larger social circumstances in which the characters are embedded as fixed and unchanging and texts that represent those circumstances as historically determined and therefore possessing the same potential for development as the characters themselves. By that stage in the discussion, the contextual aspects under consideration primarily involve political organization and class structure. The bases of communal identity and the terms in which it is understood are not included in the fluidity of the historical background. In other words, a text may raise the issue of what it means to be a burgher in a particular place at a particular time, but what it

42 Auerbach, Mimesis, 491. Emphasis mine.
means to be French stands beyond discussion. And in *Mimesis* it clearly means something to be French, something different from what it means to be German or Italian, something that persists even through radical shifts in social and political organization. The “Adam and Eve” chapter establishes the fundamental social self as the starting point not only of the Christian drama of redemption, but also of the modern West.

Although Christian theological concepts have played a prominent role in this discussion, it should be clear that the domestication of the Bible represents more than a problem for those with Christian theological commitments. The process is embedded in the very construction of the West, so that both sacred and “secular” readings of the Bible are implicated in it. The problem of the Bible and postcolonial concerns therefore turns out to be central, not peripheral, to modern biblical studies. Accordingly there is a pressing need for decolonizing readings. Mudimbe explains,

> Although generalizations are of course dangerous, *colonialism* and *colonization* basically mean organization, arrangement. The two words derive from the Latin word *colère*, meaning to cultivate or to design. Indeed the historical colonial experience does not and obviously cannot reflect the peaceful connotations of these words. But it can be admitted that the colonists (those settling a region), as well as the colonialists (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority) have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs. 43

Following Mudimbe’s characterization of colonialism and colonization, such readings would not simply resist biblical texts that display an affinity with imperialist thought, but rather endeavor to dismantle and get beyond the organization and transformation of the Bible into a fundamentally European construct.

---

Said, Kiberd, and Mudimbe emphasize that although discourses like that found in *Mystère d’Adam* purport to represent groups of Others (e.g., women, Orientals, the Irish, the Bantu) and depict them as they are, their primary work is constructive—creating the (collective) Self and then creating an Other in the antithesis of one’s own image. Coming to terms with them therefore involves more than recognizing them as discourses that describe “those people” inaccurately. It requires consideration of the ways in which an account of “those people” has gone into making “us” who “we” think “we” are; indeed, it has helped define the parameters of what constitutes “us.” In order to properly reckon with Genesis’ intervention into the construction of communal identity, it is necessary to reopen the question of what it means to be an “us” and not leave participation in an “us” as an (often unacknowledged) *a priori* condition of all interpretation. This is not to deny the existence or the significance of such preexisting commitments, but rather a refusal to regard those commitments as fixed and final.

### 2.3 Conclusion

Two approaches to Genesis clash on the pages of *Mimesis*, each with different implications for communal identity. One, found in the “Odysseus’ Scar” chapter, could be termed “YHWH-centric.” As developed by Auerbach, Handelman, Levenson, and (somewhat differently) the Church Fathers, this perspective understands certain features of Genesis to imply that the Bible provides a conceptual framework comprehending reality, one that pushes for the reconstitution of the reader. It presents communal identity as contingent, with Israel having no history beyond the divine word and Gentiles having their histories challenged by a biblical history that claims universality while assigning centrality to Israel. Auerbach’s discussion of *Mystère d’Adam*, however, presents a
different view of Genesis, both describing and reflecting a Eurocentric conception of the 
book. This perspective takes the biblical text as undergirding the conceptual framework 
already dominant among Western readers, conferring authority upon it and confirming 
their (collective) sense of self.

In Mystère d’Adam, the boundaries between the sacred and the secular become 
blurred, with the secular dominating the resulting hybrid even though it bears a Christian 
label. In other words, the play uses the biblical narrative as a means of expressing cultural 
norms, not the other way around. Mystère d’Adam reflects what Mudimbe describes as 
the colonial propensity “to organize and transform non-European areas into 
fundamentally European constructs.” In the realm of identity, this has meant a tendency 
to envision everywhere a world inhabited by stock characters. Thus, the contours of 
identity have been determined prior to any engagement of the biblical text. Moreover, in 
its much-championed role as avatar of Western Civilization, the Bible has been taken up 
into the West’s self-definition, ensuring that Adam and Eve remain the couple next door. 
Reading identity in Genesis from a YHWH-centric rather than Eurocentric perspective 
therefore requires engaging this process, reevaluating the relationship between the text 
and its readers, and reintroducing fluidity at the deepest levels of communal identity. 
Thus far, the possibility for the kind of unnatural thinking that Ellen Davis describes as 
the hallmark of the Bible has generally been limited to how people behave as a “we.” 
This study wants to reopen the question of how those “we’s” are constituted and allow 
Genesis to guide the discussion.

44 Ellen F. Davis, “Vulnerability, the Condition of Covenant,” in The Art of 
Reading Scripture (eds. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids, Mich.: 
Eerdmans, 2003), 279.
3. Family Storytelling: Constructing Community Through Story

I have shuddered to hear it said that Joseph is “one of the most believable figures in Western literature,” and not just because such a statement puts the Bible on the wrong bookshelf. At such a remark one wants to object—on the model of the vaudevillian’s “Who was that lady I seen you with last night?” “That was no lady, that was my wife”—one wants to say that Joseph is no character at all, but someone far more intimately ours. That initial literary act, “Come gather round and let me spin a tale,” is not quite the starting-point of even this most tale-like part of the Pentateuch. Its premise—“Let me tell you what happened to Joseph—your-ancestor, let me tell you how things came to be as you know them actually to be”—is significantly different. Not to speak of “Let me tell you how God has saved us,” “Let me tell you God’s teachings.”

--James Kugel

Identifying Genesis as a family narrative brings to bear the insights of scholarly literature specially attuned to the ways narrative and the act of storytelling function to define and create a community. While recognizing the salience of family in both the biblical texts and the societies that produced them, biblical scholarship has stopped just short of reading biblical texts as family narratives. However, the study of family storytelling has a great deal in common with the study of the Bible, often resembling established approaches in biblical studies.

This study will use literature on family storytelling in concert with biblical scholarship to engage the construction of communal identity in Genesis and its appropriation by readers. Such an approach has the advantage of highlighting the role of identification in biblical interpretation. It cultivates sensitivities that can be used to

---

decolonize the biblical text, clarifying Eurocentric approaches and facilitating the emergence of a YHWH-centric reading of Genesis.

### 3.1 Family Storytelling

Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh describe “a growing interest across the human sciences in treating narratives as the means through which social and cultural life comes into being.”

This interest fuels inquiries in and across a number of disciplines utilizing a number of different rubrics. Of these rubrics, family storytelling proves particularly suited to the task of examining identity in Genesis because of the way that it plays on the prominence of family in the biblical texts and on the role of “blood” (biological descent) in more recent accounts of identity.

Scholars in a wide variety of disciplines take an interest in family storytelling practices, including Psychology, Sociology, Communications, and Folklore, among others. As Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson observe, “family storytelling transects the disciplinary structure of academic knowledge because it cannot be subsumed as an object of analysis under any one group.”

Although folkloric and psychological concerns receive ample attention in the literature, Elizabeth Stone’s *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us* stands nearly alone in providing a sustained theoretical analysis of family storytelling and its relationship to communal, rather than

---


individual, identity. The significance of Stone’s work, first published in 1988 and now in its second edition, is confirmed by the ubiquity of its citation and the tendency of even those who do not reference it to echo its conclusions.

Stone defines “family story” in this way: “Almost any bit of lore about a family member, living or dead, qualifies as a family story—as long as it’s significant, as long as it has worked its way into the family canon to be told and retold.” A family story may even consist solely of a single “well-developed scene,” a snapshot without any sort of plot development. In this view, even such details as Methuselah’s 969 years would be considered family stories. Stone further observes that “family narrative” has emerged as the near-equivalent of “family story.” She explains,

What’s the difference between a narrative and a story? To my ear, “Narrative,” now associated with “narratology,” directs us to scrutinize rather than engage with stories, drawing our attention away from content alone, to include awareness of form operating according to literary and/or social rules, and in so doing, reminds us that content is neither interchangeable with experience nor inevitable in its presentation. Narrative genres--whether Alcoholics Anonymous testimony, a medical chart, or a confession to one’s priest--shape and control what can be said.

The present study will make use of both “family narrative” and “family story” as those terms are described here. Insofar as it analyzes the literary features of Genesis, “family narrative” seems the more appropriate category. However, consideration of the

4 Stone is professor of English, Communication, and Media Studies at Fordham University.
6 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 4.
7 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, xvi-xvii.
relationship between reading and identity formation falls under the more reader- and content-oriented rubric of “family story” and “family storytelling.”

Stone’s analysis derives from her interviews of “more than a hundred people from a variety of regions, races, ethnicities, ages, and classes,” as well as her readings of autobiographical narratives. She found that the basic strategies of telling and appropriating family stories remained constant across region, ethnicity, and “tenure and status” in the United States, a consistency she attributes to the role family stories play in the culture of the family. She explains,

The family is our first culture, and, like all cultures, it wants to make known its norms and mores. It does so through daily life, but it also does so through family stories which underscore, in a way invariably clear to its members, the essentials, like the unspoken and unadmitted family policy on marriage or illness. Or suicide. Or who the family saints and sinners are, or how much anger can be expressed and by whom.

Family stories create and perpetuate family culture by conveying the family’s understanding of itself and of the world. They can accomplish this because “a family

8 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 7.
9 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 7, 11. Of all these types of diversity, Stone found that a family’s tenure and status in the United States had the strongest influence on the types of stories they shared: “Those whose families had been here longest and had been the most prosperous tended toward a sunny worldview--the world was generous and individual initiative mattered deeply. Eastern European Jews, southern Europeans, and Blacks tended to posit a world which was less giving, even dangerous, and where individual initiative could be, and was, undermined by chance, oppressive authority, and even the weather” (11). Stone does not offer further nuancing of the category “tenure and status in the United States,” but it is interesting that she groups “Blacks” with European immigrants who came to the United States at least half a century (if not hundreds of years) later. Matthew Frye Jacobson offers a compelling explanation of the commonalities between these groups and what they reveal about modern understandings of identity in his Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
10 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 7.
11 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 7.
has a shared sense of what its stories mean, or at the very least, are supposed to mean.” Stone identifies a belief in this shared sense of meaning as the guiding assumption of her work.12

Recognizing in her own family a disproportionate inclination towards certain types of careers, Stone traces this propensity to stories that “seemed at once to sponsor and mirror our aspirations as a family”: “I . . . noticed that our most idiosyncratic family conviction—that the arts are supremely important and certainly more important than money—was there even in that first story, when my great-grandmother chose as her true love that talented but poor postman.”13 Stone observes, “the facts of a family’s past can be selectively fashioned into a story that can mean almost anything, whatever they most need it to mean.”14 In this instance, the story of that marriage highlighted the great-grandmother’s belief that being artistic matters more than being wealthy and reflected it back to the family. Successive generations heard the story (and others like it), adopted similar values, and chose careers accordingly.

The prescriptive aspect of family stories does not stop with behavior. According to Stone, “family stories go a step further and define the family, saying not only what members should do, but who they are or should be.”15 These family definitions encapsulate the family’s understanding of its own identity. Although the family definitions may not be immediately apparent to outsiders or directly articulated within the

family, family members share a “roughly consistent” perception of “what it means to be a member of the family.” However, Langellier and Peterson caution that “Family definitions . . . mask the contradictions of a particular family history as well as the family in history . . . , where definitions of sex roles, the meanings of age, status, and the nature of family obligations undergo transformation.” Further, “as a form of social control, family definitions naturalize the present as ‘the way the so-and-so’s are.’”

Stone highlights several features that typify family definitions: “First, the family definition will usually include a number of attributes. . . . The breadth of definition is to ensure that there’s something for everybody in it.” Second, the family definition reinforces the family’s perception of its own “specialness,” celebrating even traits that may not have obvious appeal to others. Moreover, “the family definition is in some way an ideal, whether obvious or covert, that the family as a group has for itself.” Stone continues, “third and related, in some cases you might say that the family definition also serves as the family’s most important instruction to, and perhaps covert ground rule for, its members--what they ought to be like.” A fourth tendency Stone observes in family definitions as well as “the individual stories used to buttress [them]” is that they “give clues to the family’s organization and its power center.” This information can be found by examining both the stories and the people who tell them.

Stone makes some additional comments about this fourth characteristic of family definitions that raise interesting issues when read with the biblical texts in mind. She observes,

---

16 Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*, 34.
It’s customary for the standard-bearer to be a member of the most senior generation. But it has to be a generation of recent enough vintage so that individual members can still be recollected and characterized. Usually, it’s a particularly beloved grandparent or great-grandparent who may now be dead but who is still a distinct and palpable family presence. . . . The implied fantasy is that this elder is the founder of the tribe and the creator of its ethos, rather than just a member of the generational rank and file, as in fact we all are. The elder’s attributes, real or imagined, now become the family’s.21

Although Stone does not discuss this possibility, this aspect of contemporary family storytelling may reflect the influence of the biblical family stories as much as it parallels them. Just as the stories in Stone’s study shed light on the biblical family stories, so the Bible (in concert with other religious epics familiar to contemporary families) has probably influenced those stories. Such a mutual relationship is reflected in Stone’s frequent use of words with biblical or religious epic connotations in her introduction: “genesis” (p. 4), “canon” (p. 5), “belief” (p. 7), “ancestral figures” (p. 8), and “myth” (p. 9). Stone’s book opens, “In the beginning, as far back in my family as anyone could go . . . ,” echoing the most popular translation of the opening of Genesis.22 These words and phrases function on an emotional level to endow the family stories in Stone’s study with the epic significance of the Genesis stories. Although one might assume that the biblical stories are just another manifestation of “the sense of . . . specialness that most of us privately believe ourselves to have,”23 this sense of specialness may instead derive from the biblical stories and stories like them. That might account for the tendency to attribute to one’s own family the characteristics of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs and depict them as “founder[s] of the tribe . . . rather than just a member of the generational

21 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 35-6.
22 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 3.
23 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 35.
rank and file, as in fact we all are.”

In her analysis of one story, Stone calls attention to its use of “phrasing one would expect in the Bible” and the “connotative weight” and “sacred allusiveness” such language provides.

In the view of Stone and other theorists, family storytelling functions not only to define the family, but also to create it. They emphasize that families do not simply exist but must be constructed and reconstructed. Stone debunks the “myth of blood,” pointing out that “each one of us is the product of a confluence of strangers. We come from two families—not one—even if we look only as far back as our parents. . . . And so the blood that coursed through a great-grandparent or even a grandparent is but a thin trickle in our own.” Accordingly, as Stone explains, “family is always jerry-built and has to be reconstituted every generation.” Scholars emphasize the important role of family storytelling in this process. Langellier and Peterson maintain that “storytelling is the primary way that families are produced, maintained, and perhaps transformed. . . . [W]hat we commonly call ‘the family’ is not a naturally occurring biological phenomenon but one type of small-group culture strategically produced in discourse such as family stories.”

---

24 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 36.
25 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 175-76.
26 For example, Ruth Stotter suggests that “stories of memorable events and interesting family members and friends surviving challenges, failures, and tragedies, as well as accounts of their successes... become the threads that bind a family. I have always believed that we are made of stories” in her introduction to Gail De Vos, Merle Harris, and Celia Barker Lottridge, Telling Tales: Storytelling in the Family (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003), xvii.
27 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 40.
The role that family stories play in the (re)creation of family helps explain why Stone identifies relevance to the family as their most important characteristic. She maintains, “attention to the stories’ actual truth is never the family’s most compelling consideration. Encouraging belief is. The family’s survival depends on the shared sensibility of its members.” In other words, stories can create the communion that is the basis of family whether they are factual or not, as long as family members live with them and through them develop a “shared sensibility.” Their factualness proves less important than their ability to ring true in the life of the family.

Langellier and Peterson use Stone’s work as a starting point for their essay on family storytelling, but they employ a distinct emphasis on the family’s embeddedness in larger societal and historical dynamics and on the diversity within and among families. While finding much in Stone’s work that is useful, they also offer a critique of what they perceive as its limitations. First, they suggest that Stone “overestimates the consensus on the meanings of family stories, assuming a more homogenous experience of the family than is warranted. The assumption of a homogenous family experience masks both differences among families (social and historical) and differences within family experiences that emerge from the arrangements of sex and age.” This is an important criticism, but it fails to consider the possibility of a kind of double consciousness by which family members might hear a story through the ears of the group even as they maintain their own conflicting perspective. If Langellier and Peterson are correct in identifying family storytelling as a strategy of social control, it seems not only possible but likely that tension and dissonance would coexist with a kind of official consensus.

30 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 7.
31 Langellier and Peterson, “Family Storytelling,” 60.
32 Langellier and Peterson also find that in Stone’s study, “alternatives to normative family arrangements--for example, same-sex households, single parent households, cultural
3.2 The Relevance of Family Storytelling for Biblical Scholarship

The contemporary focus of the literature on family storytelling does not diminish its relevance for an ancient text. The evidence suggests that, although the institution of the family varies considerably across times and cultures, family storytelling has functioned similarly in ancient Israel/Judah/Yehud and in the contemporary United States, the context for Stone’s study. Scholars of ancient Israel/Judah/Yehud posit storytelling as a component of family life; some even describe these practices in terms reminiscent of those used in Stone’s study. Moreover, the leap from the smaller kinship groups discussed in contemporary family storytelling literature to the considerably larger kinship group that constitutes Israel proves not to be as great as might be supposed. This results partly from the considerable importance scholars ascribe to the family in developing their understanding of Israel/Judah/Yehud, and, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, partly from the particular way Genesis constructs Israel as family.

Carol Meyers argues that understanding Israelite society in large measure rests on understanding the Israelite family. She explains, “when examining the period of Israelite beginnings, the study of early [premonarchic] Israel is nearly equivalent to the study of variations such as the kibbutz and Native-American kinship systems, and contemporary communal families . . . are not conceived” (Langellier and Peterson, “Family Storytelling,” 60). However, it remains unclear whether they have uncovered a limitation in Stone’s own thinking or in that of her interviewees, who may have been taught to structure their talk about “family” according to dominant conventions. Stone does not offer a detailed statement of methodology, but mentions soliciting “family storytellers” through a newspaper ad (Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 41). People viewing such an ad may have assumed that they were supposed to talk about “normative family arrangements,” and those with different experiences may have considered themselves unsuitable for Stone’s study or censored the unconventional aspects of their experience. Moreover, Stone’s study is an analysis of family storytelling, not the family itself. Her findings do not depend on a reductionist understanding of the family, even if Stone herself is thus limited.

46
the family.” Identifying this period as “especially important because of [its] formative role,” she traces its influence throughout the biblical era.\(^3^3\) Meyers emphasizes the role of the physical and economic conditions of early Israelite life for understanding the family structures that developed. Accordingly, she finds parallels between ancient and contemporary farming communities that she attributes to their having to negotiate the same sorts of challenges. She observes,

Many theorists in [social or cultural anthropology] now hold that, despite clear differences between modern and ancient farm families, the division between preindustrial and contemporary smallholders is not so great as some would suppose. Indeed, there are systematic commonalities between them, with critical elements of farm families found virtually everywhere. For this reason, the results of contemporary social history as well as traditional ethnography and social anthropology are relevant to a consideration of the ancient agrarian family pioneering in the Palestinian highlands. Studies of families in colonial America and on the shifting American frontier are full of insights into family dynamics and values that have found parallels among pioneering farm families everywhere.\(^3^4\)

Studies of family narratives, stories, and storytelling fall within the purview of the “contemporary social history as well as traditional ethnography and social anthropology” referenced by Meyers.\(^3^5\)

Rainer Albertz also assigns the ancient Israelite/Judahite/Yehudite family a central role in his historical/theological work.\(^3^6\) In his *History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, he identifies “family piety,” in tension and later in cooperation


\(^{3^4}\) Meyers, “Family in Early Israel,” 8.

\(^{3^5}\) Stone mentions “the early 1990s, shortly after family ‘narratives’ became interchangeable with family ‘stories’ and largely referred to collected ethnographies or case studies” (*Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*, xvi).

with “official religion,” as a key shaping force of Israelite religion and the biblical texts.  

He maintains that “‘patriarchal religion’ is to be defined not as a preliminary stage but as a substratum of [YHWH] religion. . . . This religious stratum of the family is very much older than the specific history of Israelite religion; it is the basis on which Israel’s [YHWH] religion was built up.”  

Although Albertz describes the relationship between the family and the people Israel as undergoing significant changes in response to the circumstances in which the ancients found themselves, those differences prove less important for this study than his assessment of the continuing importance of the family and its centrality to the “final form” of the biblical texts.

Scholars allude to the family character of many of the biblical texts without explicitly invoking family storytelling as a rubric for analysis of those texts. For example, Meyers refers to the “family storytelling traditions” that “served to preserve and pass on unifying elements of connected family households” and also to the “family narratives of Genesis,” without drawing a connection between them.  

Joseph Blenkinsopp observes, “much of the narrative of the Hebrew Bible is basically family history, obviously so in the story of the ancestors (Genesis 12-50) but no less with that of the monarchy itself--for

37 Ziony Zevit offers an important critique of this perspective in The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches (New York: Continuum, 2001). He argues that such a distinction between official religion and popular religion best describes Christianity and becomes problematic when applied to ancient Israel. In ancient Israel, as in Judaism and Islam, different communities had different guidelines for practice and belief. There was not a unitary overarching “official” religion with elite sanction that can be contrasted with “popular” religion. Given Albertz’ desire to “star[t] from the burning problems of the present and the controversies in theology and the church about how a Christian solution can be achieved” and locate analogies between ancient and contemporary theological problems (History of Israelite Religion, 17), he might agree that his view of negotiation between different segments of society reflects a contemporary outlook and concern.

38 Albertz, History of Israelite Religion, 29.

39 This study does not delve into the production of Genesis or explain the text by reference to any specific moment in the history of the ancient people.

40 Meyers, “Family in Early Israel,” 32, 35.
example, the history of struggle and intrigue within David’s family (2 Samuel 11–1 Kings 2). The idea of Israel as a cluster of families held together in a precarious unity was never far below the surface.” Leo Perdue refers to ancient Israelite “family traditions,” including stories and storytelling, but stops short of making a connection between the storytelling that took place in the family household and the biblical texts. He even refers to the role of “ancestral fathers” in “the folklore of the household,” but limits his discussion to individual households rather than to the house(hold) of Israel.

Stone’s discussion bears a strong similarity to observations of scholars specifically studying the biblical period. For example, as noted previously, Perdue writes, “the oral tradition of the household would have included narratives involving the ancestral founding of the family; the original gift of the family’s land; the history of the family; the kinship relationships of the family to clan, tribe, and greater Israel; and the religion, mores, wisdom, and laws of the family passed down through time.” These categories also show up in Stone’s study. For example, she describes stories that recount the “genesis” of the family. In addition, one of her interviewees, the descendant of a “pioneer settler in Iowa,” remembers stories supporting her family’s claim to their land. Just as Stone describes the way in which family stories “delineate the rules and mores that govern family life,” Perdue observes, “in the folklore of the household, the

45 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 4.
46 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 118-19.
ancestral fathers embodied in their lives and experiences the traditions and customs of the family.”

Biblical motive clauses, defined by Rifat Sonsino as “dependent clauses or phrases which express the motive behind the legal prescriptions,” also utilize story to promote praxis. They link many of Israel’s distinctive laws and rituals to stories from Israel’s history. For example, Exodus 23:9 warns Israel not to oppress a stranger:

וֹרֵם לֵאָת הַחַלֵּה יִבְרָעֵל אֲדַנֵּמָה עַרְבִּים יִבְרָעֵל מֶהָרִים בֹּאֵר יִבְרָעֵל פַּרְעֶה יִבְרָעֵל

And a stranger you shall not oppress. You yourselves know the soul of the stranger because strangers you have been in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 23:4-5 draws a connection between Ammonite and Moabite acts of hostility in the wake of the exodus from Egypt (described in Numbers 22:3ff) and the prohibition against their admission into the congregation of YHWH. Sonsino notes that moral and humanitarian laws are most often accompanied by motive clauses, suggesting that this high incidence “is perhaps indicative of the special moral concern that animated the legislators who also wanted to ensure compliance to these laws.” These motive clauses predicate the people’s present relationships on their past (collective) experiences.

In another example of the use of story to promote praxis, Stone’s observation that family stories often contain instructions about marriage finds a parallel in the “ancestral” narratives featuring cross-cousin marriage. Mara Donaldson reads these narratives as reflecting the importance of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. Using the kinship theory

---

50 Sonsino, *Motive Clauses*, 223.
51 The designation of Gen 12-50 as the “ancestral” narratives obscures the way in which Gen 1-11 also depicts ancestors of Israel.
of Lévi-Strauss, she argues that the recurrence of barrenness among the matriarchs reflects a failure to find the middle ground between a woman who is too closely related to her husband and one who isn’t related closely enough. Eventually, “the systems of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage resolved the contradiction between the promise of descendants and barrenness.” Meyers identifies such marriages as having considerable pragmatic advantage in the world of the early Israelites, connecting this practice that is advantageous for the group’s survival to stories that encourage it. She later makes this connection more explicit:

Although virtually invisible in the biblical record, ethnographic evidence suggests that household religious or ritual activities, along with family storytelling traditions, served to preserve and pass on unifying elements of connected family households. Standards of interpersonal and interfamilial behavior, encoded as traditional sapiential morality on the one hand and incipient legal regulations on the other hand, were likewise part of the family heritage transmitted didactically across generations and probably reinforced by a framework of religious rites and beliefs.

The contention of family storytelling theorists that “blood” is not the real basis of a family’s communion also has its adherents among biblical scholars. In challenging the “myth of blood,” Stone explains, “what blood does not provide, narrative can.” Family stories link members in a way that blood can only symbolize. Likewise, social historians of ancient Israel emphasize that “blood” is best understood as a metaphor for the

54 Meyers, “Family in Early Israel,” 31-32.
55 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 70.
connection between members of that society. Perdue writes, “It is important to note that even this larger federation [people of Israel] understood itself as the extended, multigenerational household of Israel (Jacob). This self-understanding, largely fictional, provided the ethos of solidarity and the corporate identity for the entire nation.”\textsuperscript{56} Blenkinsopp likewise maintains,

In stressing the idea of fictive kinship, contemporary sociologists have helped us to see how the primary function of a kinship system such as existed in ancient Israel transcends the obvious biological aspects by providing a network or grid for the social location of the individual and the determination of expectations and roles, with their attendant rights and duties. By the same token, it provided a measure of emotional security and stability for all members of the household, including those not biologically affiliated, the only condition being a willingness to live by the consensual ethic and ethos of the larger kinship group.\textsuperscript{57}

In terming the kinship of Israel “fictive,” these scholars are not exposing false claims made by the biblical texts. Rather, they are highlighting the difference between biblical depictions of kinship and the narrow, biologically-based notion of kinship that dominates popular thought in the modern West.

Rather than utilizing such a conception of kinship beyond “blood,” Joel Rosenberg eschews the language of family when he identifies story as the substance of the connection between the Bible and its “readers.”\textsuperscript{58} He describes the biblical text as entering into a kind of intentional relationship with the community that gathers around it: “The Bible’s relentlessly ‘chronological’ progression (despite the quirks and unevenness of narrative time) anticipates a continuation of the tradition it purports to depict, outside the borders of the text, by the future generations who read and retell.” He further

\textsuperscript{56} Perdue, “Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 178.  
\textsuperscript{57} Blenkinsopp, “Family in First Temple Israel,” 53.  
\textsuperscript{58} The word “readers” will be used here to designate the text’s audience, including those who encounter it orally.
suggests, “in this way, biblical narrative predicts its own interpretive history, while at the same time binding its readers to its world by a connection deeper, perhaps, than even law or genealogy: the force of parable and analogy.”59 Rosenberg’s comments point to the utility of family storytelling as a rubric for biblical interpretation, an approach well-equipped to consider the Bible’s mindfulness of its readers.

Although they were written with an understanding of family far removed from the institution of biblical times, contemporary accounts of family storytelling practices nevertheless have the potential to offer insight into the biblical texts and their means of constructing identity. As so many scholars have observed, the narratives under examination here describe family histories. Notions of lineage and descent lie at their very center, as reflected in the recurrence of genealogies and kinship-related terms. Family storytelling also taps into the profound way that stories about ancestors shape identity, allowing each successive generation to draw upon the resources of the past to negotiate its own distinct challenges. And finally, the family storytelling model addresses the issue of identification with biblical Israel for readers who consider themselves descendants of those whose story is described in the biblical texts. The remainder of this chapter will explore the role of storytelling in the constitution of the family, contrasting it with the biological approach symbolized by “blood.” It will also offer some preliminary reflections on what it means to read Genesis as family narrative.

3.3 Story and Biology in the Making of the Family

In “Ordering the Family: Genealogy as Autobiographical Pedigree,” Julia Watson analyzes the conception of communal identity as biologically given, distinguishing it from a view of identity as socially constructed. She describes this contrast in terms of a conflict between autobiography and the dominant practice of genealogy in the contemporary United States. Watson’s description of this contrast is helpful, even if it requires her to adopt a narrow view of genealogy that derives from only one of its manifestations. In discussing her work, I will use the word “genealogy” in the same limited sense that she does; nevertheless, this study will argue that the genealogies in Genesis function differently.

Watson characterizes genealogy in this way:

Genealogy as a highly organized and codified set of practices for recording family history claims the disinterested objectivity of a science. It mistrusts “family secrets” as a subjective record that contaminates the preservation and transmission of accurate family history. The life it confers is teleological, ordering the particulars of family into a coherent, demonstrable chart. Each generation of a family is connected to its “tree” and assigned a “pedigree” that commemorates its origin and-- overtly in Mormon practice--provides a means of election for its members among the true believers destined for salvation. But genealogy does more than give the family a life--it installs particular families in the privileged world of those who can trace their origins and attest to the coherence of their stock.  

Genealogy is all about “blood.” It depicts communal identity as biological, immutable, and objectively verifiable. Notably, it stands in intentional opposition to family storytelling as a means of understanding the family. Watson cites one manual’s counsel:

60 Watson, “Ordering the Family,” 299. Watson is playing on the title of the volume in which her essay appears: Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography. This section will use the word “genealogy” with the technical meaning that Watson gives it here.
Don’t accept as gospel truth all that [you are told] about the history of the family. People do not always realize that they have confused two different episodes and telescoped them into one, and sometimes they do not discriminate between fact and fiction. Some are natural-born storytellers and quite unconsciously embroider the facts a little here and there to make the tale more dramatic.61

Accordingly, Watson describes her own interest in “family history as a means of collective self-creation giving voice to the past” as contrary to the goals and assumptions of genealogy.62

Watson argues that genealogy’s pretensions to objectivity mask the extent to which it is subjectively situated and narratively organized. She invokes William Boelhower’s assessment that “genealogical ordering, as a given of many traditional cultures, is deployed by displaced immigrants to make narrative sense of the radical discontinuity of their American experience and impose on it a frame of narrative coherence. Genealogy values origin, stock, race, blood, in an increasingly heterogeneous world.”63 In other words, “blood” provides roots for the uprooted, enabling people to make sense of their stories despite having been severed from the context that had previously rendered the self comprehensible as a member of community.64 Watson suggests that genealogists “recreate symbolically the sense of familial connection that has been in fact displaced by geographic mobility and identity shifting.”65

Watson’s evocation of the symbolic connection between members of a family tree, together with her account of the way genealogies give life “transpersonal significance” and provide a

63 Watson, “Ordering the Family,” 298. The words are hers.
“hedge against mortality in an increasingly mobile, global world,” resembles Benedict Anderson’s description of the nation as an imagined community performing precisely those functions. Although Watson does not reference Anderson, the similarity between the two formulations seems more than coincidental. It speaks to the affinity between genealogy and nationalism, a relationship that I will explore in more detail in conjunction with Genesis’ negotiation of these topics.

Watson demonstrates that “despite the objectivity it claims, [genealogy] has functioned as an exclusionary practice, providing a network of connection for some, but an impermeable boundary for others.” The emphasis on documentation largely ignores the fact that such records are not readily available for all families and leads to obstacles for descendants of slaves and Holocaust survivors, among others. Watson gleans from the genealogical literature a tacit admission that “the degree of historical accuracy in one’s genealogical pedigree depends to a significant extent on one’s ancestors’ cultural status before 1850. White . . . Western Europeans will be more successful than others in verifying their ancestral pedigrees.” Such verified pedigrees constitute the only basis of membership in “societies for which a documented, worthy family past is required.” Citing the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Society of Mayflower Descendants, and the Society of Colonial Wars, Watson observes, “these societies are hereditary, have a patriotic orientation, and are by definition highly exclusionary. Testifying to one’s commitment to the goals of the organization will not suffice; either the bloodline is there or it is not.”

Having chronicled the difficulty of finding African ancestors according to the methods advocated by genealogical manuals, Watson asks, “What use are African American descendants of slaves to make of genealogy as familial authorization? How lay claim to a generational family history, the legitimating basis of white American culture?” Her answer focuses on family narrative: “Though how-to books can offer little, strategic intervention in the documents-driven impulse of genealogy has been posed by an alternative creation-recovery of the family in myth,” namely Alex Haley’s *Roots*. The book “both calls on and confounds documentary evidence in exposing the speculative character and mythic power of genealogical legitimation for historically invisible subjects.” In Watson’s view, the advantages of the family narrative lie in its “revalidating the oral and the everyday erased in the writing of official history.” Moreover, she finds that “autobiography can furnish a more extensive account of lived history than can the documented historical record. In that sense the autobiographical story of the family is a ‘truer’ account than the genealogical pedigree, precisely because it incorporates several modes of rendering lived experience.”

Watson finds in autobiography and genealogy different conceptions of group membership, the mutability of identity, and the permeability of boundaries. Her account thus helps demonstrate the relevance of using family storytelling as a means of apprehending Genesis’ “autobiographical” presentation of communal identity as distinguished from the currently regnant “genealogical” approach. This is not to say

---

71 Watson, “Ordering the Family,” 313.
72 Watson, “Ordering the Family,” 316.
75 The word “autobiography” is used here because of the role it plays in Watson’s essay. She follows the usage that allows “autobiography” to designate a group’s story about itself, as in a family story or narrative.
that the focus on family storytelling predetermines the view of identity that will emerge through it, but rather that by examining identity as constructed rather than predetermined and fixed, the family storytelling “model” allows for a certain flexibility of identity. Additionally, in probing beneath the “objective” surface of the genealogical impulse, Watson helps establish what is at stake in the various appropriations of the past.

3.4 Narrative and the Construction of Identity in the Bible and Beyond

Like the contemporary literature explicated here, the biblical texts assign biology a secondary role in the formation of familial identity. For example, the election motif in Genesis demonstrates that family is not a simple matter of shared genes. Election trumps biology in delineating group membership. Esau and Jacob/Israel are twins presented as the ancestors of rival peoples, while Jacob/Israel’s twelve sons become twelve tribes within the single people Israel. There is no biological reason for this discrepancy, any more than there is a biological reason that Ishmael, the son of Sarah’s handmaid Hagar, does not belong to the same people as Isaac, Sarah’s son, while the children of Rachel’s and Leah’s handmaids are counted alongside those of their mistresses.

Genesis also concurs with the contemporary literature in depicting language as an identity-shaping force. Many commentators have remarked on the significance of the book’s depiction of divine speech as the agent of creation, observing that it demonstrates God’s “absolute sovereignty over nature.”\(^7\) Susan Handelman argues that Genesis

thereby establishes the priority of language over the material world, and, consequentially, the priority of textual interpretation over observation of nature as a means of apprehending “ultimate reality.”

Genesis’ depiction of human speech proves equally revealing, however. The first dialogue the book ascribes to someone other than God belongs to the adam (earth creature) and functions to confirm and celebrate his connection to the woman:

This time, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. This one will be called woman, because from man this was taken (2:23).

God speaks heaven and earth into existence; the adam speaks relationship.

Source criticism offers one means of accounting for the shift in tone from the exalted creation account of Genesis 1 to the earthy story in Genesis 2. However, examining the role of speech points to an alternative.

Genesis 1 describes the construction of the cosmos, with divine speech standing majestically alone in both the process and the text. Genesis 2 depicts a work of social construction. By giving God

---


78 I have deliberately refrained from capitalizing “adam” in order to emphasize that the word is not only a proper name for a single being, but also a more generic term for a category of beings—humans. I think it is significant that Genesis allows these two functions to blur. Cf. Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 80.

79 Walter Brueggemann suggests that divine speech also functions to establish relationship, arguing that “the main theme of [Gen 1:1-2:4] is this: God and God’s creation are bound together in a distinctive and delicate way,” and that “the mode of that binding is speech” (Genesis [Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 22, 24).

80 In speaking of an “alternative” to source theories, I am not positing an alternative understanding of the history of the text, but rather an alternative to understanding the text by its history, whatever that history may be.

81 As will be explored later, social construction in Genesis includes relationships between humans and land in addition to relationships among humans or between
less to say and taking a more hands-on approach to God’s creative work, the text draws attention to human speech and the way it complements divine action.

God speaks twice in Genesis 2, once to issue the commandment concerning edible trees that figures so prominently in the next chapter, and once to identify the adam’s need for society. The solution to this social problem comes through the cooperation of God and the adam. God’s hands form the woman, while the adam’s words’ convey recognition of God’s action and formalize the relationship. The next verse confirms that the adam’s speech is more than just decorative. Directly following the adam’s speech and beginning with הִלְכַּל_ (“for this reason”), a phrase indicating a causal relationship to what has come before, it identifies the adam’s words as helping to bring about an affiliation that goes beyond the biological:

יתְּכָל יִשְׂרוּל אֶשְׂרֵי אַבִּי אֲחָר יִשְׂרֵי אַבִּים הָאָרֶץ לֵבָנָה.

For this reason, a man will forsake his father and his mother and will cleave to his wife and they will become one flesh (2:24).

The name יֵשָׁה (“woman”) embodies the recognition of a shared יָבֹא (“bone”) and יַחַד (“flesh”), yet it also becomes the occasion for one form of kinship to supplant another, bringing about יַחַד (“one flesh”). The adam’s speech is thus simultaneously

humans and God. Relationships between humans and animals are also important in Genesis but do not figure significantly in this study.

Commentary often focuses on a historical situation in which the state promotes the nuclear family in an attempt to become more powerful than the tribe or clan (e.g., Blenkinsopp, “Family in First Temple Israel,” 88-90). Focusing on a Persian period setting for the text, Mark G. Brett offers the poignant reading that “in a context where men were being urged to leave their foreign wives . . . the peculiar strength of this language may well be explained by reading the verse as suggesting a priority of commitments: the kinship bond with the wife stands above that of the parents, and in this sense, marriage comes before bloodlines. The notion of the ‘holy seed’ suggests the reverse— that marriage has to conform to the bloodlines” (Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity [London: Routledge, 2000], 31). For the present purpose, why one form of kinship is shown supplanting another is less important than how that happens.
declarative and performative, acknowledging the connection that is already there but somehow also speaking that connection into existence.

Nahum Sarna remarks on the prominence of this pericope within the creation accounts. He explains, “whereas the creation of man is told briefly, in a single verse, the creation of woman is described in six verses. This detail is extraordinary in light of the generally nondescriptive character of the biblical narrative and as such is indicative of the importance accorded this event. With the appearance of woman, Creation is complete.”

Sarna’s commentary on this passage emphasizes the divine underpinnings of the institution of marriage. However, a broader understanding is possible: the creation of woman also marks the advent of society. Rosenberg highlights this aspect of the story, drawing attention to the way in which the terminology used in this episode signals the transformation of the adam from a strictly biological being to a social one. He observes that “the first human being, seeing his first human companion, had exclaimed a name for the woman (‘ishah! woman!) which in effect required his own renaming from ‘adam . . . to ‘ish. . . .” He further explains that the designation יְהִי נֶפֶשׁ refers to “man as a

\[83\] Sarna, Genesis, 21.

\[84\] Cf. Claus Westermann, Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 192. Theodore Hiebert identifies the creation of the woman with the creation of the family, although his interpretation does not take into account the reference to a father and mother in 2:23 (The [YHWHist’s] Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 60). In any case, the family created in this verse is a unit defined synthetically rather than biologically. Elsewhere, Hiebert focuses on the beginnings of kinship in this verse (The [YHWHist’s] Landscape, 188 n. 101).

\[85\] Westermann likewise emphasizes “human community” as the central concern of this passage. He insists, “the narrative . . . is not concerned with the creation of woman, nor with the origin of the mutual attraction of the sexes. It is concerned with the creation of humankind which reaches its goal in the complementary society of man and woman” (Genesis 1-11, 232).
social being” and is “not a word that expresses his biological identity.” The emergence of human speech thus corresponds to and enacts the emergence of society.

Examinations of biblical poetics highlight the Bible’s reliance on direct discourse as its primary method of characterization. Recognizing this technique as an aspect of the Bible’s literary art has guided readers in their search for meaning and helped them understand how the biblical texts tell stories. However, there remains the further question of whether this tendency is strictly a matter of literary technique or whether it has some ideological significance. The use of discourse in characterization could be interpreted in relation to the idea that “the self is produced, maintained and modified in interaction and discourse.” Although the constitution of individual identity remains outside the purview of this study, such an understanding of the role of discourse certainly relates to the idea of communal identity as constructed through language.

Among biblical scholars, Gerhard von Rad uses similar terms to describe the role of speech in identity formation. Discussing the “credo” of Deut 26:5-9, he remarks, “the speaker recapitulates the great, sacred facts that constitute the community. He abstains from all individual concerns and in this moment identifies himself completely with the community; that is, he makes a confession of faith.” Von Rad finds membership in the community enacted through discourse and identifies such membership with faith. Speaking is belonging is believing. Von Rad understands the “patriarchal narratives” as

playing an important role in the creation of Israel, taking “old cultic traditions of the pre-Mosaic period [that] always belonged only to a very small cultic community” as well as “aetiological narratives . . . [that] had only a limited regional validity” and “broadening” them toward “the Israel of the twelve tribes.” In his view, faith thus involves situating oneself within a new community not narrowly predicated on one’s experience or that of one’s “blood” ancestors, and thereby gaining new ancestors and a new history.

The significance of this perspective can best be understood through comparison with an example of a decidedly modern negotiation of these topics. According to a recent article in The New York Times, a professor “gave his students at Pennsylvania State University genetic ancestry tests to establish the imprecision of socially constructed racial categories.” However, “he found the exercise reinforced them instead. One white-skinned student, told she was 9 percent West African, went to a Kwanzaa celebration, for instance, but would not dream of going to an Asian cultural event because her DNA did not match.” This student reorganized her communal identity to match a biological profile that only became apparent to her through taking a DNA test and that provided information with no corollary in her experience or in the received lore of her family. In sharp contrast, the process to which von Rad alludes involves storytelling deliberately bucking biology and creating a discrepancy between the genetic record and the community’s story about itself. Despite involving a heritage passed on within families,

90 Von Rad, Genesis, 23.
91 My interest here is not in evaluating von Rad’s proposal concerning the history of Israel, but rather in engaging the view of identity implied by his discussion of the “patriarchal” narratives’ relationship to that history.
93 Cf. Wilson, who observes, “the purpose of the recital [of oral genealogies] is not to provide the sort of accurate historical account that is the goal of the modern historian, but to legitimize contemporary lineage configurations” (Genealogy and History, 54). Steven Grosby misses this point, suggesting that a “tribe” is a collectivity
the community of faith cannot ultimately be mapped through DNA. Story takes precedence.94

The emphasis on storytelling in the Bible and post-biblical Jewish tradition expresses a similar conviction about its primacy and its power as an identity-shaping force. Avivah Zornberg remarks on the considerable significance accorded narration, observing,

> Several times, the Torah . . . emphasizes the importance of telling the story to one’s children and grandchildren. At certain moments, this imperative to narrate the Exodus becomes the very purpose of the historical event: it happened so that you may tell it. At the heart of the liberation account, indeed, God prepares Moses with a story to tell a future child; this rhetorical narrative, astonishingly, precedes the historical narrative of liberation.95

In her view, the Bible depicts storytelling as even more important than the events that occasion it. This emphasis on the performance of narrative (act of storytelling) has an impact on the identity of the reader. She explains, “it is precisely through narration, by fulfilling the biblical imperative to tell the story, by the continuing interaction between

determined by biological relationships, as distinct from the fictive kinship that characterizes a “nation” (Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002], 146).

94 The student’s reaction to the DNA test reveals a further nuance to the distinction between story and biology as contrasting means of characterizing familial cohesion. She assumes a linkage between her genetic self and her cultural self, in other words, that her biology determines her story. This conviction reflects the extent to which, as Kenan Malik observes, culture has become “a homologue for race” (The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society [New York: New York University Press, 1996], 8). For this reason, although this study associates “story” with an understanding of identity as adaptable, the correlation between the mode and the mutability of identity is not absolute.

95 Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 4. By “self” she means “the ‘self’ that was liberated from Egypt—whether we consider the people as a psychological unit, or imagine the individual participant in the Exodus” (5).
parents and children, that transformed versions of self and the meanings of liberation will be generated.”  

Several biblical texts enjoin families to recount the story of the exodus from Egypt. The post-biblical Passover Haggadah picks up on subtle differences between these texts and uses them to articulate the significance of this ritual:

The wise son asks: “What is the meaning of the rules, laws and customs which the Eternal our God has commanded us?” You shall explain to him all the laws of Passover, to the very last detail about the Afikoman. [Ex. 12:26-27]
The contrary son asks: “What is the meaning of this service to you?” Saying you, he excludes himself, and because he excludes himself from the group, he denies a basic principle. You may therefore tell him plainly: “Because of what the Eternal did for me when I came forth from Egypt” I do this. For me and not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed. [Ex. 13:8]
The simple son asks: “What is this?” To him you shall say: “With a strong hand the Eternal brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” [Ex. 13:14]
As for the son who does not even know how to ask a question, you must begin for him, as it is written in the Bible, “You shall tell your child on that day: This is done because of that which the Eternal did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.” [Deut. 6:20-21]

The sons’ different attitudes toward the remembrance reflect their different attitudes toward the community. The contrary son excludes himself from the remembrance, and accordingly from the people as well. The exodus story and membership in the community are thus closely linked. To be a member of the community is to be one who has lived with the story, and thereby lived in the story. In this very pointed example of family being

---

96 Zornberg, Particulars of Rapture, 5.
reconstituted every generation, biological descent that is not reinforced through the ritual of storytelling loses its meaning.98

3.5 Reading Genesis as Family Narrative

Studies of family storytelling emphasize the extent to which, even at what many take to be its most basic and biologically-given level, community is socially constructed. Both the scholarly literature and Genesis assign discourse a central role in this process. The literature on family storytelling explores the paradox by which family stories assume the existence of a community (the family) as their context, but also function to create the communion that is the basis for that community. Although Genesis lacks the specific injunctions to storytelling found in Exodus and Deuteronomy, it nevertheless shares with those books a self-consciousness that recognizes that society is forged in the telling and retelling of stories such as the ones it contains. Accordingly, examining communal identity in Genesis requires a sensitivity to the ways in which the text posits and endeavors to shape a community of readers. Family storytelling not only resonates with the biblical emphasis on family, but also provides a model that comprehends this process of creating community through stories.

3.5.1 Genealogy as Family Story

A prominent feature of Genesis with an obvious connection to family, genealogy merits special consideration here. Focusing on the dominant practice in the contemporary

98 This perspective stands in sharp contrast to the essentialist notion of culture implicit in the student’s reaction to the DNA test.
United States, Watson contrasted genealogy with autobiography as opposing means of narrating the self as a member of a larger collective. However, like the nation, genealogy is not an monolithic mode of conceptualizing familial relations. The genealogical practice that Watson describes stands at considerable remove from the usage in Genesis.

Robert R. Wilson’s study *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* demonstrates the limitations of certain modern assumptions about the nature of family and familial identity. It explores the operation of oral and written genealogies in both contemporary and ancient Near Eastern societies as a means of illuminating biblical genealogies and clarifying their significance for historiography. For the purposes of the present study, however, it is perhaps most helpful to highlight the way in which its description of genealogy functions as an account of an approach to conceptualizing identity.

Wilson utilizes a distinction between linear genealogies, which relate an individual to a particular ancestor by focusing on a single line of descent, and segmented genealogies, which map a social network by describing all the members of each generation. He also differentiates between oral and written genealogies, noting that the fluidity of oral genealogies is essential to their role in structuring society and guiding everyday interactions. Rooted in assumptions that run counter to modern conventions, oral genealogies directly oppose those discussed by Watson. They regard ancestry as a product of social negotiations rather than an external check on them. From this perspective, “it is quite possible for apparently contradictory genealogies to coexist in the same society if they have different functions. The people who use genealogies do not hesitate to cite conflicting genealogies if it suits their purpose.”

---

example comes from the work of Laura Bohannan, who offers it as illustration of the point that “a practical compromise sometimes determines a genealogy.” She describes a meeting at which it was debated whether two ancestral names referred to two men, a man and his wife, or one man. The decision was not based on a determination of who was “really” behind the names, but rather on which understanding of them would have the most desirable result for the situation that necessitated the clarification. The outcome of the deliberations “fixed a disputed genealogy” in a way understood to be real and binding.100

Wilson argues that in order to maintain the flexibility needed to address the demands of daily existence, genealogies must be oral in form.101 Committing such a genealogy to writing inhibits the capacity for change that allows it to stay current.102 Colonialism had precisely this impact. Wilson describes European colonial administrators rigidifying genealogies in the African societies they governed.103 Thus, Frantz Fanon’s observation that “the aim of colonial policy . . . was not so much to destroy preexisting

100 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 28-29. Cf. Grosby, Biblical Ideas of Nationality, 5, 9. This use of genealogy calls into question what Grosby cites as “Max Weber’s observation that the great achievement of ethical religions was to shatter the fetters of the sib by establishing the superior community of faith and a common ethical way of life in opposition to the community of blood” (Biblical Ideas of Nationality, 8-9). Kinship cannot necessarily be reduced to “blood,” nor should “blood” and “faith” be contrasted as inherently opposed approaches to characterizing a group’s cohesion.

101 However, the conflict between the approach to historiography that dominates biblical scholarship and the “genealogical mode of thinking” leads Wilson to neglect his own conclusions and remark of Gen 4-5, “certain names have been modified and perhaps corrupted, although it is now impossible to determine which of the present versions of the names are correct, if in fact any of them are” (Genealogy and History, 162). Despite his carefully cultivated understanding of “genealogical fluidity” and its function, in asking whether Gen 4-5 can be made to yield the “correct” names he momentarily slips back into the modern focus on a “real” identity that is unitary and biologically determined.

102 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 131, 198.

cultural forms, as to mummify ‘native’ culture as a form frozen in time, and thereby to deny its creative character.”

As text, the Bible can only contain written genealogies, which have a more limited range of functions than their oral counterparts. Nevertheless, Wilson finds biblical evidence supporting a comparison to oral genealogies. Of Gen 36, he observes, “the author expressed the equation [of Esau with Edom] in the genealogical idiom, and he tolerated the contradictions the new genealogy created. Both of these facts suggest that the author was familiar with the genealogical mode of expression.” Of his examination of select biblical genealogies, Wilson concludes,

...the biblical genealogies we have examined provide no examples of segmented genealogies functioning in the social or political spheres. We suggested that the segmented genealogies in Gen. 36 and the segmented Israelite genealogies may have once functioned in those spheres, but we also noted that these genealogies have no such function in their present written contexts. Gen. 36 has a literary function in the overall redactional structure of this portion of Genesis, but the individual genealogies in Gen. 36 have no function, and the reason for their inclusion is unclear. Similarly, the twelve-tribe Israelite genealogies do not have social or political functions in their present literary contexts.

Deeming it impossible that biblical segmented genealogies could (in that capacity) have the same sociopolitical function as their oral counterparts, Wilson remains unable to identify a purpose for them.

---

104 This quotation is from the summary by Kenan Malik (Meaning of Race, 172); The original reference is to Frantz Fanon, Toward the African Revolution (trans. Haakon Chevalier; New York: Grove Press, 1969), 34.

105 Wilson maintains, “Gen. 36 provides clear evidence that segmented genealogies in the Israelite area functioned in much the same way as do contemporary oral lineage genealogies” (Genealogy and History, 181).

106 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 176. Wilson here refers to the discrepancy between the names and genealogies of Esau’s wives as listed in Gen 36:2–3, Gen 26:34, and Gen 28:9.

107 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 198.
Building on Wilson’s work, Crüsemann begins to move beyond this impasse, demonstrating that a sociopolitical framework used in a way that precludes its performing its usual function may nevertheless have conceptual import.\(^{108}\) He highlights the opposition between “the logic of genealogical thinking” and modern racial nationalism and interprets it theologically.\(^{109}\) On such a reading, rather than simply patterning the community in the ways described in Wilson’s study, the Genesis genealogies evoke that typical role toward a critical end.

Family storytelling provides a link between the role of oral segmented genealogies in actively shaping/reflecting society and the written form of the biblical text, pointing toward a use of genealogy for theological rather than sociological purposes. Many of the original functions of oral genealogy persist, while many others are transformed. Rather than clarifying specific relations between individuals or groups in order to structure such concerns as marriage wards, biblical segmented genealogies offer general guidance that does not require continual revision to remain functional. Thus they serve two purposes. First, they operate in conjunction with other family stories; in other words, they orient family members in relation to the rest of the biblical text. Secondly, they convey the fundamentals of an approach to conceptualizing both relationships and the self as a member of community. Such a vision of communality only gains more relevance in situations in which genealogical means of organizing society have been rendered obsolete, including both modernity and the historical settings in which most scholars locate the “final form” of Genesis. In those contexts it becomes a social critique and a means of nourishing a countercultural sensibility within the family. Wilson’s


description of “native” response to colonial imposition supports this assessment: “The usual response of the tribesman has been to continue to operate politically within an ever-changing lineage framework, while at the same time paying lip service to the ‘official’ government structure expressed by the ‘correct’ genealogy.”

The biblical texts constitute a site of such resistance, obstructing an imperial monopoly on defining identity.

Wilson remarks, “biblical scholars must now take seriously the possibility that the ancient Israelites were interested not in simply passing on a received tradition but in shaping the tradition for particular tendentious reasons.”

The literature on family storytelling illuminates the process of reception and transmission of material by a group that understands itself to be somehow implicated in that material. It suggests that foremost among the “particular tendentious reasons” behind the shape of Genesis is a push to provide and perpetuate an understanding of what it means to be heirs of the patriarchal promises.

In the family narratives of Genesis, genealogy functions not

---

110 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 48.

111 J. Richard Middleton describes a similar role for the imago Dei, which he describes as presenting “an alternative construal of the human condition” to that found in “the matrix of Mesopotamian ideology that legitimated and found embodiment in the empires of Babylon and Assyria” (The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1, [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2005], 185).

112 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 205.

113 Discussing 1 Chronicles 1-9, Marshall D. Johnson suggests that “in essence, this use of the genealogical form is comparable to the previous attempts to maintain a kind of continuity between the patriarchal period and the emergence of Israel as a nation during the exodus and conquest. The ‘census’ list of Num. 26... purports to show the identity of the people of the exodus with the families of the patriarchs enumerated in Gen. 46, thus affirming the status of the Israelites in Palestine as ‘sons of Abraham’ and therefore the true heirs of God’s promises to the patriarchs” (The Purpose of Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus [2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 44). This focus on the community constituted by God’s promises accords well with the presentation of Genesis, suggesting that this designation suits the community that book has in view better than does “Israel,” although the two are coterminous.
only as the vehicle of that understanding, but also as its tenor. Such a focus on the nature of this collective implies a shift in perspective from that employed in the extrabiblical genealogies that Wilson discusses. Rather than clarifying the place of the individual in the group, Genesis delineates the place of the group in the world (or more specifically, the cosmos).

The use of genealogy in Genesis should also be distinguished from the modern usage described by Watson above. Removed from the experience of using genealogy as a means of social construction in the way described by Wilson, moderns take a very literal approach to the genealogies of Genesis, particularly the one in Gen 10. They interpret the focus on descent basic to the genealogical form through the emphasis on blood prominent in their own accounts of identity. From this perspective, the purpose of genealogy is not to delineate networks of relatedness and responsibility, but rather to situate people within a segmented and/or hierarchized account of humanity. Rather than expressing and promoting the cohesion of the community, genealogy functions as a kind of credential for individuals; clarifying their ancestry enables them to lay claim to a particular identity and the prerogatives that go with it. With identity understood in biological terms such that “real” identity lies in the bloodline, genetic testing provides the most reliable means of establishing one’s true self, but genealogy attempts to preserve the same knowledge.

If the Bible does at times display an interest in genealogy as a credential guaranteeing the individual’s place in the community, most notably in Ezra, that does not keep it from utilizing genealogy in other ways. Moreover, Ezra directly depicts life under

---

114 Cf. Johnson, who suggests that “the genealogical form could be used as an alternative to narrative or poetic forms of expression, that is, as one of several methods of writing history and of expressing the theological and nationalistic concerns of a people” (Purpose of Biblical Genealogies, 82).

imperial governance in a way that Genesis does not. Neither can Ezra’s “theological”
rhetoric be separated from his “political” aims. For example, Mark Brett follows
Kenneth Hoglund in assuming that economic motives lurk behind Ezra’s discourse: “The
focus on genealogical purity is . . . a way of establishing the legitimacy of land tenure,
thereby asserting control of land and property.” Observing that Canaanites were
nowhere to be found in the Persian period, Daniel Smith-Christopher suggests that Ezra
invokes the “old terms” like “Canaanite” as a way of dismissing people’s claims to be
Israelites. He argues that these terms “almost surely have become stereotypically
pejorative slurs referring to those ethnic groups who have long since either disappeared
or assimilated, but who were condemned historically as those unclean peoples
‘justifiably’ destroyed by Joshua in the legendary patriotic tales of the founding of the
Davidic House.” Even in Ezra’s usage, then, ethnicity is a matter of allegiance and
alliance, a matter that can be contested, not a fact objectively residing in one’s blood.
The recourse to Urim and Thummim as a means of verifying unsubstantiated claims

---

116 I am not assuming a cleavage between theological and political discourse, only making a temporary distinction as a convenience in conveying this point.
118 Smith-Christopher is here referring especially to the “:mixed marriage crisis”
of chs. 9-10.
120 Commentators who imply otherwise, such as Johnson (*Purpose of Biblical Genealogies*, 43, 80) are likely influenced by the rhetoric of modern racial supremacies that understand kinship as a microcosm of race. Cf. Grosby, who cites “territorial collectivities to which kinship was attributed to those who dwelled within the territory.” He cautions, “the inability to recognize that locational contiguity may be a referent in the relation of kinship has created many problems in the analysis of both ancient Israel in particular and nationality in general” (*Biblical Ideas of Nationality*, 10). Accordingly, it cannot be assumed that Ezra advocated “the homogeneity of the race” (the phrase comes from Johnson, *Purpose of Biblical Genealogies*, 80).
(2:62-63) should not be understood as a supernatural stand-in for genetic testing, but rather as an appeal to a different kind of authority.\textsuperscript{121}

Wilson discusses ways in which genealogy functions as a credential for individuals, although closer examination reveals that this usage differs considerably from the modern approach just described. First, he identifies this credentialing function as a specific property of linear rather than segmented genealogies. The two types of genealogy thus serve different purposes rather than combining to create broad classifications (species) of humanity and then locate individuals on that map. Secondly, the credentials thus obtained are vocational and professional, not physical and genetic. Linear genealogies allow those who use them to lay claim to membership in a particular guild or even to a position of royalty,\textsuperscript{122} but they do not operate within an essentialist account of personhood to validate someone as a member of a certain strain of humanity. Rather than functioning as a means of biological verification of the self that transcends and overrules socially constructed reality, they remain a product of those negotiations.

Often the individual and communal views of genealogy nearly coincide, but the difference between them becomes apparent in cases of discontinuity (e.g., adoption) and in the ways they respond to heterogeneity (exogamous marriage). Grosby suggests that “from the moment of birth the individual is never merely a member of the family into which he or she is born; the individual is also a member of the larger collectivity into which he or she is born.”\textsuperscript{123}Attributing membership in a “larger collectivity” to birth rather than to the social processes that attend it, he takes an individual, biological view of genealogy, emphasizing “the life-giving and life-determining connections formed

\textsuperscript{122} Wilson, \textit{Genealogy and History}, 116-17, 155.
\textsuperscript{123} Grosby, \textit{Biblical Ideas of Nationality}, 201.
through birth to particular persons and birth in a specific territory.”

From this perspective, a baby born in Beijing and adopted by a French-Canadian couple from Montreal is “really” Chinese, even if she does not retain any relational connection with anyone in China and grows up as part of her adoptive parents’ family and community. If her adoptive parents make sure she learns to use chopsticks even though they themselves never use them, they are nurturing their daughter’s cultural identity, which remains somehow different from that of the people among whom she grows up. In such a case of discrepancy between “factual” and lived genealogy, the “factual” genealogy takes precedence. It is significant, however, that this example involves a case of adoption that is not only international, but also interracial. If the adopted baby were white and had been born in Appalachia, it is unlikely that her parents would consider it important to expose her to bluegrass music and educate her in her “native” dialect.

In BirthMarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America, Sandra Patton identifies transracial adoption as a site from which to interrogate the way in which “the metaphor of roots” structures understanding of communal identity.

---

124 Grosby, Biblical Ideas of Nationality, 168. Cf. 174: “The universalistic breakthrough of the axial age did not obliterate primordiality; most individuals are members of collectivities not because of a voluntary exercise of conscience but because of the significance that is attributed to the fact that they are born into them.” This statement resembles the functionalism advocated here in highlighting not the fact itself, but rather the significance attributed to it. Still, it continues to focus on the collectivity of birth rather than the collectivity of experience, a hallmark of the biological approach to genealogy as distinct from the communal approach described by Wilson.

125 Such observations are not intended to deny appearance any relevance to communal identity. Rather, they situate it within an account maintaining that race matters not because it embodies some essential aspect of personhood, but because people believe that it matters and have lived accordingly for hundreds of years. Moreover, it is often the case that skin color overrides other aspects of appearance, so that people have difficulty seeing a child’s resemblance to a parent whose skin is a different color even when there is a biological relationship and the two have similar features. Cf. Sandra Patton, BirthMarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 20.

126 Patton, BirthMarks, 1.
“the period from 1993 to 1996, when transracial adoption reemerged as a controversial issue in public policy and popular culture.” Although she relates “the contentious public dialogue that converged in this social issue” to the particular people whom it impacted most directly, she nevertheless maintains, “this dialogue can also be read as a broader discourse involving questions that touch the lives of all people living in the United States at the turn of the century.”

Lynn Praeger, an adoptee interviewed for Patton’s study, relates an experience that gets right to the heart of genealogy’s modern role as a credential for individuals: “I was upset about this homework assignment [to make a family tree]. And my mom said to me, ‘Well, we’re your family now’. And I said, ‘But that’s not my real family’. [with anger] I mean I had this definite idea to have a family tree you had to know--I mean, I had an idea of roots, that you had to be able to trace it biologically. I mean, I knew that even at whatever age you are in fourth grade, at age nine.”

Praeger’s dilemma highlights the way in which moderns understand genealogy as a declaration of one’s biological inheritance and not one’s communal ties. Although this distinction proves so important to a modern context that even a child cannot avoid being aware of it, Wilson’s study suggests it does not apply to Genesis. The genealogies there are not concerned with clarifying the nature of the individual, but rather with helping the group understand its place in the cosmos.

3.5.2 Interpretive Implications

Identifying Genesis as a family narrative has interpretive implications. The characterization involves recognizing that the text performs certain functions and

---

127 Patton, BirthMarks, 6.
128 Patton, BirthMarks, 1.
highlights certain concerns, and therefore implies that some questions are more relevant than others. Stone emphasizes that the most important feature of a family story is its significance to the family, not its factualness or its entertainment value. Thus, for example, the Passover Haggadah does not call upon each generation to affirm the historicity of the exodus from Egypt, but rather to acknowledge the story’s immediacy and personal importance.

Family stories neither privilege nor preclude factual truth, but rather subordinate it to ideological concerns. Kenneth Kitchen makes a similar observation with regard to biblical genealogies, which could be considered family narratives. He maintains that they “were not intended to serve just a narrowly chronological purpose in the modern sense; . . . their main purpose was theological. . . .” Wilson likewise explains that ancient Near Eastern genealogies were sometimes used as an “idiom,” so that what appear to be inaccuracies actually reflect the particular function of the genealogy. As an example,

129 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 50. This aspect of family stories/narratives does not have automatic implications for the historicity of the biblical texts. Although Stone argues that family stories/narratives prioritize questions of meaning over questions of fact, she also observes that they may preserve factual information that official records get wrong: “The fact of documentation alone is no index to truth, and historically, documented untruth . . . has publicly triumphed over the barely whispered truth of a family’s experience, for no other reason than stamina, for decades, or even centuries” (xiv-xv).

130 Compare the Church Fathers’ perspective on biblical interpretation (as summarized by Auerbach, above): “Holy Scripture favors those whose hearts are simple and filled with faith; . . . such a heart is a prerequisite to ‘sharing’ in it, for sharing and not a purely rational understanding is what it seeks to offer.” The point is not that historicity or rational understanding are excluded, but rather that participation trumps such concerns, perhaps enfolding them as well.


he cites the Assyrian King List, which uses the father-son relationship to describe the succession of kings, many of whom were actually related to their predecessors in other ways. In this case, the genealogy is factual, but not in the way the contemporary reader might expect. Reading Genesis as a family narrative therefore requires sensitivity to its distinctive priorities, which may or may not correspond to the priorities and expectations of the modern interpreter.

The family storytelling approach also helps focus the range of interpretive possibilities. Family members know how their stories should be understood, though outsiders may not. Responding to another family’s courtship story, Stone writes,

As an untutored listener, I thought the story was rather rich with urgency and covert sexual excitement. . . . But this was Jane Gilbert’s story, and she knew its implications. This was not only because she knew how it had been told to her, but because she understood the story in its familial context. She knew the Gilbert codes, patterns, and values that governed daily family life, and she knew the rest of the stories that unambiguously told her what the story of Tessa and Cartwright ought to mean.134

It is important to recognize that Stone’s perspective on the story of Tessa and Cartwright is not intrinsically wrong. It just doesn’t correspond to the way the story functions in the Gilbert family. This assertion of the family’s privilege with respect to their own stories is not meant to deny the legitimacy or the importance of an interpretation offered by an “untutored listener.” Rather, it suggests that certain considerations are essential to understanding the biblical texts insofar as they function as family narratives that undergird Israel’s identity. Moreover, in arguing that a family’s stories make sense to the family in a way that eludes outsiders, Eileen Silva Kindig suggests that they thereby provide a means for outsiders to become family: “When you realize that you are finally in

134 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, 56.
on the joke, perceive all the nuances of a gesture or an expression, and understand what
the story implies, you know that you have had conferred on you a very special privilege.
You are no longer a guest. You are family.”

In her discussion of the story of Tessa and Cartwright, Stone identifies three
reasons why family members have the inside edge on understanding the family’s stories,
each of which closely resembles a common approach or consideration in biblical studies.
First, she cites cues in the presentation of the story (“how it had been told to her”). In
biblical studies, such concerns constitute the focus of literary analysis. Second, she cites
the interpretive context provided by other family stories and by the family itself. In
biblical studies, such considerations characterize intertextual approaches and theological
approaches emphasizing the life and norms of the communities for whom Genesis
functions as a family narrative. They also resemble the kind of sensitivity to the canonical
setting and significance of the biblical texts that has been promoted by Brevard Childs,
engaging the text as one that has been and continues to be transmitted and received.
Whatever its origins, at this point the book of Genesis has spent most of its existence
linked to a fixed group of other texts and to the communities for whom those texts
function as scripture. Those realities have an interpretive significance as decisive as any

135 Kindig, Remember the Time, 166. Her remarks elsewhere confirm that she
refers to a thoroughgoing incorporation into the family: “These are the few, special
people who inch over the line that separates even very dear friends from family. To
choose (or to be chosen) as family is a process that happens only rarely, and seldom
quickly, for the simple reason that it requires participants to assume all the complicated,
uncomfortable and downright wretched parts of family life along with all the warm
fuzzies that make us feel good. Those who cross the line are in for the long haul, which
means that when they encounter a glitch, even a big one, they can be counted on to stick
around and work it out, even when the path leading in the opposite direction looks
infinitely more enticing” (168).

136 See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as
round of redaction, although the text of course has a life beyond them, a life scholars are
certainly justified in exploring.

A leading proponent of a theological hermeneutic, Stanley Hauerwas describes
the special relationship between the Bible and those groups whose self-understanding
depends on it. He maintains, “the narrative requires a corresponding community who
are capable of remembering and for whom remembering remains the key to continuing a
distinctive way of life.” Just as the community requires narrative to remain cohesive,
the narrative requires community to remain meaningful. From this perspective, a
“final form” reading remains diachronic, not only because of textual pluriformity, but
also because of the ongoing negotiations between reader and text. As Kaminsky observes,
“over time a single passage may have been linked with a multiplicity of events.” For
this reason, this study’s lack of participation in the “small cottage industry . . . attempting
to correlate passages in the Bible with specific political events in Israel’s history” should
not be interpreted as reflecting an ahistorical formalist approach. Rather, it recognizes
that the circumstances surrounding the text’s production are not the only ones that shape
it. As argued above, the circumstances surrounding its transmission and reception have
become equally determinative, but in ways that have largely been neglected.

137 In referencing “groups,” I am here extending Hauerwas’ remarks. Hauerwas
focuses exclusively on Christians and the Christian Bible.

138 Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian

139 In this conviction, Hauerwas has been influenced by Stanley Fish’s
contention that “it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader,
that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features” (Is
There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities, [Cambridge, Mass:

140 Joel S. Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election
(Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 52.

141 The quotation is from Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 52.
Stone explains that “as the self creates the text, the text in turn creates both the self [and] a place in the world for the self.” Scholarship on Genesis has tended to focus on the text’s role as evidence of a context and a creating self or selves (individuals or groups within ancient Israel/Judah/Yehud). This study will use family storytelling to consider the text’s own creativity—in Stone’s terms, the ways in which it creates the self and its world. It will look at the depiction of biblical Israel as constructing a community that challenges modern conceptions of how communal identity works.

The considerable degree of overlap between interpretive considerations in family storytelling and in biblical studies means that this study’s exegetical methods will be largely familiar to biblical scholars. Moreover, its use of an alternative exegetical rubric may not always be obvious. In some respects, the account of family storytelling here functions as much as an elaboration of and justification for this study’s assumptions as it does as a means of orienting readers to an unfamiliar mode of discourse. Nevertheless, the literature on family storytelling will help generate a distinct set of questions for the text and the reader. Finally, in light of Stone’s comments, it should be noted that the complexity of the biblical texts and the size of the groups that call it their own makes it unlikely that reading the text as a family narrative will render biblical interpretation entirely unambiguous.

142 Stone, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins, xvii. Examining identity at the level of the individual in “Medical Identity: My DNA/Myself,” Kay Cook likewise observes, “Consider how and why we create our autobiographies. Whether we formally publish retrospective documentaries of our lives or record our thoughts in diaries and letters, we are structuring, however selectively--identities that not only mirror us, but create us. (Even the act of reading what I have written about myself changes who I am.) . . . We are selves in flux.” In Smith and Watson, Getting a Life, 81-82.
4. Recreating Family

The one-sided emphasis on Gen 1-3 has already decided that the genealogies of chs. 1-11 can have no particular significance, in any case, no determining theological significance. The commentaries deal very thoroughly with the names listed in these genealogies; but there is scarcely ever any discussion of the meaning of the genealogies for the whole. To devalue implicitly the genealogies or to leave them aside must have far-reaching effects on one’s final understanding of and judgment on the primeval story.\(^1\)

--Claus Westermann

It has already been noted here that Genesis proves a decidedly unsuitable starting point for a modern study of identity because it lacks those features moderns consider most important to community self-definition. Studies that do work with Genesis generally recontextualize the book and import those elements from elsewhere. While such a perspective is helpful for thinking about how Genesis interacts with and nuances an established national or ethnic identity, it does not engage the ways that Genesis subverts such an identity precisely through its primacy and through its lacks.

In the passage quoted above, Westermann highlights the role of certain exegetical decisions in shaping perceptions of the theological significance of Genesis. Dominant approaches to the book constitute another reason why its distinctive view of communality becomes obscured. Reading communal identity in the Bible depends not only on whether or not one begins with Genesis, but also on \textit{how} one begins with Genesis and \textit{where} in Genesis one begins. For example, it has long been commonplace to subdivide Genesis into two distinct portions: the primeval history, spanning chapters one through eleven, and the patriarchal history, comprising the rest of the book. As means of establishing the

context in which any given passage is read, conceptualizations of the relationship
between these two parts (or lack thereof) have implications for ascertaining the text’s
view of identity. Since the “primeval history” includes some of the most universal parts
of Genesis (or of the Hebrew Bible), relating it to the texts that describe the immediate
origins of the people Israel goes a long way toward an overall interpretation of the
Bible’s universal and particular tendencies. One common perspective, epitomized by E.
A. Speiser, regards Gen 12 as the first episode in “biblical history proper,” relegating Gen
1-11 to the status of preface and depriving it of any foundational role in relation to either
Genesis or the Bible.² As Speiser’s explanation of this assessment demonstrates,
conceptualizations of the relationship between the so-called primeval and patriarchal
histories often already encode understandings of communal identity that are then applied
to the biblical texts.

As highlighted by Westermann, another fundamental exegetical issue in Genesis
concerns the recurrence of the genealogical form and its role in the book’s structure. The
once traditional scholarly view, attributed to Martin Noth, understood the genealogies as
later interpolations designed to link the book’s disparate stories.³ This perspective has
been questioned in recent years, with scholars highlighting the intimate relationship
between the genealogies and the narrative portions of Genesis. A leading proponent of
this reconsideration, Westermann challenges the neglect of genealogy implicit in the
focus on Creation and Fall that constitutes the dominant approach to Gen 1-11. He
observes in that portion of the book “three forms of tradition”: narrative, numerative, and

² E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Anchor Bible 1; Garden
City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1964), LI.
³ Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale
a mixture of the two. In his view, an effective interpretation must engage all three because “the narrative texts and the numerative texts of Gen 1-11 belong together and mutually interpret each other. . . .”

Naomi Steinberg reaches a similar conclusion, despite bringing to bear a very different methodology. Her social-scientific analysis of Genesis leads her to assert, “in the final formation of the text, genealogy and narrative are inextricably linked.” Identifying distinctive roles for genealogy and narrative in “the Genesis ancestral stories,” she explains, “interrelated narrative episodes establish the criteria for determining heirship in each generation of ancestors, while genealogies provide the links between generations. Genealogy also represents the uninterrupted movement from one generation to the next. When problems occur that threaten the continuation of genealogy, narratives interrupt to explore and resolve these generational issues.” Genealogies thus demonstrate the rule while narratives explore the exceptions. In this way, “the narratives and the genealogical framework together organize the plot of generational continuity.”

Steinberg’s view leads her to reevaluate the boundary between the “primeval history” and what she terms “the Genesis ancestral narratives” in order to include the genealogy of Shem (11:10-26) with the latter. Once she has reconfigured the designation between these two sections, the primeval history receives no further attention. Her thesis concerns “the plot of Gen 11:10-50:26,” leaving unanswered the question of how that material relates to the earlier portion of the book. This unanswered question represents a significant weakness in Steinberg’s study. It implies that the primeval history (however

---

7 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 36.
8 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 35.
delineated) does not significantly condition what comes after it, an assumption Levenson shows to be extremely problematic.

It is the contention of this study that the theme of kinship/family constitutes the centerpiece of the book’s presentation of communal identity and of a non-Eurocentric conception of the relationship between reader and text. The genealogies play an integral role in the development of this perspective. The previous chapter suggested that they convey the fundamentals of an approach to conceptualizing both relationships and the self as a member of community. Such a vision of communality only gains more relevance in situations in which genealogical means of organizing society have been rendered obsolete, including both modernity and the historical settings in which most scholars locate the “final form” of Genesis. In such contexts the use of genealogy becomes a social critique and a means of nourishing a countercultural sensibility within the family. Accordingly, the tendency to relegate the genealogies to the sidelines both reflects and reinforces modern presuppositions about communality. Apprehending the distinctive perspective of Genesis requires that chs. 1-11 be read as the first piece of a continuous (though stylistically diverse) whole.9 This chapter will begin that work, exploring the foundation of the book’s framework for comprehending communal identity.

**4.1 Creating Family: Kinship in the Cosmos**

Steinberg’s thesis accounts for the alternation between genealogy and narrative in the latter section of Genesis. However, it does not explain the presence of the same

---

alternation in the earlier portion of the book. If genealogy reflects a concern with heirship and descent, why is the cosmos also depicted under that rubric (Gen 2:4)?

In differentiating the more conventional uses of genealogy from its other appearances in Genesis, Steinberg is in good company. The application of genealogy to the cosmos troubles many commentators. Convinced that דֶּרֶךְ אַחֲרֵי מֵמֶרֶס (“This is the book of the generations of,” Gen 5:1) must mark the start of “the oldest foundation of the Priestly document,” some proceed backward from the word דֶּרֶךְ in 5:1 to its appearance in 2:4. They regard the later occurrence as original and the earlier one as some sort of structural compromise, if not a textual error. Von Rad argues that 2:4 “forces the meaning of the term דֶּרֶךְ, ‘generations,’ ‘register of generations.’ Today one can translate the word דֶּרֶךְ in ch. 2.4a only in the very extended sense of ‘history of the origin’.” Skinner surveys a variety of approaches to the problem of 2:4, concluding, “neither as superscription nor as subscription can the sentence be accounted for as an integral part of the Priestly Code. There seems to be no way out of the difficulty but to assume . . . that the formula in this place owes its origin to a mechanical imitation of the manner of P by a later hand.”

As Westermann remarks, “such an explanation is not sufficient. There can be no doubt that on every occasion P related the word דֶּרֶךְ to its basic meaning of ‘begetting’, even when it had taken on the broader meaning of ‘origin’.” I would argue that what strikes moderns as an anomalous use of the concept of genealogy reflects nothing so much as the distinctive view of family in Genesis. The book understands

11 Von Rad, Genesis, 70.
13 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 16.
family in keeping with what Ellen Davis describes as “the biblical view that there is an unbreakable three-way connection among people, God, and land.” Rather than focusing narrowly on what moderns call “blood relations,” Genesis uses kinship terminology in a broad way. For example, the words פָּחוֹת (‘image’) and מִשְׁמַר (‘likeness’) are used together to describe both God’s creation of humanity and adam’s begetting of Seth (1:26; 5:3), a connection highlighted in verse 5:1’s summary:

In the image of God [God] made him. וְהָיָה בְּרֵאשָׁתָל אֱלֹהָי אֲדֹם פָּחוֹת אֵת אָדָם.

Likewise, similar words mark the adam’s cry of recognition upon seeing the woman for the first time:

Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh! (2:23) מִצְמַח מִמֶּנֶּה יִשְׁתַּרֶל מִמֶּנֶּה.

and Laban’s cry of recognition upon meeting his sister’s son Jacob and hearing his story:

Surely you are my bone and my flesh! (29:14). וּכְבָּשׁתִי מִמֶּנֶּה אֲדֹם אֲדֹם.

In each case, the same terms are used to designate both a typical “blood” relationship and another kind of kinship. The “plot of generational continuity” incorporates much more than the drama surrounding Abraham’s immediate descendants.

The breadth of the portrait of family in Genesis emerges even more clearly in the book’s use of terminology with a more metaphorical relationship to notions of kinship and descent. First, the verb פָּרַע (“be fruitful”) appears fifteen times in Genesis, as many occurrences as it has in the rest of the Hebrew Bible put together, suggesting that the word plays a special role in the book of origins. It occurs in clusters, showing up twice in the first chapter (creation), several more times in chapters eight and nine (the aftermath of the ark narrative, and twice in chapter seventeen (covenant with Abraham), before being found in significant moments in the lives of Isaac (26:22), Jacob (35:11; 48:4), and

Joseph (41:52) and in blessings passed from father to son (28:3; 49:22). It also characterizes Israel in Egypt (47:27). It is a word best characterized as agricultural (e.g., Deut 29:17; Isa 32:12; Ezek 19:10), although, perhaps because of biblical usage, it has also become a familiar way of talking about procreation. The pairing of the commands "be fruitful and multiply" in the creation charge to sea creatures, animals, birds, and humans encourages the reader to interpret the two words as belonging to a hendiadys conveying the single idea of proliferation (Gen 1:22, 28). However, as will be considered in chapter five, the word designates more than reproduction.

The agricultural connotations are even stronger in ḫâdēš ("seed"), another word that Genesis associates with family. The Hebrew Bible applies the word to animals and people in addition to plants. The word may denote either offspring or the material from which they are produced (e.g., coriander seed, semen). The use of words so deeply rooted in the plant kingdom stands in contrast to the modern tendency to view animal life but not plant life as resembling human society. While moderns may identify only with the mobile lives of animals, Genesis finds an analogue to human existence in the rootedness of plants as well. Among potent ways of designating progeny, "seed" implies an essential connection with land. Seed must be embedded in soil if it is to become fruitful, as reflected in this saying of Jesus: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24, NRSV).

With regard to what I am calling the “creation charge,” Gene M. Tucker notes, “the divine speech to the first human pair on the sixth day (1:28-29) is not a commandment but a blessing” (“Rain on a Land Where No One Lives: The Hebrew Bible on the Environment,” JBL 116.1 [1997]: 3-17, 6).

Robin Truth Goodman points out that analogies between human and animal behavior, such as employed in evolutionary narratives, function as a means of naturalizing certain social and economic choices (Infertilities: Exploring Fictions of Barren Bodies [Cultural Studies of the Americas 4; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001], 1-43).
Genesis does not liken people to plants and animals in order to emphasize the biological aspects of descent and thus fully naturalize identity. Although some have appealed to Genesis for support for a policy of “sticking with one’s own kind,” such passages as the so-called “table of nations” (Gen 10) suggest that the book does not readily supply a critique of racial mixing. Like the creation of woman from the אדמית (“rib”) of adam (Gen 2:21-22), the linking of the ancestors of the known world within a single family tree establishes that even the most disparate people are nevertheless made of the same stuff. Indeed, Genesis does not use the phrase מָגוֹל (“according to its kind”) in relation to humanity. Unlike plants and animals, humans have only one species.

In keeping with this view of creation, biblical strictures against intermarriage are generally cast in theological, not biological terms. Even Ezra, widely regarded as the foremost proponent of racial exclusivism in the Hebrew Bible, does not ground his argument for the purity of the “holy seed” (9:2) in a difference between peoples rooted in their very beings as created by God. That move belongs to subsequent interpreters, such as the “messenger from New Mexico” at the 1954 Southern Baptist Convention who claimed that “the Old Testament is filled with the admonition of the Lord that we should


18 An ambiguous phrase in Walter Brueggemann’s discussion of the Babel narrative allows this distinction to blur: “The scattering God wills is that life should be peopled everywhere by his regents, who are attentive to all parts of creation, working in his image to enhance the whole creation, to bring ‘each in its kind’ to full fruition and productivity. This unity-scattered dialectic does not presume that different families, tongues, lands, and nations are bad or disobedient. They are a part of his will” (Genesis [Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 99). On race as a Darwinian subspecies, see Love L. Sechrest, “A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006), 42.
keep our blood pure.” The biblical texts’ identification of people as forbidden marriage partners based on their being “Canaanites,” Hittites, and so on makes it easy to overlook the fact that the basis for their disqualification is never that they are biologically other but rather that they are theologically suspect.

Thus, although it appears to conform to modern racialist discourse, the agricultural approach to family utilized by Genesis belongs to a different world view. The use of the same words to describe both plant and human generativity situates procreation within the larger category of creation, establishing the broad context within which Genesis imagines family. More than mere metaphors, the linguistic connections between humans and plants underscore the interrelatedness of the two forms of life.

According to Gene Tucker (following Theodore Hiebert), the Bible’s depiction of “the integral relationship of humanity to the [natural] world” finds especially clear expression in two verses in Gen 2.

Verse 2:5b attributes an absence of vegetation to certain circumstances characterizing the primordial state:

For YHWH God had not caused it to rain on the land and there was no adam to work the earth.

This verse indicates that humans partner with God in nurturing the land, and are nurtured by it in turn. Hiebert observes that “the connection of God with rain here stands in

---

19 Cited in Robert Parham, “A. C. Miller: The Bible Speaks on Race,” Baptist History and Heritage 27.01: 27-43, 40. It would be interesting to find out whom this unnamed delegate meant by “we.”

20 Tucker, “Rain on a Land,” 8. Although Tucker attributes this perspective to the YHWHist and distinguishes it from that of the Priestly Writer, further consideration of one of his own examples (the Sabbath, see below) suggests that they share this outlook. The issue will not be pursued here, however, because of this study’s use of the “final form.” From that vantage point, both perspectives belong to Genesis and must somehow be understood together as tendencies of a single text.
parallel relationship to the connection of man with cultivation, thus suggesting that rain defines God’s activity in the same basic way that cultivation defines man’s activity.”

Verse 2:7 describes the creation of humanity out of "some of the dust of the earth”). In this way, it not only depicts an intimate relationship between humanity (בָּרֹא) and earth (גָּדוֹל), but also connects humans to other living creatures by presenting them as made out of the same stuff. Tucker explains, “all living creatures are formed from the ground, and both the human being and other living creatures are viable because they have the same ‘breath of life.’”

Any consideration of identity in Genesis should engage what Levenson identifies as “the only particular vestige of the act of creation,” namely the Sabbath, “through which Israel replicates the rhythm of the protological events (2:1-3).” As a commemoration of an event that precedes the existence of the people (Ex 20:10-11), it bolsters the depiction of Israel as a people defined by its sacred history, not its profane one. Moreover, Tucker argues that the depiction of Creator and creation sharing in


24 The Hebrew Bible offers two different rationales for Sabbath observance. Deuteronomy 5:14-15 relates it to liberation from Egypt. The connection between these two apparently conflicting origins will be explored below.

25 In contrast to what he describes as “a venerable tradition in Old Testament scholarship that rather unreflectively claims that Genesis 2:1-3, as part of the P document, constitutes the institution of the Sabbath,” J. Richard Middleton distinguishes between the “rhetoric of the text” and the history of its interpretation, arguing that, on its own terms, this passage does not “constitut[e] the institution of the Sabbath” (The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1, [Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2005], 212). The family storytelling approach suggests the treatment offered here, which highlights both this text’s relationship to one of the family’s defining practices and Israel’s absence from this text.
Sabbath observance offsets the anthropocentric tendencies of the Priestly creation story. He describes the Sabbath as “a significant qualification of the [potentially oppressive] commissions to humanity [in Gen 1:28].” One of Israel’s defining observances thus functions as an affirmation of oneness with the universe as well as its creator. In this context, the genealogy of the cosmos proves a particularly appropriate predecessor to the genealogies of such figures as *adam* and Noah. The vision of relatedness that forms the foundation of Israel’s identity reaches beyond the borders of the “nation,” and even the species.

### 4.2 Recreating Family: Generation and Degeneration

Genealogies provide the rubric that gives Genesis its structure and conveys this vision of cosmic relatedness. In a case of form following content (or vice versa), family proves especially important to apprehending both the functional unity of the text and the unified conception of humanity that emerges from it. Despite the many discontinuities between the first chapters and the ones that follow, the prominence of kinship language in both sections underscores a thematic unity.

Headings featuring the word יִדוּרֵי נְפֹלֶן occur eleven times in the book of Genesis (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2), all beginning with יִדוּרֵי נְפֹלֶן (with or without a conjunctive vav; “these are the generations of”), with the notable exception of the one in 5:1, which begins יִדוּרֵי נְפֹלֶן ("this is the book of the generations of"). Eleven occurrences strikes many commentators as a disagreeable

---

26 Tucker, “Rain on a Land,” 7. The word “anthropocentric” in this context should be understood as a relative rather than absolute characterization of the narrative, reflecting Tucker’s interest in the relationship between humans and the rest of creation.
quantity, given the way in which “formulaic numbers . . . are characteristically used by
the biblical writer to give order and coherence to the narrated world.” 27 As a result, they
often try to reduce it to a number with more symbolic resonance. Skinner notes two
proposed corrections designed to rehabilitate the structural device: “Transposing 2a to the
beginning and disregarding 36 (both arbitrary proceedings), we obtain ten sections.” He
further observes that another commentator whittles the number down to seven. 28

As Skinner remarks, these are arbitrary moves. Neither “solution” makes use of
the major semantic difference in verse 5:1. The addition of a word there suggests that this
verse should be the one singled out from the others; that the unexpected word is יִרְפָּא
suggests that the section it heads speaks in a special way to the book as a whole. 29 I
would argue that the imperfect pattern with its awkward number of repetitions reinforces
the story told through it. Genesis devotes considerable attention to thwarted designs and
disruptions in the rhythms of existence.

Although scholars have often based source or redaction critical assessments on
the formulaic character of the genealogies in Genesis and the departures from that
regularity, 30 those features could also be understood as enacting a deliberate literary
effect rather than reflecting the clumsiness of editorial accretion. Attentive readers have
often discerned a strategic use of repetition and variation in the biblical texts. 31 In

27 This description of the role of numbers in the Bible comes from Alter (Five
Books of Moses, 34), but Alter is not among those troubled by the number of יִרְפָּא
headings.
28 Skinner, Genesis, lxvi.
29 I am making this argument only for Gen 5:1. I am not making any claims
about the significance of the phrase יִרְפָּא in other contexts.
30 E.g., Von Rad, Genesis, 140; Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 9; Gordon J. Wenham,
88-113; Aharon Mirsky, “Stylistic Device for Conclusion in Hebrew,” Semitics 5 (1977): 9-
Genesis, patterns and their disruption constitute both a literary technique and a thematic element. This point emerges with particular clarity in the genealogies, the infamous “begats” that for many readers epitomize the monotonous character of the Hebrew Bible.

This study will devote considerable attention to Gen 5, a chapter that has received from modern readers scant scholarly attention (beyond the curiosity occasioned by its massive life spans) and even less theological interest. As Brueggemann observes, “in tracing the main theological elements in Genesis, it is usual to move directly from the Cain story in 4:1-16 to the flood story beginning in 6:5, with some minor attention to 6:1-4.” Nevertheless, the thematic and structural prominence of family in Genesis suggests that this chapter has more than a peripheral role in the book.

Wilson suggests, “because the genealogy is linear throughout most of its length, we would expect the Priestly writer to connect the last-named person in the genealogy with an earlier ancestor in whom the person grounded his claims to power, status, or possessions.” Joining those commentators who highlight the transmission of the creation blessing in this passage, Wilson continues, “when we examine the way in which P has shaped his genealogical narrative, we see that in fact he is using the genealogy in precisely this way.” Such an observation does not exhaust the significance of the passage, however. Gen 5 does more than confirm that the blessing given to adam also applies to Noah; it depicts the transmission of a complex legacy. As a narrative rather than a list, the genealogy not only links Noah with adam, but also situates him in relation to the larger series of developments of which adam was a part.

32 Brueggemann, Genesis, 64. He offers a brief treatment of Gen 5.
33 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 163-64.
Like the book of Judges, Gen 5-9 collapses large periods of time in a patterned refrain, occasionally interrupted by more detailed narrative describing the exploits of an important figure. Although the headings delineate two units in these chapters (one from the beginning of chapter five to verse 6:8 and another from verse 6:9 to the end of chapter nine), the recurrence of the pattern of chapter five at the end of chapter nine suggests that all five chapters should be considered together. Gen 5:6-9 presents the first occurrence of the theme in this theme-and-variations structure:

And Seth lived 105 years and begot Enosh. Seth lived after his begetting Enosh 807 years and then he begot (other) sons and daughters. So all the days of Seth were 912 years, and then he died.

The next verse takes up into the same formulae. For most of chapter five, this pattern is repeated exactly with several different figures, ages, and life spans. From 5:22 to the conclusion in 9:29, additions and deviations enter into the pattern, the largest being the Noah narrative from 5:32 to 9:27.34

In comparing the literary techniques of Gen 5-9 to the structure of a musical composition like Edward Elgar’s Enigma Variations, I am making a fairly loose analogy in order to bring an interpretive insight from music to bear on Genesis. The Enigma Variations begin with a theme that subsequently takes on different nuances in order to reflect significant people and relationships in Elgar’s life. The theme provides a point of departure from which to recognize the distinctive character given to each section of the

34 Cf. Wilson, Genealogy and History, 161.
piece, and, some would argue, constitutes a motif that runs throughout the entire piece. One interpretation holds that the enigma is friendship, manifested in each relationship reflected in the piece. This example proves instructive for Genesis because it points to the way in which patterns and variations convey meaning as parts of a schema for representing and relating a group of figures.

In contrast to the typical use of theme and variations in musical composition, in Gen 5-9, the first variation actually occurs before the theme. Instead of beginning with an unmarked version to throw subsequent inflections into relief, it provides a kind of interpretive introduction to the material that follows. Although the verses devoted to adam (5:3-5) generally conform to the structure of the genealogical list in 5:6ff, they also contain elements that relate them to the heading in 5:1-2 and to the creation account in 1:26-28.\(^{35}\) Thus, instead of simply noting that adam begot Seth, 5:3 mentions that he begot \(כָּרָאָה הַמָּלָּעָה \) ("in his likeness, according to his image") and that he named the begotten one Seth. This verse marks the third (and final) appearance of the word \(כָּרָאָה \) ("likeness") in Genesis. The other two occurrences use the word to describe God’s creation of humanity (1:26 and 5:1), strongly coloring its usage in 5:3.

The delayed mention of Seth’s name in 5:3 also reflects the creation account in 5:1-2, in which God makes and then names:

\[
\text{This is the book of the generations of } \text{adam}, \text{ on the day of God’s creating } \text{adam}. \text{ In the likeness of God he created him/it. Male and female he created them. And he blessed them and called their name } \text{adam} \text{ on the day he created them.}
\]

---

\(^{35}\)As noted above, I have deliberately refrained from capitalizing “adam” in order to emphasize that the word is not only a proper name for a single being, but also a more generic term for a category of beings—humans. I think it is significant that Genesis allows these two functions to blur. Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 80.
In these verses there is a shift in object associated with these two processes: God makes him, but names them יִמְנָה. The placement of the naming after God’s creating him (it?) has been restated to specify that God created them male and female suggests that יִמְנָה still designates humanity rather than simply functioning as the proper name of an individual man. As an introduction to a long series of figures beginning with יִמְנָה, it also indicates that women may have a more significant presence in this passage than a superficial reading would discern. Finally, this usage of יִמְנָה provides a certain segue from creation to human generational succession. Overall, by using similar language to describe both God’s and adam’s actions, Gen 5:1-3 establishes a degree of continuity between creation and procreation.

The next five figures are presented with grim regularity as participants in an unvarying structure. Some commentators, particularly among those who read this passage in sequence rather than disconnecting it from the story of the transgression in Eden, emphasize the relentless march of death in the recurring refrain יִמְנָה (“and then he died”). Von Rad notes the exceptional longevity of “the ancestral fathers,” suggesting that “we must understand man’s slowly diminishing life span (most consistent in the Samaritan system) as a gradual deterioration of his original, wonderful vitality . . . .”

Focusing on a different structural element, Sarna describes the logic behind the subdivisions in the treatment of each individual. He explains, “the continuity of the line is

36 Cf. Alter, Five Books of Moses, 35; Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, 80.
37 Cf. Westermann, who argues, “even if P names only one male in each generation in the genealogy which he thus introduces, nevertheless this initial allusion to the complementarity of man and woman shows that the stream of generations through the ages presupposes they belong in community” (Genesis 1-11, 356).
38 Cf. Alter, Five Books of Moses, 35.
39 Von Rad, Genesis, 69.
in jeopardy until the birth of the first son, who becomes, for that reason, a child of destiny. Hence, this event marks a meaningful point of demarcation in the measurement of a human lifetime.”

These comments reflect the awareness that the generations of adam contend with the escalating degeneration evident in Gen 3-4. Continuity had been built into the rhythm of creation (e.g., 1:29; 2:6, 10), but the curses of Gen 3 suggest, and the strife of Gen 4 confirms, that fulfillment of the creation charge has become a matter of struggle.

Westermann suggests that in Genesis, “consciously or not, there has been a return to the earlier stage of [ancient Near Eastern] tradition when creation and struggle were not linked.” In these remarks, Westermann focuses on Gen 1. However, the book does depict a struggle for creation, one that occurs subsequent to the moment of origins and with humans, not monsters or rival deities, as the antagonists. Elsewhere Westermann recognizes such a conflict that follows rather than conditions “primeval creation,” but it again focuses on rival deities. This shift is in keeping with Westermann’s observation that in Genesis, “the uniqueness of what happened before history or in the primeval event has moved from the story of the gods to the story of human beings.” He notes that the biblical genealogies do not focus on the birth of gods and goddesses, but rather “describe

---

41 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 31. Westermann suggests that the word הָיוֹתָן indicates a return to an earlier idea of creation as a birth or series of births.
42 Elsewhere Westermann makes a similar connection: “It is quite possible that where [the myth of the war between the gods] is the dominant motif, the revolt of humankind which is punished by the gods recedes into the background or passes over into the war motif. If this is correct, the one would readily understand how in Israel, where the motif of a war between the gods or the revolt of one god against another was utterly out of place, humanity’s revolt against God and its consequent punishment came to the fore” (Genesis 1-11, 55).
43 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 41.
the history of humankind only and so acquire an importance that they could not have in
the realm of myth.”

Recognizing the epic challenge Genesis depicts in everyday human existence
helps explain the different scholarly responses to this passage. What von Rad describes as
“the effort of [Gen] 5 to arrange the ages of man and of the world theologically” prompts
him to highlight an opposition between “Old Testament faith in YHWH” and “the
mythical, cyclical thinking of ancient Oriental religions.” Westermann, however,
discerns a distinct alternative to “the western view of history” in this passage. The
western view, he explains, “considers only the variables to be constitutive; this is the
presupposition in the concept of historical development as well as in the underscoring of
the historically unique.” In contrast,

When P introduces his historical work with the genealogy of Gen 5 he is saying
that history never consists merely in historically demonstrable processes,
developments and an apparently unique course of events. Rather, there are at
work in every event elements of the stable, always and everywhere the same,
which are common to all humankind at all times and which render questionable a
science of history that prescinds from these constants. The intention of Gen 5 is to
set a limit to the application of this sort of historical science to what is intended in
the biblical texts.

These characterizations of the philosophy of history at work in Gen 5 demonstrate the
way in which the reader’s expectations and assumptions condition interpretation. Here,
the oppositional categories of East and West play a leading role, although von Rad and
Westermann apply them very differently. However, that two such diametrically opposed

44 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 8.
45 Von Rad, Genesis, 68.
46 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 347. Interestingly enough, Westermann here reads
from the biblical text an insight similar to the one that only recently prompted
archaeology to shift its focus from the monumental to the everyday.
perspectives emerge in relation to the same text not only reflects divergent Orientalist approaches to a text that hovers between classifications (see chapter six), but also points to the tendency of this passage to convey the progressive through the cyclical.

As a rubric, genealogy implies both continuity and change within a network of relatedness. Thus, of the account of Seth’s begetting in 5:3, Brueggemann remarks:

It is not said that he is in the image of God, but in the image of Adam, who is in the image of God. Thus, he is one step removed. This might mean he continues the image of God, for the image of God is granted not only to the first human but to all humans. But such an assertion is hedged, for the image of Adam is something less, and marred (cf. Gen 3). Thus, the text may realistically recognize that Seth and his heirs are a strange, unresolved mixture of the regal image of God and the threatened image of Adam. Such a double statement recognizes the ambivalence of humankind . . . .

This interpretation reads Gen 5 as continuing the narrative trajectory of the previous four chapters, taking up the story of creation and broken relationship, not ignoring it or interrupting it with gratuitous background information.

Some commentators find in 5:3 heretofore missing confirmation that the image of God does not belong exclusively to adam, but is shared by his descendants. However, I doubt that in Genesis M〆N ever entirely sheds its broader meaning to function solely as a personal name. Adam is not only the eponymous ancestor of humanity, but also a kind of stand-in for the whole of the species, the seed of that which is to come. “He” is never simply an individual like any other, a point confirmed by the way Genesis 5 continues to use the name in a generic sense after its role as a personal name has been established.

While the transmission of the image of God constitutes a matter of considerable theological interest and has understandably commanded exegetical attention, such a focus

47 Brueggemann, Genesis, 68.
48 E.g., Skinner, Genesis, 130; von Rad, Genesis, 70-71; Sarna, Genesis, 42.
can lead one to miss the broader definition of family in play in this passage. The image of God too easily becomes interpreted as a kind of genetic feature, like blue eyes or curly hair. Yet, as Brueggemann’s remarks acknowledge by their reach toward narrative, the inheritance transmitted across the family tree includes more than chromosomes. After all, despite the preoccupation with family in Genesis, strikingly little attention is given to physical description beyond those characteristics that turn out to be important to the story being told.\textsuperscript{49} The reader is informed that Jacob was smooth-skinned while Esau was hairy, but not that Jacob had Abraham’s eyes or Sarah’s coloring. As reflected in the narrative boundaries delineated by the \textit{םֵּיהֶלֶּיִלָּה} formulae, which often subsume even a prominent son’s story under that of his father,\textsuperscript{50} members of biblical families are heirs to one another’s stories. In Genesis 5, that story is identified as one of life, childbearing, and death in the aftermath of Eden. And if that story seems too generic to have significance, keep in mind that in these early chapters of Genesis human existence is just beginning to take shape. It is during the course of these chapters that the ordinary becomes such, as people negotiate the dual legacy of the blessings of creation and the curse of the so-called Fall. After all, these are the generations of \textit{adam}.

The events of Gen 3-4 and the characterization of humanity in 6:5 suggest that the early part of Genesis chronicles the degenerations of \textit{adam} as well as the generations. These two processes, generation and degeneration, blessing and curse, provide the drama neatly packaged in Gen 5’s list of births and deaths.\textsuperscript{51} The figures whose stories disrupt

\textsuperscript{49} Alter, \textit{Art of Biblical Narrative}, 79ff.
\textsuperscript{50} Skinner, \textit{Genesis}, lxvi.
\textsuperscript{51} Cf. Westermann, who explains, “the genealogies are part of the human condition and remain so in Gen 1-11. P states explicitly that they are the working out of the blessing given at creation and that it is this same blessing which is at work in the succession of generations leading up to Abraham as well as in the line which takes its beginning from him” (\textit{Genesis 1-11}, 66).
the narrative pattern are those who disrupt the existential pattern as well. Accordingly, each interruption says something not only about the person presently under discussion, but also about the whole list and the process it describes. As Westermann points out, meaning lies in the constant (“the person’s state as a creature and its consequences”) as well as the variable (“the names and numbers”).

The next variation (after the introduction) occurs in 5:22. Instead of repeating the verb יָֽוֵֽא (“and he lived”) to characterize the second stage of Enoch’s life (after the birth of his son Methuselah), the text specifies הָלַּ֔וָּא (“and Enoch walked with God”), resuming the pattern with a report of the duration of this activity. Then, at the point when the pattern dictates a mention of his death, the text replaces הָלַּ֔וָּא (“and then he died”) with the same phrase. Closure remains somewhat elusive, as the tantalizingly ambiguous הָלַּ֔וָּא (“and he was no more, for God took him”) concludes discussion of this life marked by walking with God rather than living and dying. The impact of this intervention remains as uncertain as its conclusion. With the unusual account of Enoch still hanging in the air, the text resumes its normal course. The account of Methuselah (5:25-27) does not deviate at all from the standard pattern, although his lifespan is the longest attributed to any biblical figure.

The pattern is broken again almost as soon as it is reinstated, however. Rather than immediately identifying Lamech as the father/ancestor of the particular person who become the next link in the chain, 5:28 reports only that Lamech begot “a child” (אֲנָפָּא). As in 5:3, the name is temporarily withheld, but to different effect. This time, delaying the name functions to highlight it. An entire verse (5:29) is devoted to the naming of Noah and the rationale behind it:

52 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 347. The terms “constant” and “variable” are his.
And he called his name Noah, saying, May this one comfort us from our toil and from the pains of our hands coming from the soil, which YHWH has cursed. 53

As with many biblical names, the rationale reflects a different root than the name itself. The name נָחָה comes from נָהַד, to rest, repose, or settle down, but the explanation cites נָהַם, to comfort or console. In their lexicon, Koehler & Baumgartner try to correct this discrepancy, suggesting that נָהַם should be replaced with a form of נַחֲז. 54 However, the use of two different roots adds a level of meaning to the text, as both prove important in the early part of Genesis. Indeed, verse 5:29 uses words that summarize a considerable portion of the narrative.

The root נָהַד first appears in Gen 2:15, in which God takes the newly-created adam (cf. Enoch, Gen 5:24) and settles him/it in the garden of Eden:

And YHWH God took the adam and settled it in the Garden of Eden, to work it and to keep it.

This verse reflects the close bond between נָהַד and נָחֲז discussed above in relation to Gen 2:5b and 7. The description of creation in Genesis 2 begins with the land and describes the formation of the first human from that perspective. The land lacks a human, just as the human will subsequently lack a companion (2:20), so from the land a human is

53 My translation has made use of the one offered by Everett Fox (The Five Books of Moses: A new Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes [Schocken Bible 1; New York: Schocken, 1997]).

formed, just as from the (hu)man a woman is formed.\textsuperscript{55} Although much has been made of the creation of woman in response to the man’s need,\textsuperscript{56} commentators have largely ignored the creation of humanity in response to the land’s need. Nevertheless, Genesis specifies that wholeness involves humans in relationship with land as well as with each other (and with God).

Lamech’s speech upon naming his son echoes the language of Gen 3:17, which encapsulates the consequences for the land brought about by the recently damaged relationships between the humans and between humanity and God.\textsuperscript{57} God says to the \textit{adam}:

\begin{quote}
כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּ יָדֵי אִשְׁתֶּךָ אֶת פָּרָה הַגְּרוֹעִית לְאֵל אֵלָי אֵלָה לָא אֵלָּלָּא יָדֵי אֱלֹהִים הַגְּרוֹעִית אֶת פָּרָה הַגְּרוֹעִית לָא אֵלָּא יָדֵי אֱלֹהִים
\end{quote}

Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree that I commanded you: you shall not eat from it, cursed is the earth on your account. With painstaking-labor shall you eat from it all the days of your life (cf. Fox).

The land will bear a curse, and humans will gain sustenance from it only with a struggle. This verse thus describes a profound disruption in the created harmony established in 2:15. The humans are dis-placed even before they are cast out of Eden, and in the process they lose something of themselves. Reunification comes only through death and decomposition (3:19), a kind of reversal of creation. In Brueggemann’s terms, the human image becomes threatened. In addition to the language that Lamech cites, the reference in

---

\textsuperscript{55} Cf. Mark G. Brett, who finds here “the seeds of deconstruction” of the man’s speech in 2:23 (\textit{Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity} [London: Routledge, 2000], 30).

\textsuperscript{56} Commentators highlighting this circumstance generally interpret as יִצְרָאֵל specifically male.

\textsuperscript{57} I am not convinced that the speech in 3:17 is strictly performative, calling the curse into existence in the same way that light was called into existence in 1:3. I suspect that it has an observational dimension.
this verse to הַלְּיָבֵי וְנָקֹקָר ("all the days of your life") also has a parallel in Gen 5, providing support for the idea that its counting the days has narrative as well as numerative import.

If one stops there, then Koehler & Baumgartner’s proposal to emend נְגוֹכָר makes sense as a way of consolidating the allusions in Lamech’s speech. However, other words that he uses, coupled with recurrences of words already discussed, suggest that more than Gen 2:15 and 3:17 are in view. The explanation of Noah’s name also has strong linguistic ties to Gen 6:6, a verse that proves decisive for his destiny:

וַיִֽהְיוּ חַיֶּה בַּאֲדָמָה רְאֵהוּ פֶּרֶץ לֹא יַזְדַע אִישׁ אָדָם מֵאֵזֶר לְהַכְּפָס אֵלַי-לָהו

Then YHWH was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, and it pained his heart (Fox).

A worthy subject of attention for the numerologically oriented, the root נְנוֹכָר occurs seven times in Genesis: three times in 3:16-17, once in 5:29 (Lamech’s speech), once here, and twice later in the book (34:7; 45:5). It does not appear again in the rest of the Pentateuch. These carefully apportioned occurrences suggest that the root may have thematic significance. In Gen 3, the word describes the consequences that humanity suffers as a result of its transgression. Here, it characterizes YHWH’s suffering as a result of the degeneration of נְדוֹר. In the early chapters of Genesis, the word thus denotes the particular state of grief brought on by the frustration of the creation’s interdependence and its connectedness with the creator.

The root נְדוֹר occurs more than twice as many times as נְנוֹכָר, but not so frequently as to suggest that its appearance both here and in 5:29 represents nothing more than coincidence. The presence of these two words in both contexts gives credence to the possibility that the common root יְנָשָׁה has special significance as a link between 5:29 and
6:6. Koehler & Baumgartner suggest that the word הָעַנָּן in Gen 5:29 should be translated as “labour,” reading נָעָן as “parallel with דָּרוֹן.” However, הָעַנָּן could also be translated as “deed” or “human achievement,” meanings Koehler & Baumgartner commend in other contexts. Rather than two phrases referring to the curse, the first phrase could refer to the deed that brought it on, or more broadly, the series of degenerative behaviors that begin with that first transgression. Lamech’s own name points to that reality in that it also designates Cain’s descendant in the seventh generation, a man who boasts of his own brutality (Gen 4:23-24). As a pair, נָעָן could refer to the dubious achievements of humanity and their consequences for the relationship between מַדָּא אֲדֹ Nelson and הָעַנָּן. Gen 6:6 uses the root מַשָּׁה to describe creation (as did Gen 2:2 but not Gen 5). However, unlike previous references to creation, this one is negative; the word appears as part of an expression of divine regret. Like the נָעָן to which Lamech refers, this regret stems from the destructiveness of human behavior. A single root thus recalls the divine act of creation as well as the human act that sets it back, encapsulating the tension that drives the narrative.

The root מַשָּׁה also defines Noah’s specific part in the larger story. God’s first quoted instruction to him directs him to מַשָּׁה, to make himself an ark, a command structurally parallel to the one that later sends Abram away from his homeland (לֵךְ שְׁמֹא לָכֵן, 12:1). In both cases, a positive response to the divine command makes the rest of the story possible. As Abram/Abraham and later Jacob/Israel will be characterized by their movement (Deut 26:5), the command to make, and more generally, to act constructively (pun intended) defines Noah’s life. Although Genesis ascribes 950 years to him, he is remembered primarily for building and floating in the ark, events of a single year of his middle age.
The root יֹנַי displays similar versatility. In Gen 5:29 it conveys Lamech’s longing for consolation from the curse that afflicts human existence, but in Gen 6:6 it designates YHWH’s deep regret at ever having brought humanity into being, presaging the creator’s transformation into the destroyer. Its salient role in the introduction to the Flood narrative (appearing in 6:6 and 6:7) allows that, more than any other word in Lamech’s naming speech, it foreshadows this event. Extending the reach of 5:29’s network of allusions to the Flood narrative brings another occurrence of יֹנַי into view. In Gen 8:4, the root marks the resolution of the crisis as the flood waters begin to subside and the ark finds a resting place.

The words here discussed delineate a story of broken relationship, escalating violence, and encroaching decay, evoking both the blessings of creation and the destructiveness of the curse. In Lamech’s naming speech, they express a hope for how Noah might figure in that story. The doubly-layered name, drawing on both יֹנַי and מִנָּה, evokes the state of blessing that has been lost and portends both devastation and eventual consolation. It alludes to Noah’s negotiation of the general condition of humanity as well as the particular crisis of his own day.

Scholars often consider the extent to which the Flood represents a continuation of the narrative trajectory established in Gen 2-3 less important than the recurrence of Flood accounts in ancient Near Eastern literature. Westermann notes, “it has often been remarked that the flood story in both J and P contains many striking echoes of the creation stories,” but nevertheless maintains that “these are to be seen against the

59 Westermann cites a further parallel: “Many interpreters point out that 6:12 is formulated in parallel to 1:31 (e.g., A. Dilmann, O. Procksh, W. Zimmerli, U. Cassuto). The unexplained contrast between ‘very good’ and ‘utterly corrupt’ comes thereby into sharper relief” (Genesis 1-11, 416).
background of the history of the stories.” Some recognize the cycle of sin and consequence in the early chapters of Genesis, but do not really adopt a perspective internal to the text in considering the question of why destruction should come in the form of a flood. Hiebert observes,

Largely left out of--or at least of only secondary interest in--this “growing power of sin” approach to the primeval age is an important motif that appears in each of the major episodes of this age: the curse on arable soil. The motif of the soil’s curse is in actuality neither a minor nor an ancillary concern of the narrator’s. It occurs prominently at the narrative climax of each of the individual episodes, and these appearances together provide narrative and thematic cohesion for the primeval narrative as a whole. The soil’s curse is an element around which narrative tension is built, and it is the only issue ultimately resolved by the flood.

As already discussed, the first human transgression disrupted the network of nurture connecting God, humans, and land established during creation. Cain’s murder of his brother manifests the growth of this fissure, with a reiteration of the curse of displacement (4:12). The massive flood represents a similar response to increasingly widespread human waywardness, constituting the erasure of all place.

This ability to obliterate land lends specificity to water’s role as an agent of chaos. In addition to whatever it may owe to the ancient Near Eastern convention that identifies conflict within the divine pantheon as a hallmark of creation, the depiction of water in

---

60 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 50. Westermann here highlights the way in which creation and flood stories are coupled in extrabiblical sources, a circumstance he attributes to their shared status as primeval events.

61 My point here is not to devalue an external perspective. It is, of course, very important to be familiar with the ancient Near Eastern background to the Flood story. What I am suggesting is that if inquiry stops there, it does not fully reckon with the significance of the Flood narrative in Genesis. If the Flood (or the pairing of creation and Flood) represents a common narrative trope, its appearance in Genesis nevertheless reflects and contributes to the particular shape of that text.

62 Hiebert, The [Yhwhist’s] Landscape, 68.
Genesis corresponds to the book’s perspective on the sustenance of creation. Creation establishes a balance between (ground) water and land that enables plant, animal, and human life to emerge (Gen 1:9ff). In addition, these forms of life depend on YHWH’s provision of rain from above (Gen 2:5-6). That the Hebrew Bible only inconsistently casts water in an adversarial role may thus reflect water’s ambivalent relationship to life rather than the biblical texts’ varying degrees of indebtedness to other ancient Near Eastern mythology. In relation to the network of nurture, water is neither intrinsically problematic nor intrinsically beneficial. The measured provision of rain maintains land-based life, but in the Flood story, the overprovision of rain upsets the balance between water and land and reverses the course of creation. The substance of divine care becomes the instrument of divine condemnation.

However, the reverse is also true. The Flood story marks a turning point in Genesis in that it transforms the consequence of sin into the means of redemption. Although life as a שִׂדְחָה (vagabond) was prescribed as punishment for Cain, the reward for Noah’s righteousness (6:8-9) is that he lives the most transient existence yet. His name means being at rest, but he floats in an ark (תֵּאֶב) on the sea as one of the first humans to live entirely detached from land. An echo of the story of Enoch in the description of Noah (יהוה הילאתיו ||を与תיו; “with God he walked”) (6:9; cf. 5:22, 24) provides background to the story, setting the stage for Noah’s transformative experience of displacement.63 Like Noah, Enoch was moved (taken) because of his closeness to God. A linguistic connection calls attention to the way in which Noah’s story prefigures that of Moses, who escapes Pharaoh’s death sentence on Hebrew boys by floating in an

63 Westermann also notes the parallel but describes its relevance in terms of the way in which it offers “clear proof that both sentences, 5:24 and 6:9, go back to an earlier motif that occurred elsewhere” (Genesis 1-11, 15).
ark (ark) to survival as a member of Pharaoh's own family (Exod 2:5-6). Noah’s experience also stands as the prototype of the offer that Moses later declines, a connection cemented by the root הִזָּה:

(Exod 32:10)

So now, let me be, that my anger may burn against them and I may finish them off, but you I will make into a great nation (cf. Fox)

The Flood story thus witnesses the development of displacement into a force for reconstituting community, its recurring role in the biblical texts. For this reason, although it is Abram/Abraham who inaugurates the wanderings of the matriarchs and patriarchs, Noah’s voyage provides an important precedent for their journeys. It becomes a means of demarcating and consecrating the first covenant community, coterminous with all human and animal life (9:8-10). In the wake of the destruction wrought by the Flood, this community both reflects an act of divine differentiation and remains infinitely inclusive.64

In keeping with Mary Douglas’ contention that the distinction between clean and unclean animals corresponds to the distinction between elect and non-elect humans, the two groups are distinguished and experience different fates at the time when the same thing first happens among humans.65 Upon disembarking and setting foot on dry land, Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifice:

64 Contra Steven Grosby, who implies that Adam and Noah are uniquely Israel’s: “We know from Genesis 11 that Abraham was of the tenth generation in the line of Noah through Shem; and, from Genesis 5, that Noah was of the tenth generation descended from Adam. Thus, YHWH’s choice of Abraham was presented as indicating the cosmological significance of a particular lineage . . .” (Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002], 101).

65 Mary Douglas, Leviticus as Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 149. Although the singling out of Noah, his wife, sons, and daughters-in-law for survival
He took from every clean animal and from every clean bird and he performed sacrifices on the altar.

YHWH’s response involves a play on Noah’s name. Smelling the first אֱלֹהִים הָעַבְדְּךָ ("pleasing aroma"), YHWH decides never again to curse the ground on humanity’s account or to smite all life (8:21). The root חֲמָה, made up of the same consonants as חָמָה, embeds a reminder of Noah in the texts that describe Israel’s ritual life, its most distinctive activity. Likewise, the use of conventionally “priestly” language in Noah’s story draws attention to the resemblance between Noah and those entrusted with special roles in Israelite ritual. Such a comparison proceeds from a structural similarity in the way each (group) is singled out within a larger community. Levenson describes the covenant with Noah as the first of a series of covenants with increasingly narrow focuses, arguing that “the subsequent establishment of covenants with all Abrahamites (Genesis 17) and with all Israelites (Exodus 24) is to be read against the background of this universal covenant.” In this way, he maintains, the Bible presents “Israel’s relationship to God . . . [as] both unique and universal: no other people has it, yet all humanity has something of the same order.” The description of Israel as מֹלֶכֶת בְּשֵׁי מֵעֲנֵי יְהוָה (a kingdom of priests and a holy “nation”) suggests an analogy between the special

does not constitute the first instance of differentiated divine response, it does mark the first time such distinctions are formalized.

66 Grammarians of Biblical Hebrew describe hollow verbs and geminate roots as reflecting alternative strategies for adapting a biconsonantal root to a system predicated on triconsonantal roots (E.g., Gesenius, Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar [ed. and enl. E. Kautsch; rev. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910], 194, §72a). Verbs that occur in both hollow and geminate forms provide evidence to support this assessment. Von Rad (Genesis, 122) and Sarna (Genesis, 59) also recognize a play on Noah’s name in this phrase.

vocation given to priests among Israelites and the special vocation given to Israel among the “nations.”

Verses 9:28-29 return to the pattern of chapter five to describe the end of Noah’s life, relating the number of years that he lived after the Flood and his total lifespan. In this way, they subsume the entirety of chapters six through nine within the genealogical framework of chapter five. That narrative thus becomes an elaborate, extended variation, like the finales of musical compositions that employ the theme and variations structure. In addition to encompassing several chapters’ worth of narrative, the account of Noah differs from that of the other figures in Gen 5 in further small but significant ways. First, rather than identifying Noah as the father of his first son as well as (other) sons and daughters, the narrative mentions all of Noah’s procreative activity in one place, naming all three of his sons. Secondly, Noah’s life has two major divisions rather than just one. While other lives are divided into the time before and after the birth of the first son, Noah’s is divided by both the birth of his three sons and the Flood. At this point it is helpful to recall Sarna’s observation that the division of each figure’s life into the time before and after the birth of his first son reflects the fact that the continuity of the line had been in jeopardy until that point. In the case of Noah continuity is doubly endangered, not only by the implicit threat of barrenness, but also by the Flood.

The ancestor of the new post-Flood humanity, Noah in many respects reprises adam, bringing the genealogical structure that encompasses Gen 5-9 full circle. Like adam, Noah takes up the task of cultivating הִנָּה (“the arable soil” 9:20). Sarna highlights Noah’s life “in harmony with the animals” as another point of connection

---

68 See also the discussion below, ch. 5.
69 Cf. Brett, Genesis, 40.
between the two figures. However, despite his auspicious beginning and the high hopes of his father, Noah’s life turns out to be a return to an Edenic existence only in a parodic sense. The text depicts the first human couple as unselfconsciously naked until the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil brings them to shamed self-awareness. Gen 9:20 finds Noah naked, but his insensibility to his condition derives from drunkenness, not primordial innocence. In a reversal of the Eden story, his act of consumption brings oblivion rather than knowledge, with equally devastating consequences. As in Eden, the episode leads to cursing and ultimately to conflict, but in this instance Noah is the author of both. He ordains a divided future for his sons and their descendants based on their different responses to his indiscretion (9:24-27), returning the narrative to the theme of rivalry inaugurated in Gen 4 with Cain and Abel.

The singling out of Canaan for censure clearly anticipates the conflict with the peoples living in the Promised Land. However, the common assessment that “the means of a family narrative is used to characterize political realities at some point in Israel’s

70 Sarna, *Genesis*, 50. Sarna also notes that “both personages beget three sons, one of whom turns out to be degenerate,” and that “the role of the wind in sweeping back the flood waters recalls the wind from God in 1:2. The rhythm of nature established in 1:14 is suspended during the Flood and resumed thereafter, in 8:22. Finally, the wording of the divine blessing in 9:7 repeats that in 1:28, just at the genealogical lists of the Table of Nations in chapter 10 parallel those of 4:17-26 and 5:1-32 that follow the Creation story” (*Genesis*, 49-50).

71 Brueggemann expresses a consensus shared by many commentators when he remarks that “verse 21 cannot be interpreted as a negative comment on drinking, alcohol, or drunkenness. Indeed, the Old Testament is not preoccupied with such a ‘moral’ issue. It is aware of the potential destructiveness of excess, but Lev. 10:9 is an exception to the general acceptance of wine. The drunkenness of Noah is only a presented as a context for what follows” (*Genesis*, 89). Cf., e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 487. In my view, Genesis does not depict a polemic against alcohol such as associated with the twentieth-century temperance movement. Nevertheless, as the condition occasioning the episode that follows, Noah’s drunkenness does have a decidedly negative connotation. At the very least, it brings about a lapse in judgment that facilitates more serious transgressions. Lot’s drunkenness in Gen 19:29-38 presents a comparable situation. I agree that the point of the narrative is not to condemn Noah for his drunkenness, but I do not read Noah as simply the offended party in the episode.
history” ignores the interpretive implications of the rubric of family.72 Tracing the conflict with Canaan to this family drama and lacing it with echoes of Eden nuances the adversarial relationship, presenting it as a less than positive development, despite Brett’s suggestion that “the reader is expected to see the curse of slavery as justifiable.”73 After all, in cursing his own seed Noah curses himself.74 The slippage between the names of Ham and Canaan in this passage, so that Canaan receives a curse for his father Ham’s misdeed, underscores this reality.75

The text expresses its disappointment at this turn of events by immediately bringing the account of Noah to a curt conclusion. Leaving behind the pattern of chapter five, almost four chapters have confirmed Lamech’s hope that Noah would be the one to inaugurate a new and better era. However, after Noah curses his (grand)son and divides his children, the pattern abruptly resumes:

\[
\text{ויהי יאש חמה שבל היה יאש יחמה שבל (9:28-29)}
\]

And Noah lived after the Flood 350 years. And all the days of Noah were 950 years, and then he died.

72 The quotation here is from Brueggemann (Genesis, 90).
73 Brett, Genesis, 46.
74 Sarna suggests that the rabbinic tendency to compare Noah unfavorably to Abraham finds support in the fact that “unlike Abraham’s response to the case of Sodom and Gomorrah in 18:23-33, Noah does not plead for mercy for his contemporaries,” a fault that rabbinic literature retells the story to correct (Genesis, 50). The observation highlights another way in which Noah displays his individualism and lack of concern for those to whom he is connected.
75 Cf. Matthew Henry, who observes that Noah “pronounces a curse on Canaan the son of Ham (v. 25), in whom Ham is himself cursed” Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Wherein Each Chapter is Summed Up in its Contents: The Sacred Text Inserted at Large in Distinct Paragraphs; Each Paragraph Reduced to Its Proper Heads: the Sense Given, and Largely Illustrated with Practical Remarks and Observations (6 vols.; Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1986) 1:74. However, he does not consider that such logic also extends to Noah.
In the end, he was just like everyone else.\textsuperscript{76}

\section*{4.3 Reading Family: Genesis as Family Narrative}

With kinship language occurring frequently and at significant junctures, family constitutes a dominant theme in Genesis. A reluctance to accept the book’s expansive view of kinship has diminished its salience, however. Von Rad’s dismissal of the word לְאָדָם in Gen 2:4 as “forc[ing] the meaning of the term” typifies a scholarly tendency to filter the biblical text through the more circumscribed modern understanding of family as a biologically affiliated group of people in a nuclear or slightly larger unit. Aspects of biblical usage that do not conform to this definition are not regarded as having any substantive connection to the notion of family.\textsuperscript{77}

Approaches that focus on the book’s divisions also dilute its presentation of family. Obstructing the interplay of disparate elements, they foreclose the nuanced depiction that emerges through the whole of Gen 5, for example, and in that chapter’s relationship to preceding and subsequent ones. By isolating the genealogies from the narratives, such approaches also help reinforce the genealogies’ marginal status in theological engagements of Genesis that do consider the shape and import of the book as a whole. Together, the reductionist approach to family and the piecemeal approach to the

\textsuperscript{76} In contrast to the view presented here, some scholars consider Noah to have fulfilled the hopes of his father, e.g., Westermann, who highlights Noah’s development of viticulture, and Hiebert, who considers the Flood to have resolved the curse on the arable soil.

\textsuperscript{77} Cf. Grosby, \textit{Biblical Ideas of Nationality}, 20-21, in which he identifies “family” exclusively with the Hebrew term בָּנָי, suggesting that anything larger should be understood as having only a metaphorical connection to the concept.
book have ensured that, as Westermann observes, “there is scarcely ever any discussion of the meaning of the genealogies for the whole.”

Recognizing the family as the context in which family stories are told, the family storytelling approach foregrounds the question of how the community around the text is constituted, understanding that community as both already given and continually recreated. The distinction drawn here between Eurocentric and YHWH-centric approaches reflects that there are different kinds of families gathered around the biblical text. The family constituted Eurocentrically (Western Civilization) identifies the Bible as one of its family stories, but approaches the biblical text using a logic derived from its own interpretive context. The Eurocentric tradition of interpretation reflected in Auerbach’s reading of Mystère d’Adam employs strategies that ensure that the biblical stories are told to this family in such a way as to ensure that they are interpreted “correctly,” in accordance with its definitions and norms. As Stone experienced in regard to the story of Tessa and Cartwright, however, the interpretation that rings true to the family is in a sense already given and may not accommodate the nuances apparent to those whose understanding is not governed by the dictates of the family.78

This study breaks with Eurocentric norms to highlight the nuances in the text of Genesis that have been foreclosed by such a perspective. For a family constituted YHWH-centrically, those nuances prove particularly important. Such a family attributes its beginnings to the word of YHWH and therefore lacks what Levenson describes as a profane history. In direct opposition to the Eurocentric approach, it understands its definition and norms as deriving from that word. It is this kind of family that, in Auerbach’s description, finds its reality overcome by the biblical text.

78 See above, ch. 3.
As a text preoccupied with origins, Genesis might be expected to have a special role to play in a YHWH-centric family’s definition. For this reason, the next chapter will continue to focus on the early part of Genesis, not as constituting a discrete unit, but rather as establishing the conceptual horizon for the whole of the book and for the family constituted through it.
5. Peoplehood

The point is as simple as it is easily missed in the modern world: the ancients did not perceive identity in the way modern physical anthropologists and linguists do. They did not think that their chosenness rested upon racial and cultural superiority or that the unchosen status of outsiders followed from some innate deficiency because they did not have a concept of race or culture at all in the sense in which the term is used by moderns, whether open-minded or bigoted, nationalistic or cosmopolitan. Indeed, one of the hardest points of biblical thought to understand is the concept of peoplehood, which is familial and natural without being racial and biologic.¹

--Jon Levenson

In this excerpt, Levenson distinguishes ancient perceptions of identity from modern ones. Describing the contrast in such a way suggests temporal succession, with an older understanding of communality giving way to the current state of affairs. Nevertheless, the context of Levenson’s discussion reveals that the distinction he draws is not predicated on time so much as conceptual paradigm. He maintains that the ancient, biblical view still has a place in the contemporary world; indeed, he associates it with the best current practice of Judaism. His essay assumes that contemporary Jews adhering to tradition both participate in and maintain conceptual distance from modernity, an assessment that corresponds to this study’s characterization of Genesis as engaged in a subversive process of community formation.

Using Levenson’s essay as a point of entry, this chapter will foreground the contest of definitions in the reading of Genesis, identifying the confrontation between divergent approaches to communal identity as a hermeneutical issue mirrored in the text

itself. Building on the work of the previous chapter, it will continue to highlight the theological significance of the genealogies, arguing that they should not be dismissed as a superficial feature of the text or as a reflection of the biblical writers’ lack of sophistication. Such a neglect of the rubric of family and its central role in Genesis has enabled the biblical text to be taken up as an expression of modern constructions of communality. In particular, the book’s use of a family tree has been subsumed under the modern emphasis on a social ladder, a circumstance especially apparent in readings of the portion of the book considered here (9:18-12:7). As explicated by Kenan Malik, the idea of the social ladder relates the overt racial hierarchies frequently articulated in the past to the more positive statements about human difference that now hold sway. Together with this concept, Benedict Anderson’s account of the origin and spread of nationalism can help clarify the contours of the currently regnant paradigm of communal identity and the ways that it shapes biblical interpretation, allowing the differences between that perspective on human diversity and the one that emerges in Gen 1-12:7 to become apparent.

The story of the Curse of Ham encapsulates the way in which Genesis has been read as an account of the origins of racial difference as understood by moderns. Although that reading owes more to externally arising ideas than to the text itself, Genesis does trace to that episode the hierarchies that characterize human relationships. Noah’s cursing of his grandson Canaan marks a turning point in the biblical story, ordaining a new mode of relationship among his descendants. In subsequent chapters, this new dynamic develops into a powerful alternative to the rubric of family, reaching a climactic point in the confrontation over the Tower of Babel in Gen 11:1-9. These events provide the immediate context for the call of Abram in Gen 12:1-7, helping clarify the meaning of that event.
5.1 A People Without A Profane History

In “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” Levenson situates his discussion of the Hebrew Bible within a broader set of negotiations between Jews and the “outside world.”\(^2\) Citing Gentile misconstruals of the biblical notion of election, he identifies various Jewish appropriations of the universal and/or particular strands of the Bible as responses to a history of hard feelings and harsh consequences. Accordingly, he proposes to reexamine “the biblical material on universalism and Jewish particularism” for the sake of both constituencies. He explains, “I write not only as a student of biblical thought but also as a committed Jew interested in defining a defensible contemporary appropriation of the ancient legacy and in applying the resources of his tradition to the wide and increasingly vexatious problem of ethnicity in the modern world.”\(^3\)

Levenson argues that “the all-too-common contrast between ‘universal’ and ‘particularistic’ religion is, in every instance, simplistic, grossly misleading, and even dangerous.”\(^4\) In order for him to make his case for understanding the the universal and particular strands of the Hebrew Bible as inextricably intertwined, he needs to challenge the convention that regards the two categories as non-overlapping opposites. His perspective therefore proceeds from a careful engagement of the terms of the debate. Noting the variety of religious ideas collapsed into the same words, he offers a “rude typology of universalisms and particularisms” that moves beyond sharp dichotomies.\(^5\)

\(^2\) Levenson, “Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 143.
\(^3\) Levenson, “Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 143-44.
Moving to the biblical text, Levenson follows Jewish tradition in reading through a “postulate of coherence” that “enables us to regard the separate elements as parts of a total picture that may not in reality have been affirmed by their original authors.” In this way, “some systematic statement is possible, so long as it is loose enough to allow for exceptions and self-aware enough to acknowledge its dependence on a canon that did not exist in the biblical period itself.” Like the Torah, therefore, Levenson begins with Genesis, examining the way in which the primeval history sets the stage for everything that follows.

The creation accounts play an especially important role in his argument. Not only do they provide the literary and theological foundation on which everything else is built, but they also confer the “prestige of origins.” He explains, “the placement of the story of cosmic creation by God (’elohim) at the beginning of the entire Bible (Gen. 1:1-2:3) establishes a universal horizon for the particular story of Israel, which occupies most of the rest of that sacred book.” In his reading, the lack of geographical specificity in the first creation account and ethnic specificity in both accounts has major implications for conceptualizing biblical Israel. Comparing Genesis to the Babylonian creation story Enuma Elish, he observes, “like ’elohim, Marduk is also a cosmic creator-god; his power is not limited to Babylon. But, as is emphatically not the case in Gen. 1:1-2:3, his special relationship to a particular community is embedded in the very structure of cosmic order.” Levenson finds Genesis specifying that “Israel is not primordial. It emerges in

---

7 Levenson, “Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 147. He takes the phrase from Mircea Eliade.
9 Levenson, “Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 146. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, who also contrasts Genesis with Babylonian traditions, noting that in the biblical book, “One does not read the names of primeval kings, i.e., of mythical representatives of a polis, but rather of patriarchs, i.e., representatives of a unified prenational humanity. In Israel men did not succumb
history, twenty generations after the creation of the human species in the image of God (or the gods, 1:26-27).”

The uninterrupted universality of the Genesis creation accounts builds toward a climax in the story of Noah, with the establishment of a covenant between God and humanity. As the first biblical covenant, it helps shape and condition the more narrowly focused ones that follow. Levenson explains,

The relatedness of the members of the human family to each other and to God is underscored and formalized in the announcement of an eternal covenant with Noah in Gen. 9:1-17. Underlying this covenant is a theology that places all peoples in a relationship of grace and accountability with God. The subsequent establishment of covenants with all Abrahamites (Genesis 17) and with all Israelites (Exodus 24) is to be read against the background of this universal covenant. Israel’s relationship to God is thus both unique and universal: no other people has it, yet all humanity has something of the same order.

Levenson’s reading of Genesis is thus characterized by an emphasis on continuity, the way in which the various stories function as parts of an unfolding whole. In this, his postulate of coherence dovetails with the present shape of the text.

Moving into the “Patriarchal narratives” of Genesis 12-50, Levenson traces Israel’s beginnings to the promise to Abram in 12:1-3. The significance of the primeval history fully emerges at this point. Not only does it depict a number of important firsts, but it also constitutes that portion of the Bible outside of and prior to Israel, providing a


10 Levenson, “Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” 147. Contra Steven Grosby, who asserts that “Israel was understood by the worshipers of YHWH to be the focal point of creation...” (Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002], 101).

special vantage point from which to consider Israel’s gradual emergence within the text. Levenson takes special note of the fact that the people as such does not yet exist at the time of “the revelation to Abram.” He insists, “it is significant that the Torah’s promise to Abraham predates the existence of a people Israel, which indeed comes into being only as a result of YHWH’s mysterious grace and the equally mysterious but edifying obedience of Abraham.” Once again, Israel is late to its own story, “making the theology earlier than the people.” In other words, “Israel exists only because of God’s choice, and apart from God, it has no existence at all.” It is in this context that he asserts, “Israel has no profane history, only a sacred history, a history of redemption, of backsliding and return, punishment and restoration.”

Levenson’s reading of Genesis redefines the nature of the difference between Israelites and non-Israelites, challenging the common tendency to read it as a moral distinction between those who are ethnically and religiously insiders and those who are not. He argues, “it is significant that the primeval history (Genesis 1-11) presents humankind as primordially monotheistic and, in fact, YHWHistic (4:26). Idolatry. . . is not intrinsic to human beings, and in the Hebrew Bible a gentile is not generally assumed to be idolatrous. It is possible to be a faithful and responsible worshiper of YHWH (the proper name of the God of Israel) without being an Israelite.” Accordingly, Levenson identifies a “grave danger in using the term ‘pagan’ to denote both a non-Israelite and a practitioner of a religion odious to the God of Israel: The two are not coterminous. Not

---

every non-Israelite was thought to practice an abominated cult. . . . Quite apart from the specific self-disclosure of God to Israel . . . the Bible assumes a natural knowledge of God available to all humanity.”¹⁸ For this reason, Levenson concludes, “the convenient dichotomy of insider-outsider is too crude to accommodate the Jewish conception of the divine-human relationship.”¹⁹ Israel is not, strictly speaking, the people of God; all people are God’s. Rather, it is “God’s special possession” among peoples, a people whose particularity derives entirely from an act of election that calls them to a distinctive relationship with God expressed in covenants and lived out in *mitzvot.*²⁰ Levenson describes the election that constitutes Israel as having a dual nature, embodying God’s mysterious choice of Israel and unconditional parental love, as well as purposes to which the chosen people were called: “Election implies service, but service renews election. God’s grace implies his law, but his law implies his grace. Neither takes precedence over the other; they are inextricable.”²¹

In the same way that it clarifies the debate by pushing for greater precision with regard to terminology, Levenson’s essay also reexamines the relationship between what might crudely be called tradition and modernity.²² In keeping with the celebration of natural theology in wisdom literature, Levenson maintains that non-particularistic language and concepts have their place, especially in public discourse. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that successfully navigating the problems taken up in his essay depends on preserving the integrity of tradition and allowing its distinctive voice to be heard. Accordingly, he resists the secularizing approach often employed by those attempting to

---

²² The problem with this language is that it obscures the fact that modernity is in its own way traditional.
make tradition more amenable to modern priorities and concerns: “Can this world view, assembled synchronically out of the varying materials in Scripture, survive the demise of its theological matrix? I think not. . . .[W]hen commandments are recast in the language of values, the effect is to undermine subtly and usually unintentionally the very basis of Jewish existen
c23 Reducing the particular to the universal in this way empties the biblical notion of Israel of its essential content. However, Levenson identifies as equally problematic another secularizing approach with very different aims:

Ironically, secularization can also result in the opposite extreme, an exaggerated particularism purchased at the cost of the universal dimension of Judaism. I am thinking, for example, of the currently common habit of stressing Jewish survival as a goal in its own right. On occasion, we even hear Judaism itself commended on the grounds that it contributes to Jewish survival: “Keep kosher so that your children won’t intermarry.” Instead of Israel’s existing for the service of God, God exists for the service of Israel. At its worst, the absolutization of Jewish survival leads to the denial of ethical constraints on a Jewry in danger. And since Jewry is usually in danger, this grants the Jews a moral carte blanche—quite the reverse of the biblical intent. If “ethics is the Judaism of the assimilated,” then nationalism is the Judaism of the secularized.24

Although nationalism is often associated with a conservative impulse to preserve the community’s identity and past from external influence and change, Levenson here reads Israel as a community for whom nationalism itself represents a threatening innovation, undermining rather than consolidating its identity and past.

Much in Levenson’s approach proves instructive for the present study. Rather than attempting to get behind the text to recover historical processes from the murky recesses of the ancient past, his exploration of the nature of Israel focuses on the construction taking place within the text. He contrasts appropriations of biblical Israel

with the implications of its textual construction. Moreover, he carefully brackets the modern schema of identity that distorts the reading of the biblical text while recognizing the relevance of that schema as a force shaping the world of contemporary readers. The looming shadow of the Holocaust, among other manifestations of communal tension, thwarts any tendency to treat the conceptualization of biblical Israel as a strictly academic exercise, reminding the reader that the issues treated in the essay belong to a life and death struggle.

It should be noted, however, that not all scholars agree with Levenson’s characterization of the early chapters of Genesis as having a universal orientation. Theodore Hiebert’s close attention to what he terms the “[YHWHist’s] landscape” leads him to conclude that Israel is no less central in the early chapters of Genesis than it is in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. He maintains,

The setting for these stories is the distinctive and particular environment of biblical Israel, not some general setting or distant terrain. And its major characters are the kind of hill country farmers typical of the majority of the population of biblical Israel. They are not generic representations of the human race. Furthermore, the natural environment and the social world of J’s primeval era is essentially the same as that in the ancestral narratives that take place in the hill country after the flood. J has thus described creation not in terms of the world as a whole and of humanity in general but in terms of the precise environment and culture of which he was a part. As far as J was concerned, [דַּיְי] was the first Israelite farmer and lived on hill country soil. To describe the primeval period in J’s narrative as concerned with universal human issues, as is the rule, takes no account of the particularity of the narrative and represents a misleading picture of J’s view of origins.25

Hiebert’s study provides an interesting vantage point from which to consider the text; nevertheless, this assessment fails to consider the interpretive difference between a setting that clearly resembles Israel and one that is named as such. The real insight of his

work lies not in revealing that Adam and Eve actually lived in Israel, but rather in
demonstrating the way in which one’s own context constrains one’s imagination of the
universal. The self functions as the basis for conceptualizing humanity. In this regard, the
YHWHist’s predilection for an Israelite landscape could be compared to the tendency of
medieval painters to depict biblical characters in contemporary garb.

Another study that traces contemporary concerns to biblical understandings of
identity reaches similar conclusions about the basis of biblical Israel’s communion and its
relationship to the predicates of identity that characterize other polities. David Fishman,
Rena Mayerfield, and Joshua Fishman engage biblical depictions of communal identity
through word studies, bringing to the task a background in ethnicity studies and a Jewish
theological sensibility. Focusing exclusively on the use of מְנֶשֶׁהָ (“people”) and הָיוֹת
(“nation”) as ethnic designations,26 they summarize their preliminary findings in two
rules derived from examination of the Pentateuch that they then weigh against the
exceptions. The first “intergroup” rule observes that “ʼam [sic] is applied more often to
the Jews than to Gentiles and that goy is applied more prevalently to Gentiles than to
Jews. . . .”27 The second “intragroup” rule both complements and qualifies the previous
formulation, noting that “when speaking of the Jews, the Pentateuch stresses their ʼam

26 They enumerate other uses of the terms, specifically designating those as outside their
area of concern.

27 David E. Fishman, Rena Mayerfield, and Joshua A. Fishman, “ʼAm [sic] and Goy as
Designations for Ethnicity in Selected Books of the Old Testament,” in The Rise and Fall of the
Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity (eds. Joshua A. Fishman, Michael H.
Gertner, Esther G. Lowy and William G. Milán et al.; Contributions to the Sociology of
by others] has been criticized as actually stemming from the later post-Biblical meaning of goy . . .
the evidence, on the whole . . . does seem to verify this distinction,” 22. Throughout their essay,
they transliterate ʼam rather than ʼam.
aspect more than their *goy* aspect, while stressing the *goy*-ness more than the *‘am*-ness of other peoples.”

As explicated by Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman, these rules encapsulate “a significant statement as to the Pentateuch’s view of just what the Jewish people essentially represents: communal closeness, sanctified guidance, religious precepts, traditions and codes (*‘am*-ness attributes theoretically attainable by all peoples). On the other hand, land, other material interests, statehood and monarchy are secondary and nonessential since they constitute *goy*-ness (in Israel or in other nations).” By delineating distinct aspects of communality through the words ממי and ממע, the Pentateuch establishes those predicates most foundational to Israel and to the distinction between that collectivity and others. Notably, Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman’s findings converge with Levenson’s discussion of Israel as a people without a profane history.

Recognizing that the different character and interests of other parts of the Bible may correspond to a different use of the terms in question, they examine “selected historical books” and “selected moralistic books” in turn. This investigation generally confirms and refines their previous findings. They conclude that the intergroup rule “now clearly appears to deal with the stronger and more obvious regularity” while the intragroup rule “deals with the bulk of the subtle exceptions to normal usage.” Most importantly, “it is *the two rules together* and *the dialectic between them* that reflect the refined nuances of the Biblical texts. Either rule alone would be simplistic and, indeed,

---

29 Fishman, Mayerfeld, and Fishman, “‘Am and Goy as Designations for Ethnicity,” 24. “Land” here should be understood in the sense of national territory.
propagandistic. The two taken together speak to the complexity of ‘the ethnic condition’.

Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman approach their study of biblical אומות and גוי through questions about the development of the term “ethnicity” toward its present usage and about the pejorative connotations of “heathen” that the Oxford English Dictionary ascribes to the word. Linking *ethnos* with גוי via the Septuagint, they highlight the way in which the very language of “ethnicity” encodes an appropriation of biblical Israel. Discussing the term’s currency in the United States, they observe,

In a country with literally countless different ‘ethnic groups’, including Indians and long indigenized Blacks, little else remained to designate those outside the unmarked Anglo-American mainstream (Fishman 1977). The latter was presumably non-ethnic. It represented the core of society. But, “the others”, “the outsiders,” the *goyim*, those who are at times somewhat wild and woolly and, at other times so passionately bound up in their emotions toward (or against) one another, they were “ethnics,” one and all, their ethnicity being both their greatest blessing and their greatest burden.

In an ironic turn, a word that originally referred to the distinction between Israel and other polities comes to designate the distinction between “the unmarked Anglo-American mainstream” and its others, including Jews.

The corollary of this development proves equally significant, although Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman devote less attention to it. While the word גוי and its translations *ethnos* and *gens* have remained at the forefront of the language of identity, the word אומות and its translations have not shared in that prominence. If Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman are correct about the relationship between the two terms, the loss of the distinction that they represent corresponds to the loss of the notion of Israel as

30 Fishman, Mayerfeld, and Fishman, “'Am and Goy as Designations for Ethnicity,” 36.
31 Fishman, Mayerfeld, and Fishman, “'Am and Goy as Designations for Ethnicity,” 37.
a collectivity that differs from others because it is constituted in its special relationship to God. In the world in which all categories of identity are assumed to do the same work,\textsuperscript{32} election becomes nothing more than a way of attributing a divine mandate to one group out of many. The underpinning of the elect community’s cohesion is the same as for any other group, but the elect partake of a special authority that elevates them above all others. The strong distinction remains, but its basis has completely changed.

\section*{5.2 Noah’s Bad Seed: A Curse and its Aftermath}

In Barbara Kingsolver’s novel \textit{The Poisonwood Bible}, five-year-old Ruth May Price recounts the story of the Curse of Ham as a way of anticipating her future life as part of a Christian missionary family headed to the Congo, and of understanding her previous life in segregated Georgia:

\begin{quote}
God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham. Ham was the worst one of Noah’s three boys: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Everybody comes down on their family tree from just those three, because God made a big flood and drowned out the sinners….

Ham was the youngest one… and he was bad… After they all got off the ark and let the animals go is when it happened. Ham found his father Noah laying around pig-naked drunk one day and he thought that was funny as all get-out. The other two brothers covered Noah up with a blanket, but Ham busted his britches laughing. When Noah woke up he got to hear the whole story from the tattletale brothers. So Noah cursed all Ham’s children to be slaves for ever and ever. That’s how come them to turn out dark.

Back home in Georgia they have their own school so they won’t be a-strutting into Rachel’s and Leah and Adah’s school. Leah and Adah are the gifted children, but they still have to go to the same school as everybody. But not the colored children. The man in church said they’re different from us and needs ought to keep to their own. Jimmy Crow says that, and he makes the laws. They don’t
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} See the discussion of Benedict Anderson’s account of the colonial census, below.
come in the White Castle restaurant where Mama takes us to get Cokes either, or the Zoo. Their day for the Zoo is Thursday. That’s in the Bible.33

Like Mystère d’Adam in Auerbach’s treatment, this narrative understands an essential continuity between characters in Genesis and the members of its contemporary community.34 From this perspective, Genesis describes each kind of person being assigned to his or her proper place in society, the place they still occupy.35 Kingsolver uses the simplicity of her youthful narrator to highlight and mock this legitimation of the social order, tracing Jim Crow laws about zoo attendance directly to the biblical text. In the discussion of Auerbach, such an engagement of the Bible was termed a Eurocentric, colonizing approach. This section not only describes the hermeneutics of the Curse of Ham and its more recent manifestations, but it also considers the way in which Genesis explains them. The reading offered here draws a different sort of connection between Noah’s confrontation with his son and the social order depicted in The Poisonwood Bible, tracing to that episode the beginning of the construction of hierarchies that have borne such fruit.

34 The word “contemporary” here is used in a relative sense.
35 The strong emphasis in these texts on continuity between the Bible and the social order may actually reflect a certain degree of societal instability. Attributing divine legitimation to the social order likely indicates that it has been called into question and requires defending. Cf. Homi K. Bhabha’s account of the ambivalence of the stereotype: “Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated…” (The Location of Culture [London: Routledge, 1994], 66).
5.2.1 The Social Ladder and the Family Tree

Kenan Malik quotes Houston Stewart Chamberlain, “the English racist and adviser to Adolf Hitler” as maintaining that “a theory of race that is useful and can be taken seriously cannot be constructed on the tale of Sem, Cham and Japhet and such ingenious intuitions, mixed with hair-raising hypotheses, but only on a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of natural science.”\(^{36}\) Chamberlain’s remark contains several important points for the present study. First, it highlights the role of a text from Genesis (9:18–28) in modern negotiations of communal identity. His dismissal points to the prominent place Noah’s sons have occupied in racial thinking, as well as the way in which such appeals to them have largely been abandoned. The fascination with genetics reflects the extent to which science has indeed become the preferred source of information about the nature of identity. Nevertheless, this line of interpretation remains important despite its lack of currency because readers jettisoning its conclusions often continue to work within its assumptions.

In describing a theory of race being “constructed on” rather than “constructed from” the biblical account of Noah’s sons, Chamberlain’s comment acknowledges that the Curse of Ham story owes less to the interpretation of Genesis than it does to the attempt to find authoritative grounding for externally arising ideas about race. Indeed, until the passage is placed within the framework of modern racial thinking, the biblical text simply does not provide enough information to construct all the details of the story as it has become popularized.\(^ {37}\) Although Cain (possibly) receives some sort of identifying

---


\(^{37}\) As Stephen R. Haynes emphasizes, “when antebellum proslavery authors asserted the curse’s relevance to American slavery, they habitually *re* told the tale. While often supplementing the narrator's voice with their own, they generally related a coherent story with a beginning,
mark (Gen 4:15),38 Gen 9 never names skin color (or any other feature) as a physical manifestation of Noah’s curse.39 This aspect of the Curse of Ham legend derives not only from the association between the Hamites and Africa derived from Gen 10, but also from the assumption that the descendants of Ham were racially distinct from those of his brothers. Filtering the biblical text through the lens of conventional understandings of social reality (as in Auerbach’s reading of Mystère d’Adam), people already inclined to associate dark skin with debasement easily found in Noah’s curse a basis for such an assumption. Moderns merged their racial typologies into the biblical text and then read from the Bible the origin and legitimating basis of those typologies. Accordingly, Ham became different from his brothers (who were presumably white) as a result of the curse.

In addition to ignoring some textual details (like the fact that Canaan receives the curse, not Ham) and inventing others, such readings downplay the negative dimension of Noah’s action and focus only on the less than admirable conduct of Ham.40 For other commentators, the ethical implications of the genealogical rubric disappear altogether as the story becomes a simple fable of misdeed and consequence in which an insolent boy is

---

38 Interpreters differ on this point. In addition, having evoked Cain in this context, it is important to note that Cain’s mark is protective, not punitive.

39 The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge: Consisting of Five-Hundred Thousand Scripture References and Parallel Passages from Canne, Browne, Blayney, Scott & Others with Numerous Illustrative Notes (27th ed.; London: Bagster, 1928) offers an ingenious etymology suggesting that Ham (MDB), a word that means “heat” or “warmth,” among other things, “signifies burnt or black.” It observes, “this name was peculiarly significant to the regions allotted to his family. . .” (6). This book was reissued by Hendrickson in 2005.

taught respect. Racial strife becomes the norm not the exception, or in more basic terms, difference proceeds from and naturally occasions conflict. Reading Gen 9:18-28 as the Bible’s first word on human diversity also allows readers to moralize difference. A difference in moral character leads to physical (racial) difference so that moral degeneracy becomes the a priori condition of blackness. Melanin functions as the mark of a kind of original sin.

Consigning (the son of) the wayward son to servitude, the language of Noah’s curse provides racism with its most powerful point of connection to the Bible. To moral disparity and physical difference it adds hierarchy as their necessary and/or inevitable consequence. As Matthew Henry observes, Ham’s transgression transformed the relationship among Noah’s sons from one of equality into one of dominance and subordination: “Those who by birth were his equals, should by conquest be his lords.”

Notably, Henry supplements the words of Noah’s curse, which mentions future servitude but not conquest as the means by which such a condition should be effected. Such an interpretation belongs to the inclination to assume that the significance of the curse has scarcely been exhausted by the subjugation of Canaan recounted in the books of Joshua and Judges. The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge explains, “the devoted nations,


\[42\] But cf. Westermann’s conclusion about this passage: “The sweep of the possibilities suggested here is amazing. The historical situations alleged to explain the pronouncements stretch from about the middle of the 2nd millennium to the period after Alexander the Great. There is no methodological basis for further conjectures, as Gunkel’s embarrassment should have already made clear. Only a new methodological approach to the text can help. B. Jacob is the only one, as far as I know, who gives the exegesis a quite different direction when he says: ‘In the narrative Ham, Canaan, Shem, Japheth are individuals, sons and grandsons of Noah. They must be the same in the curse and the blessing’ (Genesis 1-11, 491).}
which God destroyed before Israel, were descended from Canaan: and so were the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, who were at length subjugated with dreadful destruction by the Greeks and Romans. The Africans, who have been bought and sold like beasts, were also his posterity.⁴³ Shifting the focus from Canaan to Ham helps give Noah’s words a much wider application, transforming them into a foundational statement about different strains of humanity and the relationship between them. In this way, moderns brought the Bible into line with their own accounts of identity that proceeded from such statements.

Although slavery and overt, unapologetic racism have largely fallen out of favor, the assumptions about identity that govern the Curse of Ham legend remain influential. Race remains a dominant lens through which people interpret the Bible, so that even commentators who disapprove of slavery and oppose the tendency to give it a biblical mandate could not resist relating colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade to this text. Henry explains,

This certainly points at the victories in after-times obtained by Israel over the Canaanites . . . . The whole continent of Africa was peopled mostly by descendants of Ham; and for how many ages have the better parts of that country lain under the dominion of the Romans, then of the Saracens, and now of the Turks! In what wickedness, ignorance, barbarity, slavery, and misery most of the inhabitants live! And of the poor negroes, how many every year are sold and bought, like beasts in the market, and conveyed from one quarter of the world to do the work of beasts in another! But this in no way excuses the covetousness and barbarity of those who enrich themselves with the product of their sweat and blood. God has not commanded us to enslave negroes; and, without doubt, he will severely punish all such cruel wrongs. The fulfillment of this prophecy, which contains almost a history of the world, frees Noah from the suspicion of having

uttered it from personal anger. It fully proves that the Holy Spirit took occasion from Ham’s offence to reveal his secret purposes.44

Despite breaking with the tradition of interpretation that reads here the institution of racial hierarchy, Henry continues to read Noah’s three sons in terms of the social landscape of his own context, as progenitors of races.45 He celebrates this fusion between text and context as prophecy fulfilled, so that the passage “contains almost a history of the world.”46 Notably, the warning that the enslavement of “negroes” should not be understood as obedience to a divine command reveals that the “we” addressed by his commentary does not include “negroes” and is defined in opposition to them. The group gathered around the Bible is a “we” defined racially, not theologically.47

Malik identifies the persistence of racial thinking even after the rejection of explicit hierarchies as structuring modern perceptions of communal identity. He argues that the horrors of the Holocaust discredited racialist discourse but not the basic assumption behind it, so that the concept of culture now does much of the work once performed by race. He explains, “the impact of Nazism discredited biological theories of race. But it did not destroy the underlying belief that humanity is divided into discrete

44 Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 21. This commentary was originally introduced in six volumes appearing from 1706 to 1721.

45 Delineating the line of interpretation that understands the passage as “a culture-myth, of which the central motive is the discovery of wine,” John Skinner remarks, “from this point of view the story of Noah’s drunkenness expresses the healthy recoil of primitive Semitic morality from the licentious habits engendered by a civilisation of which a salient feature was the enjoyment and abuse of wine. Canaan is the prototype of the population which had succumbed to these enervating influences, and is doomed by its vices to enslavement at the hands of hardier and more virtuous races” (emphasis mine). However, he seems to accord some significance to the rubric of family, continuing, “in the setting in which it is placed by the [Yhwhiíst] the incident acquires a profounder and more tragic significance” (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis [2d ed.; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930], 185).

46 On prophecy as glue binding ancient text and modern reader, see ch. 6.

47 In light of the role of the Bible in racial identity, the “we” could also be understood in terms of a theologized vision of race. See the discussion in the next chapter.
groups, each defined in some manner by immutable and ahistoric characteristics, and that human interaction is determined by the nature of these immutable differences. Rather, the idea of difference was transposed on to the concept of culture.”

Malik depicts this development as taking the ladder of racial hierarchy and turning it on its side. Although assigning difference to a horizontal rather than vertical plane seems to reflect an egalitarian tendency, he cautions that separate is not equal, nor was it ever meant to be. On the contrary, he maintains, the idea of separate strains of humanity first arose as a way to explain and to justify socioeconomic inequality between members of the same society; “the concept of race emerged . . . as a means of reconciling the conflict between the ideology of equality and the reality of the persistence of inequality. Race accounted for social inequalities by attributing them to nature.”

The image of the ladder vividly conveys Malik’s argument and calls attention to an important dimension of the Eurocentric appropriation of biblical Israel. The colonization of the Bible involves more than simply reading Israel as one’s own group. It also involves reading Israel and the मूँ ("Gentiles" or "nations") according to modern modes of conceptualizing identity and difference. From this perspective, Genesis becomes a book structured by a ladder (upright or sideways) and “Israel” becomes conceptualized according to current fashions in communal identity. However, this study maintains that Genesis employs its own structural device, the family tree, through which it defines the elect people of YHWH in accordance with a very different means of

48 Malik, Meaning of Race, 7, 127. Like many analysts, Malik associates a biological emphasis with a prior era of racial thinking. This study refers to the present essentialist paradigm as reflecting a biological view of identity because, while not utilizing such categories as head size and shape, it nevertheless assumes that social identity resides first and foremost in the body. The word “biological” also alludes to the way in which “science replaced God as the guarantor of social relations” (Malik, Meaning of Race, 86).

49 Malik, Meaning of Race, 156.

50 Malik, Meaning of Race, 6. Cf. 82, 119.
characterizing communality. Devaluing the genealogical rubric has greatly facilitated the imputation of a modern schema of identity to the biblical text, blunting its ethical impact. While the sideways ladder represents humanity as primordially separate, the family tree does not divorce difference from an understanding of human relatedness and responsibility.

Discussing Gen 9:18ff, von Rad observes, “this first picture after the Flood shows us a new world. Before the Flood the theme of the primeval history was man and his concerns; now it is the world of nations, but still man embodied in nations and marked by national characteristics. This international world has a uniform origin . . . . Moreover, it is not something originally given by creation, but something that happened primevally.”

The popular term “Table of Nations” corresponds to such an assessment of the post-diluvian world; nevertheless, it belies the fact that Gen 10 reflects but does not depict a world of “nations.” Depicting groups neatly arranged in cells, “Table of Nations” echoes Malik’s image of the sideways ladder whose rungs divide humanity into discrete units. Crüsemann describes the distortion inherent in such an approach to the passage. As discussed above, he distinguishes the presentation of communal identity in Genesis from the modern nation. In addition, he warns against an overemphasis on the level of belonging constituted by the people (Volk). “Within the logic of genealogical thinking,” he explains, “all these levels [בָּןָבָא (household), יַעֹלֶמְבוֹת (extended family or clan)]

51 The reference to the “family tree” in the explanation of the Curse of Ham quoted above uses the notion to express a biological theory of race. As discussed in the previous chapters, Genesis does not assume such a perspective, but rather uses genealogy to a different end. The association of the Genesis genealogies with discredited biological theories of race has likely contributed to the perception that they should be ignored or replaced by the most recent understandings of human difference.

52 Von Rad, Genesis, 135.
and tribe] are of equal importance. What we call a ‘people’ plays only one role among many. Especially in comparison with all forms of modern nationalism, the manifold layers of identity should be stressed.” From this perspective, Gen 10’s incorporation of personal names and gentilics within the same structure no longer requires the manifold “solutions” that have attempted to resolve these diverse elements into unitary schemas.

Westermann distinguishes between the world of Gen 1-11 and the “historical” world of subsequent texts. He suggests that the significance of the Genesis genealogies becomes most apparent through contrast with the Sumerian king-lists: “The succession of generations in Gen 5 is on the other side of history; in the Sumerian king-lists it is a part of history.” In his view, the “biblical story of primeval events” has more to do with myth than with politics, although it represents a departure from both realms. Thus, “the biblical genealogies from Adam to Abraham have no meaning as an actual succession of generations. The system is deliberately abstracted from the historical character of the peoples mentioned; it is the blessing of the creator, constant and effective, enabling humanity to continue and to expand over the face of the earth, that is essential for humankind in primeval time.”

Nevertheless, when it comes to Gen 10, Westermann moves away from this perspective, explaining,

This is a completely new scheme which has practically nothing in common with Gen 5. While ch. 5 is a genealogy in the proper sense of the word, the “table of the nations” of P in ch. 10 is nothing more than a mere list of names. Nothing is said of birth, begetting, and death; the “sons” are not sons in the real sense of the

55 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 9.
word; “son” has the meaning of “belonging to.” The names are not the names of real persons, but the names of groups, partly in plural. The meaning of this is as follows: P has united under the heading real genealogies with a list of names of three groups of peoples who are derived from the three sons of Noah.56

Although Westermann ably highlights the differences between Gen 5 and Gen 10, the perspective here does not fully reckon with the way in which Gen 10 continues to use the rubric of family to organize the world. Understanding the Flood story as the point of transition from primeval to historical time, Westermann takes the genealogical form in this chapter as a veneer, an ancient way of expressing political truths that have no substantive connection to the notion of family.57 However, he observes, it is an approach beset with inherent difficulties:

The traditional form of the genealogy is obviously inadequate. It can present growth and expansion in the family context, but not the division and spread of the nations over the earth as then known. The history of nations cannot be presented as family history. One can appreciate then all the more P’s attempt, albeit with inadequate means, to conceive as a whole the nations known at that time. The genealogy, for all its inadequacy, has the advantage of presenting the nations as a whole in the manner of a family. Its disadvantage is this: between the introductory “the sons . . . are” and the concluding “these are the sons . . . ,” only names are in fact listed. No clue at all is given to determine the territory further nor is there any indication of the relationship to each other of the peoples named. The structural sentence: “The sons of A are BCDE,” can really say nothing more than that the nations take their origin from the three primal ancestors.58

Westermann does not consider that the “inadequacy” of the genealogical form for depicting nations with all the proper predicates might be an indication that the Gen 10 genealogy is trying to do something else. Why assume that P, J and R are struggling to

56 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 14.
57 E.g., of Gen 10:2-5 he remarks, “the genealogical pattern is only the form of presentation; it is not meant to indicate descent” (Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 504).
58 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 499.
express what they really want to say? It may well be that they have said exactly what they want to say but it is not what the modern reader expects to hear. The biblical perspective need not be considered a failed attempt at modern insight; it conveys with great nuance an insight of its own. Westermann’s claim that the genealogy does not adequately convey the relationship between its members is extraordinary, only carrying weight if one assumes that the familial relationships are an unintelligible substitute for direct indications of political and economic alliances.

Although Westermann here abandons his emphasis on the book’s commentary on community in favor of a more conventional politico-historical focus, the former idea retains its currency. The approach of Gen 10 does more than work within the narrative boundaries established by the Flood story. The genealogical format not only classifies and groups, but also conveys relatedness across the entire system. As has already been mentioned, situating a story about interactions between groups within the experience of a single nuclear family transforms it, coloring it with the intimacy and intensity of family life. Behavior that might come across as ordinary in intergroup relations looks quite different when considered in relation to members of a single family. As Westermann remarks of Noah’s curse, “the curse of servitude under one’s brothers is not to be construed primarily as political servitude. It is to be seen in the perspective of the family where it is something unnatural and unheard of for a brother to become a slave of his brothers. The curse can certainly have its effects in the political area; but it is here pre-political, a social matter.”

Westermann begins to consider genealogy as a means of societal formation, observing, “the basic form of social life among nomads is the tribe or family.

59 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 492.
Accordingly the genealogy, inasmuch as it is both the basis and the sign of origin and belonging, has a significance which gives direction to life in common. . . .” However, his next statements suggest that he understands genealogy not in terms of a group’s story about itself, but rather through the biological rubric of blood: “The genealogies then take on something of a form of existence which precedes history, as Herder had thought (both Wellhausen and Gunkel disputed this). It is a way of presenting the history of a form of life in common in which chronological continuity as well as the community and contiguity of the groups follow naturally from the ties of blood, from the origin from one father and from brotherly relationship.”60

Westermann’s comments typify the current phase of modern discussions of communal identity. Although he debunks many popular racialized readings of Genesis, such as the “Curse of Ham” line of interpretation, he continues to adhere to many of the assumptions that undergird those approaches. To a certain extent, he recognizes Gen 10 as critical discourse, suggesting “as far as we know this is the first attempt in the history of humankind to conceive and define the basic elements of the entity ‘people’.” However, as in Auerbach’s discussion of the play Mystère d’Adam, he assumes an essential harmony between the accounts of the communal self in Genesis and in his own context. He therefore continues, “[Gen 10] arose from the theological impulse to express how the separation of humankind into people is grounded in the will and blessing of the creator.”61 In the context of Westermann’s argument, this statement implies that Genesis offers theological legitimation of national identity as that concept is understood in the modern West. Any discrepancy is attributed to the limitations of the genealogical form. Westermann reads from Genesis the naturalization of modern categories of identity, as

when he asserts of the recurring “refrain verse” (Gen 10:5b, 20, 31), “[P] is saying that a people is more than a mere conglomeration of persons; it is an articulated part of the human race, and the race exists only in these parts.” In his treatment, Genesis affirms national identity as a basic predicate of human existence. Accordingly, Westermann’s commentary on Gen 10 attempts to get behind the veil and reconstruct the politico-historical circumstances cloaked in genealogical guise. He maintains that “it is possible . . . to have a fair idea of the period in question.”

Speiser goes a step farther than Westermann in naturalizing the categories of identity. Observing several verbs in the Bible that describe the formation of a הָעָם (“nation”), but none describing the formation of an אָדָם (“people”), he asserts that “an [הָעָם] just is; it is a physical fact.” In this way, the distinction between אָדָם and הָעָם becomes a way of neutralizing the biblical depiction of Israel as having no history beyond YHWH’s call. Discussing Gen 12:2, he explains, “the term in question is [הָעָם], not [אָדָם]; and rightly so. For Abraham was an [אָדָם] to begin with, in the primary sense of the word [“paternal uncle”], so long as he had a nephew named Lot.” The preexistent אָדָם is not confined to Abraham’s household, however. Speiser asserts, “in terms of God’s own connection with the people, Israel was his [אָדָם]. It was chosen and treated as such. But to carry out God’s purpose, as that purpose is expressed by the Bible as a whole, the [אָדָם] was not enough; what was needed was the added status and stability of nationhood in a land specifically designated for that purpose.” In his view, Gen 12 alludes to God’s transforming the אָדָם of Israel into the הָעָם of Israel. God does not create a new collective, but rather bolsters an existing one.

62 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 509.
63 Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 509.
64 E. A. Speiser, “‘People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel” JBL 79.2 (1960): 157-63, 160.
65 Speiser, “‘People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel,” 163.
In addition, Speiser so completely disregards the rubric of family in Gen 10 that he cites the passage as evidence that “there is not the least hint of personal ties under the concept of [“ד]ב. The noun labels large conglomerates held together, so to speak, from without rather than from within.” He maintains, “it is surely no accident that the so-called Table of Nations (Gen 10) speaks of [“ד]ב exclusively, all such entries being classified according to geographic (בערבת) and linguistic (לשתים) principles.” Although the presence of [“ד]ב might seem to call this perspective into question, he divests the word of any relational connotation, arguing that its appearance in Gen 10 “show[s] that [“ד]ב was basically an administrative rubric.”

Speiser observes the prominence of family in the Bible as compared with Mesopotamian sources, but interprets it as a heightened interest in “blood” rather than a theological depiction of cosmic relatedness and responsibility.

Brueggemann takes the genealogical structure of Gen 10 more seriously, forsaking the conventional “Table of Nations” designation in favor of “The Family of Nations.” He finds the passage “urging that the known world has a fundamental unity to it. . . . In a sweeping scope, the text insists that there is a network of interrelatedness among all peoples. They belong to each other.” This observation corresponds to his characterization of the chapter as “primarily a political rather than an ethnological statement,” one with a particular historical referent. In his view, Gen 10 “reflects networks of relations at a given time,” most likely the time of Solomon. Thus, “it does

---

66 Speiser, “People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel,” 159.
67 Speiser, “People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel,” 161.
68 Walter Brueggemann, Genesis (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 91.
69 Brueggemann, Genesis, 91, 93.
70 Brueggemann, Genesis, 92.
71 Brueggemann, Genesis, 91-92.
not speak of racial groups. Rather, it comments on present political realities in terms of Israel’s friends and enemies.”

Brueggemann begins to consider Gen 10 as critical discourse, finding in it a perspective on the nature of politics and human relationships that counters (then) regnant paradigms. Highlighting “the Nimrod element,” he observes, “in the closest Near Eastern parallels, it is claimed that human politics and kingship are given by God and wrought in heaven, that is, political institutions have ontological reality and are immune to criticism. In contrast, this text suggests that human relationships are a result of human power and human decision. As a consequence, they can be changed and are subject to criticism.”

These remarks represent the extent of Brueggemann’s engagement of this dimension of the text, however. He does not explore the possibility that the text might challenge contemporary assumptions as well as ancient ones. Although he highlights both the familial and the political aspects of the passage, he stops short of interrogating the relationship between them. In his account, family functions as a way of describing the relationships between nations but not as an alternative mode of political articulation. For this reason, while his discussion is suggestive, in crucial respects it does not stray far from Westermann’s contention that the genealogical structure is a veneer without substantive consequences for the material it contains.

Despite its abandonment by scholars, the “perspective of the family” remains the best perspective from which to consider Gen 10. It is striking that the portion of the Bible most concerned with human diversity adopts such an intimate approach to the subject, tracing all the world’s peoples to three brothers from a dysfunctional family.

---

72 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 92.
73 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 93.
74 The quoted phrase comes from Westermann (*Genesis 1-11*, 492), discussed above.
Moreover, scholars observe and biblical law confirms that, particularly in societies organized genealogically, familial ties designate people toward whom one has certain social responsibilities (e.g., Lev 25:25; Deut 23:8). As Madeleine McClney-Sadler explains,

A kinship term is jural in nature because it denotes the rights and duties of one person to another in equal or greater degree than it represents an actual biological tie. A similar principle is at work in our legal system. In the United States, regardless of actual blood ties, anyone can be named the “executor” of a will; this title carries with it specific legal rights and duties that vary from state to state. Likewise, in social structures where kinship networks are the domain for social organization, the terms for “mother,” “father,” and “brother” and “sister,” and so on, regardless of actual blood ties, carry with them specific legal duties and rights….

Additionally, as Sarna notes, “in the ancient world, kinship terms were often employed to describe treaty relationships.” In general, as Crüsemann remarks, “for all peoples who are not organized by a state system, genealogies play a role which can hardly be overestimated. The whole social order is described by means of them. The place of each individual in society--and beyond that, in part, the entire creation--is grasped by them, i.e., rank and status, claims and expectations of all kinds.”

Family thus commands a loyalty that transcends or even bypasses affection. Above all, the rubric of family infuses the relationships in Genesis with an urgency that

---


deals between relative strangers would lack. It implies a certain permanence to relationships, a commitment that does not depend on the willingness of the participants. One’s family constitutes those with whom one has to deal whether one wants to or not; brothers remain brothers even if they choose never to interact. As Westermann remarks of the Cain and Abel story, “neither does the brother as brother exist alone. The question, ‘Where is your brother?’ presumes that the brother knows where his brother is; the two are linked together be it in friendship or in enmity.” Unlike a sideways ladder, a family tree thus unites even as it separates, setting connection in place of indifference as the default relational mode.

5.2.2 Configuring Collectivity

Recognizing that the colonization of the Bible extends to the way in which human diversity is conceptualized, this section will examine the rise to prominence of certain influential assumptions about communal identity and then consider their impact on the reading of Gen 10. Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* provides a helpful account of this process. Seeking to understand the powerful emotional attachment modern nations elicit from their members, Anderson discovers a relationship between nationalism and religion, with religion lending modern nationalisms their peculiar shape. The book proves especially useful for unpacking the interaction of national/ethnic and religious/theological modes of conceptualizing identity in the world of modern nations. It describes the historical and technological developments leading to the development of the modern nation and the process by which nationalism became a universal outlook, replacing or unseating

competing conceptions of human community. Accordingly, it helps explain not only the current tendency to assume the priority of national or ethnic categories and concerns over religious or theological ones, but also the inclination to present identity as simple and absolute by ignoring or overruling alternative means of constructing communal identity. Moreover, in describing the dawn of a new mode of conceptualizing community, it also examines the redefinition of membership and the rigidification of identity corresponding to that shift. In these ways, it contributes to a more robust description of what I have termed the Eurocentric approach to reading Genesis.

Anderson describes the imagined community of the nation as replacing religiously imagined communities, though not through a simple unidirectional process of succession. Nationalism, he explains, represents “the expression of a radically changed form of consciousness,” entailing new modes of creating, experiencing, and maintaining community.79 Observing that “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time,”80 he seeks to understand “how [nation-ness and nationalism] have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.”81 His exploration of the peculiar power of the nation to command life-and-death commitment from its citizens emphasizes the relationship between the modern nation and “the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which--as well as against which--it came into being,”82 in addition to the technologies and institutions that made the new mode of identity possible.

80 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.
82 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.
Anderson defines “nation” as “an imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”83 His discussion of imagined communities focuses on the relationships such communities establish between people who will never directly interact or become personally acquainted with one another. In invoking the term “imagined,” he is careful to underscore the inevitability and ubiquity of such communities and to resist any association of “imagined” with “fake.” He insists, “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”84

Anderson identifies three “paradoxes” of nations and nationalism that highlight the complexity of their relationship to the categories of academic inquiry and the modern individual:

(1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept--in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender--vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, ‘Greek’ nationality is sui generis. (3) The ‘political’ power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence.85

His work attempts to negotiate these paradoxes by accounting for both the nation as a concept arising in and through history as well as its tendency to assume such epic proportions that it appears as one of the most fundamental conditions of human existence.

The decision to examine the concept of nation from the perspective of community formation reflects Anderson’s conviction that nationalism should not be considered in isolation as a strictly political phenomenon, but rather “treated . . . as if it belonged with

83 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6.
84 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6.
85 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 5.
'kinship' and 'religion', rather than with 'liberalism' or 'fascism'." He situates the rise of nationalism against the backdrop of two older cultural systems, each of which had enjoyed the same aura of self-evidence now attaching to nationality: the religious community and the dynastic realm.

Anderson argues that language played a central role in the ability of "great sacral cultures" (such as medieval Christendom) to incorporate large numbers of people spread across extensive territories. People with mutually unintelligible speech were joined in communion by means of a sacred language and its written script. Anderson describes these classical communities as anticipating modern nations, but nevertheless distinct from them. For example, he cites "the older communities’ confidence in the unique sacredness of their languages” and the implications of that confidence for the community’s ability to expand. He observes, “all the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power." In this view, signs are not conventional and arbitrary and the sacred language is not simply one of many ways to communicate. Rather, the written signs of the sacred language stand alone as “emanations of reality.” The idea of the sacred language meant that the literati had an especially important role. The centrality accorded written language in communities composed of a largely illiterate populace made them mediators between the human and the divine.

Belief in the community’s cosmic centrality had other important consequences as well. First, it imbued classical communities with an inclination to grow and an ability to incorporate outsiders with great facility:

86 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 5.
87 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 13.
88 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 13.
89 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 14.
There is no idea here of a world so separated from language that all languages are equidistant (and thus interchangeable) signs for it. In effect, ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-presentation: the truth-language of Church Latin, Qur’anic Arabic, or Examination Chinese. And, as truth-languages, imbued with an impulse largely foreign to nationalism, the impulse towards conversion. By conversion, I mean not so much the acceptance of particular religious tenets, but alchemic absorption. The barbarian becomes ‘Middle Kingdom’, the Rif Muslim, the Ilongo Christian. The whole nature of man’s being is sacral malleable.90

Secondly, it prompted a particular kind of social structure. Anderson observes that “the fundamental conceptions about ‘social groups’ were centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal.”91 Understandings of state sovereignty constitute an important difference between classical communities and modern nations. Anderson sketches the contrast in this way: “In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another.”92 The dynastic realm thus represents another aspect of community organization that was “centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal.” Like the sacred language, the sacred figure of the monarch helped to define the center, the measure of membership in the community. Kinship therefore played an important role in community organization and expansion. Political marriage provided the means of acquiring and maintaining authority over diverse populations. Accordingly, in sharp contrast to modern notions of

90 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 14-5.
91 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 15.
92 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 19.
racial purity, “royal lineages often derived their prestige, aside from any aura of divinity, from, shall we say, miscegenation.”  

Anderson attributes the declining influence of “the great religiously imagined communities” after the late Middle Ages to a variety of factors, but his interest in the quasi-religious aspects of nationality leads him to focus his attention and cite only the two most relevant in that connection. The first of these concerns the impact of exploration, particularly (though not exclusively) on Europe. He cites Auerbach’s observation that it “abruptly widened the cultural and geographic horizon and hence also men’s conception of possible forms of human life.”  

Anderson finds in Marco Polo’s account of Kublai Khan “the seeds of a territorialization of faiths which foreshadows the language of many nationalists (‘our’ nation is ‘the best’--in a competitive, *comparative field’).”  

Over time this perspective would increasingly be adopted in a way that was “utterly selfconscious, and political in intent.”  

The second factor in the religiously imagined communities’ loss of “unselfconscious coherence” involved “a gradual demotion of the sacred language . . . .”  

The growing importance of vernaculars during the sixteenth century, buttressed by print-capitalism, served to erode the influence of Latin. Anderson summarizes, “the fall of Latin exemplified a larger process in which the sacred communities integrated by old sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralized, and territorialized.”  

---

95 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 17.  
96 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 17.  
Anderson argues that it was more than happenstance that “the dawn of the age of nationalism” coincided with “the dusk of religious modes of thought.”99 When the Enlightenment ousted religion from its traditional place, it left a certain void: “Combined, these ideas [cosmological understandings of language, monarchy, and history] rooted human lives firmly in the very nature of things, giving certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss, and servitude) and offering, in various ways, redemption from them.”100 Nationalism developed features which enabled it to address this powerful need in a way that “evolutionary/progressive styles of thought” do not. Like religion, nationalism manifests a concern with death and immortality, establishing “the links between the dead and the yet unborn” and finding the finger of some higher providence working something transcendent through the inescapable limitations of human existence. Briefly put, nationalism provided a secular means of attributing continuity and meaning to human life.101

Anderson’s discussion suggests that if nationalism assumed the inevitability of difference within humanity (Greeks are not like Tibetans are not like Peruvians), it nevertheless involved a kind of universalism. While the whole world was no longer envisioned as potentially being incorporated into the one cosmically central community, it was nevertheless envisioned as being incorporated under the one rubric of nationality, which mediated and defined difference. Accordingly, whether intentionally or otherwise, nationalism also had its own kind of impulse toward conversion, geared not toward bringing outsiders into the community, but rather toward maintaining them as people separate from the community but comprehensible to it on its own terms. Although it was

100 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.
no longer as important, possible, or desirable to make outsiders part of the community, it remained important to assimilate them to the community’s ways of knowing.

The colonial relationship provides an important vantage point from which to consider nationalism’s encounter with other modes of identification, as well as the process by which it managed to supersede them. Anderson identifies “three institutions of power”—the census, the map, and the museum—that “together . . . profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion—the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.”

The relevance of this discussion reaches beyond his stated objective of understanding why and how colonial subjects adopted nationalism in articulating their resistance to colonial rule. It explores the impact of power dynamics on identity formation, highlighting the ways in which institutions condition the realities they are set up to process. It also describes the process by which nationality became something considered a universal attribute despite the very particular histor(ies) that brought it into being. For this reason, it can help in understanding the tendency to read the biblical texts through the lens of modern conceptions of identity.

The colonial census marked a major step from a conception of identity as fluid toward something more rigid and reified. Designed to represent populations in a systematic and orderly way, the census required that each person be counted once and only once. Anderson suggests, “the fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that

102 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 163-4.
103 Anderson focuses his discussion on Southeast Asia, his area of expertise, but observes, “Southeast Asia does, however, offer those with comparative historical interests special advantages, since it includes territories colonized by almost all the ‘white’ imperial powers—Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, and the United States—as well as uncolonized Siam” (Imagined Communities, 164).
everyone has one--and only one--extremely clear place. No fractions." The complex set of negotiations that constitute identity therefore needed to be resolved into something readily categorizable and quantifiable. Further complication derives from the circumstance that these categories were created not by insiders, but by colonial functionaries trying to make sense of foreign societies for the sake of the colonizing power. Moreover, the colonial borders that defined administrative interest led census takers to mark off groups within the state and ignore any greater breadth of belonging.

Despite its tendencies toward artificiality, the census exercises such considerable sway over the imagination that its representations acquire their own reality. Anderson cites a recent study of “the pre-Hispanic Philippines” as an example of the construct’s power. Although the name “Philippines” and the delimiting of the territory thus designated derive from the Spanish presence, the scholar’s reliance on Spanish records leads him to impose the structure of the later state on an earlier period in history. Moreover, he assumes a sense of commonality among members of the same social class that owes more to the perspective of the census (which classifies them as members of a single group) than to their own documents (which suggest isolation and competition).

Anderson locates the distinctiveness of late nineteenth-century colonial censuses in their completeness and in the push for implementation that accompanied them. They were not simply means to a specific practical end, but rather systematic representations of entire populations that left significant gaps between the perceptions of the counters and the perceptions of those counted:

... after 1850 colonial authorities were using increasingly sophisticated administrative means to enumerate populations, including the women and

104 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 166.
children (whom the ancient rulers had always ignored), according to a maze of grids which had no immediate financial or military purpose. In the old days, those subjects liable for taxes and conscription were usually well aware of their numerability; ruler and ruled understood each other very well, if antagonistically, on the matter. But by 1870, a non-taxpaying, unlevyable ‘Cochin-Chinese’ woman could live out her life, happily or unhappily, in the Straits Settlements, without the slightest awareness that this was how she was being mapped from on high. Here the peculiarity of the new census becomes apparent. It tried carefully to count the objects of its feverish imagining. Given the exclusive nature of the classificatory system, and the logic of quantification itself, a ‘Cochin-Chinese’ had to be understood as one digit in an aggregable series of replicable ‘Cochin-Chinese’—within, of course, the state’s domain.106

Not only did these censuses reconfigure identity, but they also transformed the particular into the typical; one “Cochin-Chinese” woman could readily be exchanged for any other. (For the purposes of the present study it should also be observed that the census categories function in the same way—one category of identity is assumed to do the same work as any other, so that, for example, being “Hindoo” is the same sort of thing as being “Bengalee.”107 Difference is regularized.) These censuses embodied a specific, external view of the population, which the colonial state then enacted:

The new demographic topography put down deep social and institutional roots as the colonial state multiplied its size and functions. Guided by its imagined map it organized the new educational, juridical, public-health, police, and immigration bureaucracies it was building on the principle of ethno-racial hierarchies which were, however, always understood in terms of parallel series. The flow of subject populations through the mesh of differential schools, courts, clinics, police stations and immigration offices created ‘traffic-habits’ which in time gave real social life to the state’s earlier fantasies.108

107 The juxtaposition of these categories is found in Anderson (Imagined Communities, 165).
108 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 169.
The gap between the perceptions of the ruler and the ruled was (at least partially) resolved through the creation of institutions that required the ruled to act in accordance with the ruler’s “imagined map” until the social landscape more closely resembled its representation.

Religion functioned as both a part of this process and a sphere of resistance to it, at times cooperating with racial classifications and at times competing with them. At one point, censuses employed such categories as “Hindoo” alongside ones such as “Bengalee”; however, Anderson cites a trend observed by sociologist Charles Hirschman: “As the colonial period wore on, the census categories became more visibly and exclusively racial. Religious identity, on the other hand, gradually disappeared as a primary census classification.”109 Not coincidentally, Jews proved particularly difficult to accommodate to emerging modes of characterizing identity. Anderson observes, “an astonishing variety of ‘Europeans’ were enumerated right through the colonial era. But whereas in 1881 they were still grouped primarily under the headings ‘resident,’ ‘floating,’ and ‘prisoners,’ by 1911 they were fraternizing as members of a (white) race’ [sic]. It is agreeable that up to the end, the census-makers were visibly uneasy about where to place those they marked as ‘Jews.’”110

While religion provided a ready-made census category (before being ousted by an increasing emphasis on race), it nevertheless posed a threat to colonial authorities and their efforts to define their subjects. Anderson remarks that “religious affiliation . . . served as the basis of very old, very stable imagined communities not in the least aligned with the secular state’s authoritarian grid-map.”111 In other words, religious affiliation

109 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 164-5.
110 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 164-5, n. 3.
111 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 169.
reflected a deeply entrenched mode of identity beyond state control; “the state could rarely do more than try to regulate, constrict, count, standardize, and hierarchically subordinate these institutions to its own.”\textsuperscript{112} The state’s limited ability to manage religion and its “topographically anomalous” institutions made them “zones of freedom and--in time--fortresses from which religious, later nationalist, anticolonials could go forth to battle.”\textsuperscript{113} Religion thus had an ambivalent relationship with colonial constructions of identity, its independence reflected in its popularity as a site of resistance, and its subordination reflected in the fact that this resistance was so often articulated in nationalist terms.

From his examination of the colonial census, map, and museum Anderson concludes,

The ‘warp’ of [the late colonial state’s style of] thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth. The effect of the grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belonged here, not there. It was bounded, determinate, and therefore--in principle--countable. (The cosmic classificatory and subclassificatory census boxes entitled ‘Other’ concealed all real-life anomalies by a splendid bureaucratic trompe l’oeil). The ‘weft’ was what one could call serialization: the assumption that the world was made up of replicable plurals. The particular always stood as a provisional representative of a series, and was to be handled in this light.\textsuperscript{114}

The colonial census demonstrates the approach to communal identity and the strategies of managing difference that emerged in conjunction with the nation’s development into the dominant mode of imagining community. First, it had a push toward totality. Counting

\textsuperscript{112} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 169.  
\textsuperscript{113} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 170.  
\textsuperscript{114} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 184.
and classifying populations became an important dimension of knowledge, transcending its prior role as a way of identifying those to whom the state assigned financial or military responsibilities. At the same time, a boundary-oriented model of belonging supplanted centripetal models, resulting in an inability to account for or contend with forms of liminality that had once been recognized as commonplace. *Everyone* had to be counted, once and only once. The colonial census also reflects the impact of operating within a particular area of interest defined by considerations external to the people and territory it incorporates, as well as the tendency to ignore this impact or actively erase it by projecting more recent constructions into the distant past. Finally, the late colonial state’s style of thinking included an inclination to view the particular as typical rather than distinctive. The cumulative impact of this warp and weft was to restrain the possibility of complexity and create the illusion that identity is as simple and orderly as the rungs on a ladder. Moreover, the census disregarded alternative or indigenous approaches to communality, reducing those approaches to labels for categories that it could control and thereby reserving for itself alone the task of conceptualizing identity. As Anderson’s study illustrates, this approach to regulating identity has frequently *created* the realities it claims only to process.

The legacy of the colonial census inclines modern readers to read their own assumptions about identity into Genesis without fully reckoning with the possibility that it conceptualizes identity differently. From this perspective, the genealogy of Gen 10 becomes an enumeration of census categories; the biblical names attain a decidedly modern significance. Tracing racial categories into primordial antiquity and instilling them with biblical authority, readers impute to the biblical text assumptions about identity that derive from the pragmatic demands of imperial governance, assumptions that determine not only the kinds of categories through which identity is articulated, but also
the way in which those categories are understood to work. The complex set of negotiations that constitute identity become something readily categorizable and quantifiable. Or rather, they should become so. Commentators frequently express frustration at the difficulty of interpreting Gen 10 as a clearly ordered classificatory system.

Skinner references “the older view, which explains Shem and Japheth . . . as corresponding roughly to what we call the Semitic and Aryan races,” but notes that this interpretation “has always had difficulty in discovering a historic situation combining Japhetic dominion over the Canaanites with a dwelling in the tents of Shem.”¹¹⁵ The move away from that kind of focus on racial discourse in more recent treatments reflects broader cultural trends that discourage such remarks. In the new era, with readers increasingly preferring a positive valuation of racial difference, the discourse has changed but the categories remain the same.

In his treatment of this passage, von Rad offers the exceptionally prudent caution that “the reader must not come to this text with erroneous presuppositions. The table of nations does not reveal humanity either according to race or according to language.” His own view in many respects resembles the social constructionist approach taken here, although shaped by his emphasis on history. “These are the nations that were politically and historically distinct from one another or related to one another,” he asserts. “. . . [A] definite phase of important and very complicated ancient Oriental history is mirrored in the priestly table of nations.”¹¹⁶ However, having abandoned a modern biological approach to peoplehood, von Rad disregards the rubric of family and discusses the passage in terms of political groupings of nations. In this way, like so many readers, he

---

¹¹⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 140.
neglects the extent to which, in Levenson’s terms, “though the Hebrew Bible conceives of Israel as an ethnic group, its very existence is a standing reproach to ethnicity.”

Rather than recognizing intentional theological moves in the genealogical presentation and in the absence of Israel in this passage, von Rad suggests that “one could make the impossible assumption that here a view of history and the world belonging to a nation other than Israel was adopted.” Ultimately, the decision not to depict Israel as central reveals the biblical writers as engaged in a modern-style quest to compile universal knowledge, demonstrating that “Israel looked at herself in the midst of the international world without illusion and quite unmythically.”

The colonial census mindset constrains even readers whose historical-critical methodology directs them to avoid imposing their own categories on the text. In their attempt to recover categories indigenous to the text, these readers often assume that any schema of identity, including that depicted in Genesis 10, necessarily strives for accuracy, comprehensiveness, and consistency. Thus, Skinner notes, “the basis of the classification may not have been ethnological in any sense; it may have been originally suggested by the tradition that Noah had just three sons, in accordance with a frequently observed tendency to close a genealogy with three names (4:19ff, 5:32; 11:26 etc.). Still, the classification must follow some ethnographic principle, and we have to consider what that principle is. The more obvious distinctions of colour, language, and race are easily seen to be inapplicable.”

Describing Gen 10 as “a pioneering effort among the ethnographic attempts of the ancient world,” Speiser attempts to solve this problem by

118 Von Rad, Genesis, 144-45.
119 Von Rad, Genesis, 145.
120 Skinner, Genesis, 192.
explaining, “the fact, however, that the Table shows a keen awareness of the need for method does not guarantee correct results in the light of modern findings. Although modern scholarship continues to operate with the traditional terms ‘Semitic’ and ‘Hamitic’, the current groupings depart considerably from those that are given in the Table. This is largely because the modern principle of classification is strictly linguistic, whereas the Bible employs several criteria concurrently, which cannot lead to uniform results.”

Many readers likewise view discrepancies in biblical genealogies as a problem to be solved, either through harmonization or by positing the existence of alternative traditions behind the variations. Describing the problem of the genealogies, Sarna remarks,

The Table itself is riddled with difficulties, many of which remain insoluble in the present state of knowledge. It defies the consistent application of any single criterion of selectivity or of principles of classification, apart from the very general and rudimentary distribution according to the three broad groupings. Racial characteristics, physical types, or the color of skin play no role in the categorizing. Nor is language a guideline since Canaan, recognized in Isaiah 19:18 to have the same tongue as Israel, is affiliated with Egypt among the Hamites, while the Elamites, who spoke a decidedly non-Semitic language, are classified under Shem. A special problem is the listing of Sheba and Havilah under both Ham and Shem and the subsuming of Mesopotamian, Ethiopian, and Arabian entities all under Cush, a Hamite.

Crüsemann acknowledges that “unambiguously diverse materials have been used. . . .” but cautions that “the confidence of source criticism proves to be misplaced. One need only consider how contradictory and malleable are the genealogies which have been

122 Sarna, *Genesis*, 68.
empirically researched by anthropologists.” 123 Andriolo confirms this assessment, citing “the growing awareness that a people’s perception of its socio-cultural reality does not reflect this reality neatly.” 124 Biblical scholars often neglect this kind of perception, focusing instead on texts as either disengaged reflections of ancient circumstances or as tendentious misrepresentations of those circumstances.

Moreover, the possibility remains that the discrepancies within the genealogies are themselves a meaningful way of getting around the reductiveness inherent in a single classification and expressing the multiplicity of identity. 125 Imperial governance necessitated that each person be counted once and only once, in one clearly delineated category or another, but the theological outlook of Genesis makes no such demand. Nothing prevents it from embracing the complexity of identity and acknowledging the ways in which singular classifications often underdefine people.

Crüsemann observes a way in which biblical genealogy enables a more nuanced view of identity than offered by “modern racial nationalism.” He explains, “one of the great strengths underlying genealogical thinking is its capacity for complex differentiation.” By this he refers to the dynamics that distinguish wives from maidservants and a favored wife from her rival, with the household of Jacob providing an example. He concludes, “these are different, cross-cutting possibilities for describing social status. Israelites, for example in post-exilic times, who find themselves or their ancestors here, know that the internal differentiation goes further, that many generations and separations are necessary in order to grasp the position of an individual.” 126 In

125 Cf. Wilson, who explains that “in some societies names are inherited.” Accordingly, “one man may hold several names, each of which may be important only in certain social situations” (Genealogy and History, 35-36, see also 47).
recognizing a multiplicity of factors contributing to one’s position in society, such an insight anticipates the insistence of womanists (et al.) that a person’s social status does not depend on one criterion alone, but rather reflects the interplay of several (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, national affiliation). As Crüsemann explains, “all those differences are occluded when a modern racial nationalism wants to ground itself in pseudo-biology (and, for example, makes citizenship dependent on ‘German’ origin). Even besides the liberal and ‘naturalizing’ integration of strangers into the kinship system, already mentioned, modernity lacks equivalents for both intra-ethnic and extra-ethnic differentiation . . . .”

In contrast, the seventy descendants of Noah in Gen 10 correspond to the seventy descendants of Jacob in Gen 46:47 so that “the internal differences among the Israelite people, the descendants of Jacob, are as great as those among the whole of humanity.”

Like Wilson, Crüsemann describes genealogy as a means of social organization in competition with the nation-state, observing that “kinship connections remain, wherever a state is young or weak, the basic framework of order.” In this regard, his discussion echoes Anderson’s account of the “classical communities” that preceded the rise of the modern nation. One important point of confluence concerns the mutability of identity and the ability to incorporate outsiders fully into the community. Crüsemann explains that the kinship connections he invokes are not confined to biological affiliations. Rather,

128 Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity,” 67. He finds confirmation of this idea in Deut 32:8. Along similar lines, Malik observes that “geneticists have shown that 85 per cent of all genetic variation is between individuals within the same local population. A further 8 per cent is between local populations or groups within what is considered to be a major race. Just 7 per cent of genetic variation is between major races” (Meaning of Race, 4). The next chapter will consider perceptions of difference within the family of Abraham from this perspective.
“persons are ‘naturalized’ into the kinship system who, in a strict sense, are not biologically related but are nevertheless socially integrated.”\textsuperscript{130} Taken together, Anderson’s focus on conceptions of the transcendent and sacred and Crüsemann’s emphasis on kinship point to the politico-theological implications of family as an alternative to the nation-state’s approach to conceptualizing group identity.

For its part, the Bible often takes an artful approach where its modern readers expect precision, as reflected in the predominance of round/symbolic numbers. Skinner observes of Genesis 10, “according to Jewish tradition, the total number of names is 70; and again the suspicion arises that names may have been added or deleted so as to bring out that result.”\textsuperscript{131} Skinner’s cautionary remarks not only highlight aspects of the text’s construction and offer guidance as to what type of information might be gleaned from it, but also manifest a felt scholarly need for the kind of factual account that Genesis denies or inhibits. His language suggests that the genealogy may originally have been more “correct” but was altered to produce an artful result. But why even posit such a layer beyond the present version? (Or for those who do not consider historicity a relevant category from which to engage the early part of Genesis, why assume that if originally produced in an artful form the genealogy must be an imaginative creation and not a repository of traditional knowledge?) Moderns thus look for realism in the particulars of identity where Genesis offers order, and order in the categories of identity where it offers realism. That moderns do not acknowledge their own imposition of order but assume the reality of their categories only compounds the confusion.

\textsuperscript{130} Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity,” 63. Cf. Wilson, who references a process by which “individuals or lineage groups split off from one lineage, migrate, and attach themselves to another lineage. When this occurs, their names are omitted from the genealogy of their former lineage” \textit{(Genealogy and History}, 33-34).

\textsuperscript{131} Skinner, \textit{Genesis}, 192.
As reflected in remarks of Skinner quoted above, scholars not embracing the “older view” that equates the three brothers with three races have noted the difficulty of making sense of Genesis 10. Like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Skinner finds the text failing to provide an adequate “scientific account of the origin of the races of mankind” and suggests that its real value is antiquarian, residing in the insight it offers into “the political geography of the Hebrews at different stages of their history” and in its expression of “the profound consciousness of the unity of mankind, and the religious primacy of Israel, by which the OT writers were animated.” However, giving up the expectations of comprehensiveness, consistency, and accuracy renders the text less perplexing. Sarna locates the text’s significance elsewhere, explaining, “this strangely perplexing miscellany of peoples, tribes, and places is no mere academic or scholastic exercise. It affirms, first of all, the common origin and absolute unity of humankind after the Flood; then it tacitly, but effectively, asserts that the varied instrumentalities of human divisiveness are all secondary to the essential unity of the international community, which truly constitutes a family of man.” Taking this insight a step further and coupling it with the recognition that Genesis employs different categories and employs categories differently lays the foundation for an attempt to read the book’s account of human diversity as offering an alternative to modern perspectives.

---

132 Skinner, *Genesis*, 194. The comparison between Skinner and Chamberlain refers only to their making a similar observation about race and the Bible. It does not assume or imply that Skinner shares Chamberlain’s politics.
133 Sarna, *Genesis*, 69.
5.2.3 The Aftermath of Noah’s Curse

As with the reading of Gen 5-9 offered above, the reading of Gen 10 offered here attributes considerable significance to the genealogical rubric and to the diversity of material included within it. The genealogy of Gen 10 intersperses the conventionally political with the familial,\textsuperscript{134} tracing the origins of kingdoms and empires to the exploits of their larger-than-life founders and/or eponymous ancestors. More than embellishments, these mini-narratives demonstrate that the book’s interest in Noah’s legacy goes beyond his procreative activity to include the world he helped to shape. According to Genesis, Noah became the father/ancestor not only of the peoples of the postdiluvian world, but also of the power dynamics that govern relationships between them. In consigning Canaan to an נבר נבר (“slave of slaves,” 9:25), he mandated the first subordination of a human to another human.\textsuperscript{135} That the overwhelming majority of biblical occurrences of the root נבר follow this usage inclines readers to overlook the fact that, prior to this curse, the word exclusively denotes the role of humans with respect to the arable soil. Westermann observes, “there breaks into the family structure another social structure that is foreign to it--slavery.”\textsuperscript{136} In Gen 10, the transformation of בָּלָל bears fruit, giving rise to the emergence of another common word--the root קַלָּמ, which appears for the first time in 10:10.\textsuperscript{137} Thus, although the Curse of Ham reading assumes the association of Noah with modern racial hierarchy that it claims to derive from the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{134} The phrase “conventionally political” refers to modern conventions, which distinguish between the political and the familial and assign them to different realms.
\textsuperscript{135} Cf. Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity,” who refers to “the founding of human domination” in 9:25. This interpretation assumes that Gen 3:16 does not institute a hierarchy of men over women, but other commentators who assume that it does (such as Westermann) nevertheless recognize an innovation here, as cited below.
\textsuperscript{136} Westermann, Genesis I-11, 494.
\textsuperscript{137} In its nominal forms, the root designates a king, queen, or kingdom, while in its verbal form it designates the act of rule.
\end{footnotes}
text, Genesis does suggest a formative role for him in the emergence of such forms of
dominance. His curse plants the seed that grows into empire.

Following the division of Noah’s family, the narrative undergoes several
significant changes. Several linguistic markers highlight the structural break between
chapters nine and ten. Not only does the heading of chapter ten employ "and these are the generations of"
(“and these are the generations of”), but it also eschews the conventional (hiphil) "and he begot"
(“and he begot”) in favor of the passive (niphal) "and they were born,” 10:1),
thereby avoiding one of the key words associated with the carefully regulated
genealogical framework of Gen 5-9. The somewhat awkward change in subject (shifting
from Shem, Ham, and Japheth to their descendants) that this choice of binyan requires
also allows the heading to introduce more than the first post-diluvian generation. Taking
"and they were born," 10:1),
to refer to descendants in general rather than specifically to sons, the phrase
(“and they were born,” 10:1),
"and descendants were born to them”) describes the entirety of the
chapter.

A move to segmented genealogy also heralds the new section and differentiates it
from Gen 5-9. In contrast to the focus on the firstborn son in Gen 5-9, the text now
identifies multiple members of each generation and traces their lines of descent. The
emphasis accordingly shifts away from continuity as manifested in the recurring cycles of
birth, procreation, and death; instead, the spread of humanity takes center stage. Gen 5’s
orderly structure and economical style give way to a sprawling presentation that moves
back and forth in time following one person, then his brother, and that slips from lists of
individuals to lists of peoples to delineations of territories (e.g., 10:15-19).

While an air of antiquity pervades Gen 5-9, a text reaching back to the very
beginnings of humanity, much more recent history infuses Gen 10. The names in its
genealogical record echo those of prominent groups and locales from later biblical history
(e.g., יִנְשָׁם, “Egypt,” 10:6, יִנְשָׁם, “Babylon,” 10:10, יִנְשָׁם “Assyria,” 10:11), suggesting the anthropological interest to which the designation “Table of Nations” bears witness. This chapter represents the attempt of Genesis to situate the world stage of Israel’s later experience within the book’s own framework. The postdiluvian world begins to look familiar to an Israelite audience or one steeped in Israel’s stories, but Israel itself does not yet appear in even ancestral garb. Despite the obvious imprint of Israel’s later history on Gen 10, the chapter belongs to Israel’s prehistory, or rather to history pre-Israel.

Among its many innovations to the ongoing narrative, Gen 10 occasions the emergence of specialized vocabulary for ordering the rapidly diverging humanity. The chapter highlights four components of identity: נִנְשָׁם (residential kinship group), נִנְשָׁם components (tongue/language), נִנְשָׁם (land), and נִנְשָׁם (“nation”). These terms recur at the conclusion of the genealogies of each of Noah’s sons. For example:

אלה בנים לְנִנְשָׁם לְנִנְשָׁם לְנִנְשָׁם לְנִנְשָׁם

These are the descendants of Ham, according to their residential kinship groups, according to their tongues, by their lands, by their “nations” (10:20; cf. 10:31)

Verse 10:5 differs syntactically but utilizes the same four components in relation to the descendants of Japheth.

These terms correspond to English words that play a role in modern accounts of identity. Indeed, family (biological/ethnic affinity), language, and territory are often taken as the component parts of a nation. However, simply equating the Hebrew words with the English ones runs the risk of allowing modern definitions to overwhelm the text. The

138 Contra those commentators who interpret “Shem” as a designation for Israel (e.g., Von Rad, Genesis, 137). As von Rad acknowledges, such usage is entirely unattested elsewhere.
similarities between the predicates of communal identity highlighted in Gen 10 and in modern accounts belie the differences between the conceptions of identity in which those predicates figure. As Anderson has demonstrated, the modern nation represents a decidedly innovative approach to constructing community and the communal self. Deriving much of its distinctive shape from the other modes (the “classical communities linked by sacred languages”) whose role it assumed, it must be understood in relation to its religious precedents as well as its political ones. Modernity involves a great shift in the underlying nature of national communities, even if some of the features of those communities have been around for a while.139 If similar colors are used in Genesis and in modern accounts, they function to create very different pictures.

Of the four words employed in the classificatory system of Gen 10, נִשָּׁפְּטָה proves the most difficult to define. Displaying great sensitivity to the problem of anachronism, Koehler & Baumgartner take a cautious approach to the word. Although they provide the definition “extended family, clan,” they opt for a more general definition in Gen 10 and other passages that use the word in its plural form in conjunction with other identifying terms (ךָֽנָּרָמָה, כָּפּוֹת, מַחְסִיְתָה, מַזָּרָם, וּמַזָּרָם). They suggest that in those instances the word designates the “types” or “constituent parts” of “the nations of the world.”140 Carol Meyers remarks on the inadequacy of “family” as a translation for נִשָּׁפְּטָה because in English usage the term suggests a nuclear family. The term “clan” conveys the larger community envisioned by the Hebrew word, but neglects its

139 For a detailed analysis of the relationship between ancient (Jewish and Greco-Roman from 100 BCE to 100 CE) and modern approaches to collectivity, see Love L. Sechrest, “A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006), 180-87. For a treatment focusing on ancient Israel/Judah/Yehud, see Mario Liverani, “Nationality and Political Identity,” ABD IV:1031-37.

geographical dimension—unlike a clan, the קָנָה had “residential commonality.”

(This observation poses the question of whether kinship determined co-residence or co-residence determined kinship. In other words, did people live together because they were family, or were they family because they lived together? Gen 2:23 suggests a combination of the two options.) Meyers therefore turns to more synthetic terms, which gain accuracy at the expense of usability, finally settling on “residential kinship group.” She arrives at this definition by correlating archaeological findings with “careful sociological studies of the early Israelite period.”

The methodology of this study precludes an attempt to define key words through reference to the specific historical context in which their meanings were shaped and possibly contested. Nevertheless, these definitions provide a good starting point. While situated in the material realities of the “early Israelite period,” Meyers’ definition is ultimately more social-scientific than historical, evoking the most basic differences between the social structure of Israelites and modern Westerners rather than highlighting the specific consequences of particular circumstances (e.g., Persian taxation or Josianic reform). In this regard, it facilitates an understanding of the text without requiring one to understand the people as prior to the theology.

Nevertheless, a further step is required. Reading Genesis as theological writing requires one to remain open to the possibility that it gives ordinary words new meaning or different nuances as it “overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of

politics.” In other words, Genesis might use familiar words in unfamiliar ways in order to create new ways of thinking and seeing (and, correspondingly, new possibilities for action) not constrained by conventional parameters. While Genesis likely takes such a stance in relation to its own historical context(s), as a family narrative it goes beyond offering an insight into its time destined to be transcended in its turn. Instead, it reaches beyond the circumstances of its production to be told and retold, reacting not only to the possibilities of its present, but also to those of its future. Its construction of community poses an alternative to parameters not yet in place (including those of modernity) for family members working out their identity in ever-changing circumstances.

In conjunction with definitions such as Meyers’, a structuralist approach focusing on how Gen 10’s key words function in relation to the system of the larger text rather than on their external referents offers a means of avoiding anachronism without neutralizing Genesis as “critical discourse.” Notably, three of the four words play an important role in the account of Abram’s call (12:1-7). The words וּבָנָה and הָעָשַׁיִם each occur for the seventh time there (12:2-3), while the word הָעַבְרִי appears seven times within the passage (12:1, 5-7). This confluence of sevens suggests that communal identity is somehow perfected with the call of Abram; the process of forging community that began with the opening chapters of Genesis reaches a climactic point in the summons of the first patriarch. (This reason alone would be basis enough to conclude that an approach that severs that narrative from those preceding it is too narrow to comprehend the

142 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 25.
significance of God’s dealings with Abram and his family. The meaning of Gen 10 does not emerge fully until Gen 12:1-7.

The remaining key word from Gen 10, however, does not appear again in Genesis. The absence of מָכֹּֽב from Abram’s call narrative may suggest a reduced role for language vis-à-vis the other components of identity listed in Gen 10. The structural markers that identify that narrative as a climatic moment in the construction of communal identity may indicate that language does not play a significant role in defining the community created by God’s call. Such a diminishment of language stands in stark contrast to the biblical portrayal of the postexilic period. In his study of “The Role of Language in Ancient Israelite Perceptions of National Identity,” Daniel Block describes language as the overriding basis of national identification in Nehemiah. He explains, “although . . . the central issue in Neh 13:24 was actually religious, spiritual fidelity, language and national identity were so intertwined that to lose the language was to forfeit one’s position in the community. The linguistic factor had outlived the territorial, political, and in this context, even the ethnic factors. The maintenance of Judean identity was tied to the retention of the language.” In taking this position, however, Nehemiah’s perspective stands as the exception to the rule. In general, Block argues, “it would seem that insofar as national languages did develop, these were the result of, rather than the catalyst for, national unity,” a perspective in keeping with that displayed in Genesis.

144 Cf. Von Rad: “It is . . . not wholly apt to find in ch. 11 that conclusion to the primeval history, as is usually done; for then the primeval history has a much too independent and isolated importance. Rather, its real conclusion, indeed its key, is ch. 12.1-3, for only from there does the theological significance of this universal preface to saving history become understandable” (Genesis, 154).


146 Block, “Role of Language,” 339.
Based on his examination of the ancient Near East, Block maintains that “the tenacity with which people will cling to their own language as a symbol of their ethnic identity has been overestimated.” For the Hebrews, religious assimilation was of much greater concern.\textsuperscript{147} Moreover, Block’s analysis of the biblical texts indicates that language correlates more strongly with geography than with ethnicity, as in יֶשֶׁם כָּנָן (“the language of Canaan,” Isa 19:18),\textsuperscript{148} although this correlation too breaks down.

Block’s discussion of the few languages mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that the assumption of an essential correspondence between people and language greatly oversimplifies the situation in the texts. He observes,

The name ’rmyt, as a designation for the language, appears to have been derived from the name of a people to whom it was native, that is, the Arameans. This suggests an original identification of language and nation. But few, if any, of those in the OT who are said to use the language were ethnic Arameans: Rabshakeh was Assyrian; Nebuchadnezzar’s officials were Chaldean; Tabeel may have been Aramean, but his associates involved with the letter to Artaxerxes were Persian, Hebrew, Babylonian, and Elamite; Daniel and Ezra, the purported authors of the biblical texts, were Hebrew. It is apparent that by this time Aramaic had ceased to be a distinctively national language.\textsuperscript{149}

Likewise, Block remarks on the evolution of יִשְׂרָאֵל (“Judean” or “Jewish”) from its origins in the name of a tribe to the “geopolitical entity” in which that tribe became prominent, positing that had the language been more closely tied to ethnicity it would have a name derived from ילין (“Israel”). Instead, he suggests that such a name “was probably reserved for the dialect of the northern kingdom, its usage passing from the

\textsuperscript{147} Block, “Role of Language,” 337.
\textsuperscript{148} Block, “Role of Language,” 327, 338.
\textsuperscript{149} Block, “Role of Language,” 329.
scene with the end of that state." Block describes the name יִבְנֵי הָוִדָּד as representing "an intimate relationship among people, land, and language," but as possessing the flexibility to remain in use under the greatly altered circumstances brought about by the subjugation of Judah.

The strongest associations between peoples and languages occur in texts depicting the exilic and postexilic periods. As in regard to "blood," an imperial influence functions to elevate the significance of certain modes of community definition in ways that bring the biblical text into closer alignment with modern approaches to conceptualizing identity. Accordingly, moderns take those biblical texts as offering the Bible’s fundamental statement(s) about identity, gravitating toward ancient perspectives that, like their own, reflect a world defined by empire. In this lies the appeal of postexilic texts for moderns studying identity, as well as the danger inherent in such a connection. It is not enough merely to speak into an imperial situation—the goal should rather be to speak beyond it, and by speaking thus to transform it. When not interpreted through the lens of empire, ancient or modern, Genesis speaks in such a way.

This is not to deny the presence of empire in Gen 10-11. As with the reference to Canaan in Gen 9, a text depicting imperial aspirations in a place called Babylon clearly anticipates an episode that occurs much later from the perspective of the biblical texts. However, making such an observation does not require one to disregard the textual construct and find some more adequate way of locating the passage in relation to Israel’s

150 Block, “Role of Language,” 330.
152 For example, Block notes that “genitival constructions associating a term for language with a designation for nation” using the construct form occur exclusively in postexilic texts (“Role of Language,” 326).
153 The reference to “postexilic texts” designates the period depicted in the texts, not the period in which the text received its “final form.”
history. Rather, it draws attention to the ways in which the story overlaps upon itself. Traces of later episodes in the history of “Israel” need not be read as simply betraying the real context from which the text derives. They could also be understood within the terms of the biblical “story” itself. Genesis does not relate the story of Israel’s origins in real-time from the perspective of an observer on the scene. Instead, it presents an absolute beginning beyond which Israel does not exist while nevertheless recognizing that more of the story is present to its audience than has unfolded in its own account. The book does not just tell Israel’s story. It retells it, addressing audiences already implicated in that story and thereby refining their understanding of who they are. Accordingly, empire lies within its purview even as, to apply Bhabha’s famous phrase, it “insistently gesture[s] to the beyond.”

Having attributed significance to the absence of the word נֵבֶל from Gen 12:1-7, it becomes important to note that while Gen 10 contains the book’s first and last occurrences of נֵבֶל, language proves central to the very next passage (11:1-9, the Tower of Babel). However, that narrative uses הָדַּ֖ל rather than נֵבֶל (11:1, 6-7, 9). The shift is even more striking given that the Babel narrative uses הָדַּ֖ל in ways usually reserved for נֵבֶל. Such a change is in keeping with its general tendency to replace

---

154 Cf. Von Rad, Genesis, 35.

155 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 4. This application of Bhabha’s expression is in keeping with his focus on the beyond as a space not narrowly defined in terms of temporality or attitude. He contends, “if the jargon of our times--postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism--has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the ‘post’ to indicate sequentiality--after-feminism; or polarity--anti-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment. For instance, if the interest in postmodernism is limited to a celebration of the fragmentation of the ‘grand narratives’ of postenlightenment rationalism then, for all its intellectual excitement, it remains a profoundly parochial enterprise.”

156 Block, “Role of Language,” 328.
the words prominent in Gen 10 just as Gen 10 replaced the words prominent in Gen 5-9. The words נבז and ים do not appear, while the narrative uses ים (“people,” 11:6), a word not found in Gen 10. As for יבש, the most common word among Gen 10’s technical terms, it occurs in the narrative with a meaning intermediate between the one it acquired in Gen 10 (territory) and its earlier sense (earth, as distinct from sky). Once again a semantic shift signals a structural break.

The Babel narrative counterposes two cohortatives uttered by the two participants in the story: יבש יבש (“the whole earth/land”) and YHWH.

Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly (11:3)

Come, let us go down and confuse there their language (11:7)

The first cohortative expresses the remarkable singlemindedness of the people, who speak and act with unprecedented unity. The second cohortative juxtaposes this human unity with a divine one, not only setting up a contest of wills but also echoing the language of an earlier part of Genesis. It is more than coincidence that this passage marks the first use of the cohortative since the creation of humanity (1:26-28). J. Severino Croatto explains, “the linguistic equivalence [between the speeches of YHWH and יבש-יבש] becomes thereby an opposition in projects.” In this connection, he also draws attention to “the inverted assonance [sic] (phonetic chiasm) present between the [בז-בז] (bricks) of the human project (v. 3a) and the [בז-בז] (let us confuse) of the

divine anti-project (v. 4).”158 He thus refers to “[YHWH’s] anti-project” of dismantling the human “pretension to ‘divinity’, to the exercise of total power.”159

The Babel narrative depicts people engaged in an act of construction designed to rival God’s own while specifically counteracting God’s express design in that act of creation. In verse 1:28, after making humanity,

\[
\text{וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה דְּבָרָה לָידָם לֵאַלְוּנָם לָאָלָלָנוּ לָאָלָלָנוּ יָרָן וְיָרָן יָרָן}
\]

God blessed them and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth/land and subdue it.

That יַעֲשֶׂה יָדָם יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעֹלָם לָאָלָלָנוּ יָרָן constitutes the only designation given for the group of humans in the Babel story underscores the connection to the charge given in Gen 1:28. However, they explicitly resist this mandate to fill the land and cultivate it, instead gathering into one place and focusing their energies on cultivating their own renown:

\[
\text{וַיִּקְרְעוּ אֶת שְמוֹ לְעֹלָם לָאָלָלָנוּ יָרָן}
\]

And let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth/land (11:4).

158 J. Severino Croatto, “A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel from the Perspective of Non-Identity: Genesis 11:1-9 in the Context of Its Production,” trans. Fernando F. Segovia, in Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy (eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1998): 203-23, 214. Cf. Sarna, Genesis, 84. Fokkelman suggests, “the chiasmus connects the two actions so tightly that the one can no longer exist without the other. A causal relation is made, as it were, between the construction and the obstruction: the action of these people with such God-displeasing pretensions asks for counteraction, and necessarily provokes this reaction from God on the basis on this concrete motivation” (Narrative Art in Genesis, 16).

159 Croatto, “A Reading of the Story,” 214. From the linguistic connection between שְׁם (name) לְעֹלָם, (there), and לָאָלָלָנוּ (heavens), Fokkelman argues “implicitly they want to penetrate the strictly divine and become divine themselves” (Narrative Art in Genesis, 17).
Croatto’s own reading takes note of the echoes of creation but downplays their significance,\textsuperscript{160} considering them a distraction from the text’s real focus on “advanc[ing], with enormous irony, a foundation myth in opposition to the Mesopotamian tradition regarding the founding of Babylon,” and on issuing a warning that Babylon will suffer the same fate of dispersion that it has inflicted on others.\textsuperscript{161} He argues that the Babel story is best understood as a “counter-Enuma Elish.”\textsuperscript{162} Although Croatto’s reading focuses more on the text’s historical context than its literary one, it does not prove incompatible with the reading offered here. The family storytelling approach emphasizes that, as a family narrative for Israel, Genesis is engaged in the process of defining and shaping the identity of that community even when it seems to be commenting on others. A reading that interprets the book as merely a reaction to its context therefore falls short. Rather than simply engaging Enuma Elish on that story’s own terms, Gen 11:1-9 approaches the Babylonian story from the perspective of its own fully developed alternative--the creation account at the beginning of the book. YHWH’s project thus has a positive dimension as well as a negative one, promoting the deity’s own work of creation as well as opposing the imperial Babylonian project.

The Babel narrative’s relationship to Gen 1 draws attention to the way in which God’s words have a different relationship to God’s actions in the two passages. The creation account depicts a precise correspondence between word and result; God speaks and it happens

\textsuperscript{160} E.g., Croatto, “A Reading of the Story,” 210.

\textsuperscript{161} Croatto, “A Reading of the Story,” 204, 221. Cf. Fokkelman, \textit{Narrative Art in Genesis}, 12. Westermann’s reading of this passage is diametrically opposed to Croatto’s, focusing on the “confusion of languages” and regarding the mention of Babel and of dispersion as incidental, secondary aspects of the text (\textit{Genesis 1-11}, 535-36, cf. 541).

\textsuperscript{162} Croatto, “A Reading of the Story,” 206.
(‘אלהים יוצר אדם, ובראו), אולם, "And God said let there be light, and there was light," 1:3). The cohortative verb interrupts this pattern by announcing God’s action rather than simply producing the desired outcome. Still, the language of the divine address closely resembles the description of the action:

נברא אלהים ישות ארץ שמיום בראותו;
(1:26) . . .
ונהיו אלהים את הארץ בברעה.
(1:27) . . .

And God said, Let us make adam in our image, according to our likeness…
And God created the adam in [God’s] image…

In contrast, the Babel narrative leaves one to infer the relationship between God’s words and God’s action:

היהו ה khỏe את בניו שמה שמה ולא ישמרו את שמה רעוה;
(11:7-8) . . .
ויהיו בניו את כל מצוות כל הארץ;

Come, let us go down and confuse there their language so that one will not understand his neighbor’s language.
And YHWH scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth/land.

In its larger context, God’s speech conveys an intention to act against the unbridled will displayed in the construction of the tower, and the narrative indicates that God’s action accomplishes this purpose. However, the relationship between confusing language and scattering people remains unclear. Does the confusion of languages prompt the people to separate of their own accord or does the dispersion require additional effort?

Depicting the confusion of language as a strategy for dividing a unified humanity, the Tower of Babel narrative would seem to call into question Block’s text-based observation that, in the ancient Near East, linguistic unity generally results from rather than produces national cohesion. Expressing a broad consensus, von Rad summarizes verses eight and nine by noting that “mankind is ‘scattered,’ i.e., broken up into a great
number of individual nations.” He identifies the narrative as “first of all . . . an aetiological saga; it seeks to explain why there are so many nations and languages; it also seeks to explain the name Babel.”

Croatto, however, challenges this perspective, pointing out that “‘dispersion’ is not equivalent to the division of peoples in the ‘Table of the Nations’. The verb [?] always conveys a negative sense with regard to reality and is never used with reference to any sort of organized activity.” He further explains, “‘dispersion’ has no constructive connotations; it denotes, rather, the loss of identity in a group that formerly constituted a unity.” Likewise, Block observes, “the text does not specifically associate the division of speech with the rise of separate nations.” Although some have taken the juxtaposition with Gen 10 to provide this association, he suggests that the linguistic discrepancy between the chapters “warns against tying the two too closely.” Indeed, the narrative depicts logistical problems rather than newly emergent ethnic divisions as responsible for undermining human cooperation; it suggests that the people become unable to work together, not that they are unwilling to do so. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the narrative even engages the proliferation of languages at all. Croatto argues that “the text makes no reference whatsoever to a diversity of tongues,” but rather depicts the breakdown of “language as such,” human speech as a means of communication.

Jan Fokkelman’s emphasis on the “creativity of language” and the

---

164 Croatto, “A Reading of the Story,” 220.
165 Block, “Role of Language,” 337.
166 Block, “Role of Language,” 337.
way in which it “creates new realities” provides support for this assertion, suggesting that
the Babel narrative depicts the constructive power of human speech run amok.\textsuperscript{168}
Croatto explains, “‘to mix/confuse’ (balal) is not the same as to diversify, to generate, to
multiply,” concluding that

... it would be quite incorrect to compare this story with that of chapter 10. In
effect, the story has nothing to do with the division of humanity into tongues and
peoples... but rather deals with a twofold strategy on the part of [YHWH]: first,
to undo the effectiveness of a megalomaniacal project already in operation;
second, and above all, to prevent any other such projects from arising in the
future. Such a conclusion bears an important hermeneutical strain for the
perspective of the final text of the Pentateuch. To wit: the story makes the point
that the same Babylon that drives the people of Judah into exile and “disperses” it
over the whole face of the empire will, in turn, “be dispersed” by [YHWH]. That is
the metamessage of the myth.\textsuperscript{169}

Croatto’s analysis draws attention to the way in which the use of Genesis 10 as the
interpretive key for Genesis 11 has often resulted in a misreading of the Babel narrative.
A recognition of incongruity between the two passages has prompted many scholars to
separate them by assigning them to different sources. But does their juxtaposition reflect
anything more than an awkward attempt to fashion a narrative chronology? Croatto’s
suggestion that the passage has nothing to do with the origins of human diversity
exacerbates this problem, begging the question of why the two narratives have been
coupled in the “final form” of Genesis if they are not even tangentially related.

\textsuperscript{168} Fokkelman, \textit{Narrative Art in Genesis}, 28, 27. Cf. the discussion of the role of
language above, ch. 2. Despite the observations quoted here, Fokkelman ultimately
follows the creation of diverse languages reading (\textit{Narrative Art in Genesis}, 41 n. 53).
\textsuperscript{169} Croatto, “A Reading of the Story,” 220-21.
Nevertheless, Croatto’s insights can be reconciled with an approach that takes the particular narrative setting of the passage more seriously than he does, and with von Rad’s observation that “the story about the building of the Babylonian tower is generally seen as the keystone to the [YHWH]istic primeval history.”

I would argue that the Babel story does constitute a continuation of Gen 10, though not in the way usually understood. As a story about power and its misuse, Gen 11:1-9 builds on the legacy of Noah’s curse, bringing that trajectory to a climatic point of confrontation with God.

J. Richard Middleton makes a similar assertion. “The Babel narrative of Genesis 11:1-9 … functions as an appropriate conclusion to the primeval history,” he maintains. “Having begun with God’s creation of humanity as imago Dei, gifted with real power and agency in the world, Genesis 1-11 testifies to the increasing abuse of the power of imago Dei, culminating in the impasse of the Babel story, where that violence is substantially more organized (and hidden).”

Middleton shares Croatto’s emphasis on imperial oppression as the focus of this passage’s critique, but construes it differently. While Croatto observes a human will to divine power, Middleton highlights the use of power as

170 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 152.
171 Contra Westermann, who argues, “it is questionable. . . that, as so many modern interpreters think, J intends to present a crescendo of sin.” He maintains, “The intention of J becomes clear only in what is common to these narratives of crime and punishment; it is to expound the variety of ways which the creature can turn against the creator” (*Genesis 1-11*, 53). Westermann’s conclusion should be understood in relation to his insistence on distinguishing between J and P and treating them separately, as well as his broader tendency to consider the significance of the biblical texts as depending heavily on the history of their production (e.g., 52). The view outlined here demonstrates that “an abstract theology of sin which has no foundation in J” is not the only source of the “crescendo of sin” interpretation--another approach to reading may yield a similar result. If one refrains from interpreting what Westermann terms “crime and punishment” in such generic terms and instead understands it as a clash between creative and countercreative forces, and if one maintains a focus on “political history,” a sense of escalation emerges.

the point at issue. He contrasts the ascription of the imago Dei to all men and women with the Mesopotamian concentration of the divine image (and the authority it confers) in a royal and priestly elite. In his view, Genesis describes humans as intended to share in divine power, but not in the way depicted in Gen 11:1-9. He therefore argues,

The implication is...not, as is often suggested, that Genesis 11 protests a human incursion into the divine realm (heaven). God is not the one threatened by this Promethean act of human assertion. Rather, a careful reading of the primeval history suggests that Babel represents imperial civilization par excellence and that its imposed, artificial unity is a danger to the human race. God’s remedy, therefore, not only enables humanity to obey the commission of 1:28 to fill the earth, but contributes to the diffusion of human power for the sake of humanity.173

From this perspective, the divine response should be understood not simply as the punitive impulse of a threatened authority figure, but rather as a move to reassert God’s original intention for humanity.174

Middleton also rejects the line of interpretation that takes the Babel narrative as an explanation for the origins of linguistic diversity. He follows David Smith in suggesting that Gen 11:1-9 “does not portray an idyllic world unified with a single primal language, but reflects the Neo-Assyrian imperial practice of imposing the single language of the conqueror on subjugated peoples.”175 Middleton finds that this interpretation helps make sense of the story’s canonical position:

174 Cf. Brueggemann, Genesis, 99; Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 18 n. 12; Sarna, Genesis, 83; Mark G. Brett, Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity (London: Routledge, 2000), 47. Westermann describes God’s action as “more accurately: defensive or preventative” rather than punitive (Genesis 1-11, 550). Middleton calls it “redemptive, in that it redresses the attempt of Babel to resist the original charge to the human race to multiply and fill the earth (1:28)” (The Liberating Image, 225).
175 Middleton, The Liberating Image, 223.
Whatever original meaning the Babel story might have had if it circulated as an independent work, in the final form of the text of Genesis as it now stands, multiple languages are portrayed as normal before Babel. God’s response of confusing the language of the builders cannot therefore be understood by canonical readers in any unproblematic way as simple punishment. While confusion is certainly the initial result of multiplying the languages of Babel, in the context of the primeval history this is fundamentally a restorative move, reversing an unhealthy, monolithic movement toward imposed homogeneity.\textsuperscript{176}

Like Croatto, Middleton emphasizes the relationship between the Babel story and other stories with which it is in dialogue. However, the canonical setting plays an important role in his account. He observes that “prophetic oracles against Babylon, especially in Jeremiah 51 and Isaiah 14:3-23, do not single out cultic practices, but rather imperial hubris, military fortifications, and oppressive power, portraying this in terms of Babylon’s aspiration to reach up to the heavens (see especially Jeremiah 51:53; Isaiah 14:12-20).”\textsuperscript{177} In addition, linguistic echoes that link the Babel builders to Pharaoh in Exod 1 help him tease out the “hidden, systemic violence” in Gen 11:1-9. He therefore concludes:

…the narrative of Genesis 11:1-9, even if it first suggests a superficial, surface reading that positively affirms Babylonian/Mesopotamian civilization, ends up subverting that reading. A canonical interpretation of the text suggests that it ultimately protests the hidden, systemic violence beneath Babylonian/Mesopotamian civilization by stripping away its putative divine legitimation. Babel is thus disclosed as nothing more than a human construction, and a violent one at that, in which those with power suppress the perceived social forces of chaos in the name of divine order. Thus, contrary to the mythic tradition that the name Babel means “the gate of god(s),” Genesis 11 ironically claims that the true

\textsuperscript{176} Middleton, \textit{The Liberating Image}, 224-25.
\textsuperscript{177} Middleton, \textit{The Liberating Image}, 223.
significance of Babel is “confusion.” The civilization that claimed to represent the epitome of order is unmasked as simply another form of chaos.\textsuperscript{178}

Middleton’s reading thus complements and complicates Croatto’s, situating the narrative within Genesis (and the Bible more generally) as well as offering a more subtle analysis of the narrative’s attitude toward power.

Given Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman’s account of the way in which different biblical terms designate different understandings of communality, the word מָעֵשׂ (11:6) makes a surprising appearance this passage. Treating it among the “exceptions [that] prove the rule,” they maintain that “’Am in this context is used to stress closeness and family-like unity.”\textsuperscript{179} Such an explanation reconciles this verse with their overall understanding of the word’s function. However, it leaves the deeper theological question unanswered. The reading developed here suggests that the Babel narrative depicts an approach to human community diametrically opposed to God’s purposes. Why, then, would the tower-builders be described with the same word that designates Israel’s distinctive mode of communality?

The use of such an inappropriate word is attested as a literary device elsewhere in Genesis. Ellen Davis describes a word in Gen 1:28 that “seems designed not just to prompt reflection but to stop us dead in our tracks.”\textsuperscript{180} She observes that the incongruity of מַעֵשׂ (“and conquer it”) has prompted Norman Habel to “sugges[t] that what may once have been an ‘Earth-centered’ account of creation has been editorially ‘interrupted’ by a radically anthropocentric story.” This means of relating the odd word to its context

\textsuperscript{178} Middleton, \textit{The Liberating Image}, 227.
\textsuperscript{179} Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman, “’Am and Goy as Designations for Ethnicity,” 23.
proves unsatisfying, however. Davis argues, “rather than positing an interruption in a passage (Gen 1:1-24a) that virtually all other scholars acknowledge to be a tightly unified composition, it is preferable to ask how that charge to the human may be integral to the larger earth-sensitive story in which it appears.”

She attributes a twofold purpose to the use of לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ in Gen 1. First, as noted above, the word arrests readers’ attention and encourages deeper engagement. Secondly, it evokes another well-known use of the word, in this case, the command to conquer Canaan.

Both of these purposes prove relevant to Gen 11:6. Not only does the word לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ draw the attention of readers attuned to its nuances, but it also reflects the relationship between this passage and a subsequent text, although the intertextual relationship is of a different order than the one Davis describes. The incongruous לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ of Gen 11:6 has its counterpart in the incongruous לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ of Gen 12:2. Containing the primary statement of the telos of Israel, the call of Abram might be expected to inaugurate the tradition of usage that understands the collective as fundamentally an לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ. However, it refers to the people-to-be as a לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ, and a great big one at that. Like Speiser, Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman suggest that the word לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ was precluded in this context: “How could Abraham be promised to become an ’am when in this primary sense [paternal uncle] he already was one, Lot being his nephew?”

However, unlike Speiser, they suggest that the recurring phrase לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ (Gen 12:2, 21:18, 46:3) should not be understood in the same way as other uses of לְעָבַדְתֶּךָ, but has a distinctive meaning. They describe here and in other passages a “very special (and often contrastive or exception-implying) usage of goy gadol

181 Davis, “Propriety and Trespass,” 76-77.
182 Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman, “Am and Goy as Designations for Ethnicity,” 19.
to indicate manyness, size of population, rather than nationality or ethnicity.”¹⁸³ The phrase has a particular association with divine promises of future blessing made in times when the recipient’s intergenerational survival is most in question. The use of מֵּלֶך in Gen 11:6 helps differentiate the passage linguistically from the material that precedes and follows it, in this way accommodating its use of the wrong word. The contrast between the mode of communality to which he is summoned and that manifested in the Babel narrative is maintained by the use of מֵּלֶך in Gen 11:6 and מֶלֶך in Gen 12:2. At the same time, the word מִלְּכֶּם echoes the מֶלֶך of Gen 11, marking God’s reassertion of the prerogative that humanity tried to usurp in that text.¹⁸⁴ As noted above, Gen 12:2 also marks the seventh appearance of the word מֶלֶך, pointing to the way in which communality is somehow perfected in the call to Abram.

Von Rad frequently makes reference to the erosion/perversion of human community in the early chapters of Genesis, observing the destruction of “the community of men with one another” in Gen 3 and “a real shattering of man’s brotherhood” in Gen 4.¹⁸⁵ After discussing the depiction of “man’s cultural progress” in Gen 4, he notes that Lamech’s vengeful Song of the Sword “serves to make visible something of the other side of that advance, something of the change in the human attitude which goes hand in hand with that higher development. It is the spirit of a growing irreconcilableness [sic] and fierce self-assertiveness, by which human community is more and more profoundly ruptured.”¹⁸⁶ Although his focus in this passage is on the individual and he does not mention imperial oppression, his remarks about the dark side of “man’s cultural

¹⁸³ Fishman, Mayerfield, and Fishman, “Am and Goy as Designations for Ethnicity,” 20.
¹⁸⁴ On the literary function of the similarity between these two Hebrew words, see Fokkelman (Narrative Art in Genesis, 19).
¹⁸⁵ Von Rad, Genesis, 91, 104.
¹⁸⁶ Von Rad, Genesis, 111.
“progress” nevertheless invite such a connection, particularly when the trajectory he identifies is traced through the Babel narrative.

Like Middleton, Brett traces through Gen 1-11 an ongoing commentary about the nature and distribution of power among humans, identifying “an anti-monarchic tone” in Genesis. Of the first creation account, he suggests, “when humanity as a whole is exhorted to rule over the other living creatures, this is best read as a polemical undermining of a role otherwise associated primarily with kings.” In this it continues the trajectory established by the creation of humanity “in the image of God.” As Brett explains, “the characteristic association of the phrase ‘image of God’ with Mesopotamian kings and Egyptian pharaohs has long been observed, but the implication [sic] of this comparison have often been under-analysed. If the health of the created order does not depend upon kings (whether Mesopotamian, Israelite or Persian kings), then the democratising tendency of 1.27-28 can be seen as anti-monarchic.”

These observations lead Brett to deal with this portion of the book under the heading “Creation and Dominance.”

By recognizing genealogy as an alternative to the national mode of political organization, one can find in Gen 10-11 an example of the biblical tendency to comment through the juxtaposition of contrasting characters or texts. As Crüsemann observes, Gen 10 presents “a system with the propensity to encompass all of humanity, all neighboring peoples as well as the internal structure of one’s own people.” This description could easily apply to an empire (or more generally, to the West). Gen 11:1-9

---

187 Brett, Genesis, 28.
depicts a system with aspirations similar to Gen 10, but one that accomplishes this purpose in a very different way. Citing C. Uehlinger, who finds in the text an allusion to the Assyrian empire, Crüsemann proposes that “the story is about the suppression of diversity. The nightmare of a uniform world order is prevented by God. The punishment is, above all, an act of liberation, the enabling of diverse identities.”190 Genesis thus sets the rubric of family, with all of its ethical implications, against the imperial consolidation of power invoked and manifested in the Babel narrative. In Gen 10-11, the politics of creation oppose the politics of countercreation.

Describing Gen 11:1-9 as “the last of the great narratives of the [YHWHist] primeval history,” von Rad maintains, “therefore it has special significance in the context of the whole.”191 Fokkelman finds such significance in the story’s depiction of an unprecedented threat to the cosmic order: “[YHWH] finds himself confronted with an unexpected concentration of power, with a revolution which threatens to subvert the cosmic order created by him. He intervenes and the concentric structure [of the passage] shows in a way which permits no misunderstanding that God is going to fight this evil by destroying it root and branch.”192 Although Fokkelman emphasizes the proportionality

190 Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity,” 72. Cf. Brett, who suggests “empire builders are guilty of improper ambition; the Tower of Babel episode in Genesis 11 is designed to show this. . . .” Brett identifies imperialism as the characteristic activity of Hamites: “A unifying principle among the Hamites is urbanism, and this feature is reflected especially in the mythical Nimrod, son of Cush (or Ethiopia), who somehow founds the urban centers of both Babylon and of Assyria. Nimrod is an empire builder, indeed the prototype of empire builders, and the implicit suggestion from the editors of Genesis is that empire builders--like Ham--are guilty of crimes of dominance” (Genesis, 47). See also Laura L. Brenneman, who interprets Gen 11 as cautioning that “banding together in the name of universal human interests is not necessarily a path to peaceful common good. In fact, it can be dangerous, given humanity’s destructive potential” (“Further Footnotes on Paul, Yoder, and Boyarin,” Cross Currents 56.4 [2007]: 60-69, 62).
191 Von Rad, Genesis, 148.
192 Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 27.
of the divine response, as reflected in the balanced structure of the passage, God’s action
could be viewed as extending beyond the confines of this episode, just as the human will-
to-divine-power arises before it. On such a reading, the call to Abram (Gen 12:1-3) could
be understood as part of God’s larger response to the countercreative impulse manifested
in the tower incident, as well as in the narratives preceding it. As Alter explains,
“[Israel’s] existence . . . is emphatically imagined as a strenuous effort to renew the act of
creation.”

This point is underscored by the way in which the call to Abram echoes the call to
Noah. The section continues the book’s pattern of using linguistic ties to bind rather
disparate stories together and trace through them an ongoing plot. A genealogical list that
divides the life span of each figure according to the birth of his firstborn son, Gen 11:10-
26 revisits Gen 5–9. For example, 11:14-15:

\[
\text{南非 the Shelah Shelah son of Shelah Shelah.

The Shelah Shelah Shelah Shelah Shelah son of

And Shelah lived thirty years and begot Eber.
Then Shelah lived after his begetting Eber 403 years and he then begot [other] sons and
daughters.

This structure resembles the earlier genealogy enough to invite a comparison;
nevertheless, the differences between the two lists are as important as the similarities.
Notably, the recurring refrain of death in the earlier text is here replaced with a recurring
refrain of life. Instead of concluding the account of each figure with a report of his death,
the text begins by emphasizing each figure’s life.\footnote{194} The first few verses hammer home

\footnote{193 Alter, \textit{Five Books of Moses}, 15.}
\footnote{194 Biblical Hebrew has several ways of referring to someone’s age, lending
significance to its choice of this particular way.}

\footnote{191}
this point by using the short perfect/adjectival form ‚נ, a striking contrast to the typical ‚נ. The word רָאָס (“then he died”) does not occur. Absent too the phrase פָּלַק (“all the days of”) and the interest in summation that it signals. In the earlier genealogy, a certain rigidity of form helped throw departures from the regular pattern into relief and made a larger point about the constraints governing human lives. Coming shortly after the expulsion from Eden, that text devoted special attention to the boundaries of human existence. This more open genealogy displays less of an interest in such matters, focusing instead on procreation and continuity. In a book in which kinship and continuity take center stage, genealogies constitute more than a means of transitioning from one narrative to the next. They are themselves part of the story. Comparing these two genealogies with one another and with others (such as the spare genealogy that begins Chronicles) demonstrates that they did not simply plug names into a standard structure. Rather, subtle differences in form highlight the distinctive emphasis of each list.

Perhaps the most important similarity between the genealogies of Gen 11:10-26 and Gen 5 comes at the conclusion. After focusing exclusively on a single son in each generation (presumably the firstborn), lumping all other descendants together under the phrase פְּנֵיָה וּפְנֵיָה (“sons and daughters”), the text suddenly lists three sons all at once. Although much attention has justifiably been given to the pairs of rivals in Genesis (e.g., Cain and Abel, Hagar and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah), this recurring triplet is also significant, sounding distinctively against the dominant rhythm of

196 Von Rad cites structural differences between the genealogies in Gen 5 and 11 as “an indication that these genealogies were each independent traditions and only secondarily were coupled to one another in the toledoth book” (*Genesis*, 156).
two. Nevertheless, the repetition of the figure simultaneously asserts the preeminence of pairs—even threes come in twos. The text presents Abram, Nahor, and Haran as a set after the manner of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

The formal resemblance reaches beyond the listing of three names where only one is expected. In each instance, after this break in the established pattern of the genealogy, a few verses of exposition effect a transition into a larger narrative. Both texts employ the "generations of" formula that usually signals a structural break in a place that does not seem to correspond to a narrative discontinuity (6:9; 11:27). In both narratives, God addresses an individual and issues a command using an imperative verb in conjunction with the so-called "ethical dative" (6:14; 12:1). In terms of content, both narratives describe God embarking on an elaborate creative endeavor predicated on the obedient response of the individual in question.

Once again, however, the differences are as important as the similarities. The use of a similar set up to the ark narrative suggests that Terah, the structural equivalent of Noah, will be the dominant figure in Gen 11:27ff. In this way, the text underscores the unexpectedness of God’s address to Abram. Moreover, while the earlier passage provides specific information explaining God’s choice of Noah (6:8-9), the later passage offers no

---

198 As cited above, Skinner observes this pattern but attributes it to genealogical convention rather than literary design (Genesis, 192). Westermann also considers it conventional (Genesis 1-11, 485), but cf. his later discussion of the possibility that the schema of three brothers seems artificially imposed: “According to J. Hermann . . . an older form of the narrative in[ch. 9] v. 23 mentioned only Shem. In favor of this is... that the episode would run more naturally if only one person were involved. Further, where contrasts in behavior are described elsewhere, especially in the patriarchal stories, the event concerns two individuals,” 489.

199 See also Kaminsky, who also observes this correlation but interprets it differently (Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election [Nashville: Abingdon, 2007], 29).

200 For a description of the “ethical dative” and suggestions for alternative terminology, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 208 (11.2.10d).
explanation of the choice of Abram. As far as God’s action is concerned, the execution of the ark scheme requires only a few chapters while the execution of the “great nation” scheme is still in its early stages at the end of the book. That the project with Abram requires considerably more space to work out than the destruction and repopulation of the created world testifies to its scale.

5.3 The Family Business: From Noah’s Curse to Abra(ha)m’s Blessing

Far from marking a radical new beginning wholly apart from the previous material, the call to Abram in Gen 12 derives much of its meaning from the narrative that precedes it. As reflected in the frequent use of kinship terminology and the genealogical format, that narrative emphasizes family as a means of conveying a vision of cosmic relatedness. For the modern reader accustomed to thinking of family in narrow terms, Genesis explodes the boundaries that define one’s own as one’s closest biological affines, extending the rubric of family even to the universe itself.

This perspective does not remain uncontested even within Genesis. Almost immediately after describing the establishment of the network of nurture connecting God, humans, and land, the book depicts human behavior as disrupting it. The birth of Noah is heralded as an opportunity to bring about restoration, but after an auspicious beginning, things take a decided turn for the worse when an offense by his son prompts him to curse his grandson. In ordaining a hierarchical relationship among his descendants, he intentionally sows division of an unprecedented order. The politics of countercreation become increasingly pervasive, reaching a climactic point when the Tower of Babel demonstrates the lengths (or rather, heights) to which people will take them.
At the same time, the Flood story witnesses the development of geographical displacement from a punishing curse into a force for reconstituting community, its recurring role in the biblical texts. It becomes a means of demarcating and consecrating the first covenant community, coterminous with all human and animal life (9:8-10). Noah’s voyage thus provides an important precedent for the wanderings of the matriarchs and patriarchs that begin with Abra(ha)m. Moreover, as Levenson highlights, the Noachic covenant not only anticipates subsequent covenants, but also conditions them. In both positive and negative ways, Noah stands as an important precursor to Abra(ha)m.

These literary-theological observations dovetail with the recognition that origin stories occupy an important role among family lore, offering special insight into the family definition. Elizabeth Stone explains, “I... noticed that our most idiosyncratic family conviction--that the arts are supremely important and certainly more important than money--was there even in that first story, when my great-grandmother chose as her true love that talented but poor postman.” In a similar way, Israel’s most idiosyncratic family conviction--that it lacks a profane history--emerges in its absence from its first stories. Genesis places the meaning of Israel’s existence firmly beyond that existence.

The next chapter will consider the way in which the stories most directly concerned with the gradual emergence of Israel build on this foundation. It will continue to foreground the contest of definitions as a hermeneutical issue mirrored in the text. As with the attention to Gen 5 in the previous chapter, a text whose theological significance has been underappreciated (Gen 26:22) will provide the vantage point from which to

---

survey other, more prominent narratives, while Isaac provides the vantage point from which to consider other, more prominent characters.
6. Fruitfulness

Basically soil and people are related to each other inasmuch as they are assigned to each other. Just as the cultivation of the land, which is more than simply the acquisition of food, is part of human existence, so too the fruitful is what it is because of the attention that people give it. Soil and people are associated with each other in agricultural life in such a way that each is determined by this mutual association.

--Claus Westermann

. . . the Joseph narrative may be hinting at a connection that runs through the stories of Jacob and Esau, and Isaac and Ishmael, and all the way back to Cain and Abel. That is, if one hopes to see God’s face and thus receive God’s blessing, one must be reconciled with one’s brother.

--Joel Kaminsky

In her groundbreaking work Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, Musa Dube responds to the way in which the Bible has been invoked to authorize colonial domination by developing a set of questions with which to evaluate the proclivities of biblical texts. To this end, she asks, “how does this text construct difference: Is there dialogue and mutual interdependence, or condemnation and replacement of all that is foreign?” Dube poses these questions to the text itself. However, the previous chapters have suggested that the reading of the text must also be engaged in any such consideration. As demonstrated in Auerbach’s discussion of Mystère


3 Musa W. Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 57.
d’Adam, the West has appropriated the biblical texts in such a way that the construction of difference within the text mirrors the construction of difference around it. Accordingly, understanding the Bible’s role in shaping communal identity, as it has been realized historically and as it might be realized potentially, requires an explicit attempt to allow for critical distance between the biblical text and modern assumptions.  

This chapter will not engage Dube’s analysis of the relationship between the Bible and colonialism, although the work done here might serve as the first step of such a task. It will, however, take up Dube’s question about the construction of difference in Genesis. Using Gen 26:22 as a vantage point from which to consider the family of Abraham, it will explore the way in which the book promotes its own version of Dube’s ideal of “liberating interdependence.” Discussions of this part of Genesis tend to focus on connections expressed in vertical relationships of descent and on conflicts expressed in lateral relationships of difference. However, the book does not construct its family of focus through such neat dichotomies of inside and outside. Instead, it assigns great importance to connections across lateral relationships of difference, as in Westermann’s account of soil and people, cited above. When considered from this perspective, certain aspects of these texts that have often been dismissed as haphazard emerge as very much a part of a larger narrative movement.

6.1 The Other Patriarch

A peculiar interruption in the story of Jacob and Esau demonstrates that the expanded notion of family established in the early part of Genesis informs the rest of the

---

book. After the episode in which Esau sells his birthright and before the one in which Jacob deceitfully obtains their father’s blessing, the narrative engages in an extended discussion of the exploits of Isaac in which the rival brothers do not figure at all (Gen 26:1-33).

Squeezing Isaac’s story into the cracks of his sons’ story, this detour corresponds to Isaac’s particular role in the text. He emerges as a distinct figure among the patriarchs and matriarchs, or more precisely, he emerges as a strikingly indistinct character. Commentators have often remarked that the portrayal of Isaac pales in comparison to the portrayals of his father, son, and wife. Brueggemann suggests, “he is primarily remembered as the precious son of a great father and as the beguiled father of a scheming son.”5 In keeping with this perspective, schematizations of Genesis frequently associate major sections of the book with Abraham and Jacob respectively, leaving Isaac’s story to be told as a byproduct of theirs.6 Such an assessment of the relative insignificance of Isaac helps fuel Skinner’s dismissal of the recurrences of תולדות (“these are the generations of”) as providing a suitable structure for the book. He remarks, “the schema is of no practical utility . . . and theoretically it is open to objection. Here it is sufficient to point out the incongruity that, while the histories of Noah and Isaac fall under their own תולדות, those of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph fall under the תולדות of their respective fathers.”7 Skinner finds it unlikely that the book would deliberately be structured to highlight a character who receives such scant attention rather than those to whom considerably more space is devoted.

5 Walter Brueggemann, Genesis (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 221.
6 E.g., John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis (2d ed.; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930); E. A. Speiser, Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes (Anchor Bible 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964); Brueggemann, Genesis.
7 Skinner, Genesis, lxvi.
Compounding the situation, the intrusive Isaac narrative seems as lacking in distinctiveness as the patriarch himself. Towner remarks, “the slightly modified repetition in this chapter of several earlier narratives suggests that the Isaac tradition was not very deeply rooted. Isaac’s story seems to be derived from the saga of his father; he seems to be a transitional figure between that greater patriarch and his own greater son.”

The first portion (26:1-11) so closely resembles an episode already associated with Abra(ha)m (twice!) that many scholars regard it as merely another version of the same story.

Meanwhile, the second portion (26:17-33) is of the type scholars describe as an etiological insertion, a portion of text more important for its external referent than for its role in the surrounding narrative. From this perspective, the real story is that of the wells, with Isaac’s story merely providing a place in the ancestral narratives of Genesis on which to hang it. Like Isaac himself, the narrative is positioned awkwardly between major figures and easily dismissed as lacking a significant role in the larger story.

However, as Robert Alter has demonstrated so convincingly with regard to Gen 38’s interruption of the Joseph story, an apparent detour may provide special insight into the surrounding narrative.

---


11 Westermann does suggest, “ch. 26 is theologically very important for the author because Isaac is the heir of the promise to Abraham” (*Genesis 12-36*, 424).

The generations of (יהו וֲתֹד וָט) Isaac begin in Gen 25:19 with a brief mention of Isaac’s marriage and a summary of Rebekah’s family connections. Then the narrative casually mentions that Isaac prayed to YHWH concerning Rebekah’s barrenness and was answered. The problem is noted and resolved in the space of a single verse, a shockingly brief treatment of a subject that fuels so much drama in biblical narrative. In sharp contrast to the stories of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, there is no mention of frustration and grief on the part of Isaac or Rebekah, no indication of long years of waiting or a series of attempts to circumvent the problem.

Although Alter does not explore it in detail, he lists “the annunciation . . . of the birth of the hero to his barren mother” among “the most commonly repeated biblical type-scenes.”\(^\text{13}\) In his account of biblical narrative, a “type-scene” is characterized by “prominent elements of repetitive compositional pattern . . . that are a conscious convention.”\(^\text{14}\) Type-scenes thus condition readers’ expectations.\(^\text{15}\) Surely Jacob/Israel, the eponymous ancestor, might be expected to have as portentous a birth as the Bible records. However, while Genesis anticipates the birth of Isaac in every conventional way with an abundance of drama, in the case of Jacob/Israel, “the convention . . . is present through its deliberate suppression.”\(^\text{16}\)

One aspect of this deliberate suppression involves the emergence of the expected elements in unexpected places. Thus, when Rebekah does complain and elicit a divine response (25:22), the subject is not her barrenness but rather the relentless maneuverings of her unborn children. Isaac’s expression of frustration comes incongruously in Gen

\(^{13}\) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51.

\(^{14}\) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 50.

\(^{15}\) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 52.

\(^{16}\) The phrase is Alter’s (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 48-49), but he applies it to an example of his own making, not the one mentioned here.
26:22. After he has already fathered children and acquired wealth enough to incur the envy of the Philistines (Gen 26:13-14) and make it unwieldy for him to live among them (26:16), he declares: "because now YHWH has created a wide space for us and we will be fruitful in the land"). The occasion for this statement is the naming of a well, but the conventional language that it uses (ךָּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּ…


18 I have delineated the passage in Gen 29 to highlight the parallel to be discussed here, although the naming sequence includes Rachel and extends well into the next chapter.
And she said, “Now, this time, my husband will be joined to me . . . .” For this reason, she called his name “Levi.”

Although Isaac’s words resemble those of Leah, his description of his plight better corresponds to the situation of barren Rachel. Indeed, any mention of Leah’s sufferings must make reference to her sister and favored co-wife. In this way, the relationship between the stories of Isaac and of Leah and Rachel draws further attention to barrenness and the conventions governing its appearance in biblical narrative, even as the text continues to subvert them. In Gen 26:22 Isaac expresses a longing that in many ways echoes the longing to have a child, a sentiment that might have been expected from him earlier in the text. However, at this point his concern lies elsewhere. He desires fruitfulness, but what does that amount to?

There is the possibility that the well disputes have compromised Isaac’s access to water to the detriment of his agricultural endeavors. The reference to fruitfulness “in the land” lends support to this interpretation. Nevertheless, other indications suggest something more at work, a further layer of meaning. The narrative has already described Isaac as uncommonly wealthy (26:13-14, 16), so his enterprises must not be faring too badly. Moreover, in Isaac’s statement (יִזָרֵךְ) it is “we” who will be fruitful, not the land or the crops planted in it. As noted above (ch. 4), “being fruitful” (יָרֵךְ) is a concept that the Hebrew Bible especially associates with Genesis. An agricultural term also applied to procreation, the word helps enact the book’s expansive view of family. However, neither agriculture nor procreation fully explains its appearance here, pointing to a further dimension in biblical usage.

19 The verb יָרֵךְ (“be fruitful”) appears fifteen times in Genesis, as many occurrences as it has in the rest of the Hebrew Bible put together.
The word initially appears in the famous biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply,” given first to birds and sea creatures and then to humans (ְניִסָּיָה, ְניִסָּיָה; Gen 1:22, 28). It next shows up after the Flood, when God reiterates that creation charge to Noah and his companions on the Ark (8:17; 9:1, 7). The word then occurs when God makes a covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham, promising to make him extremely fruitful (וָטַּאֲבַּהְתָּהְת, וָטַּאֲבַּהְתָּהְת; Gen 17). At this time God institutes the rite of circumcision and announces the impending birth of Isaac to the elderly Sarai, whose name God changes to Sarah. Abraham urges God to make the son he already has (by Hagar) the channel of blessing, and in response God also promises to make Ishmael fruitful and multiply him greatly (וָטַּאֲבַּהְתָּהְת, וָטַּאֲבַּהְתָּהְת; 17:20). The word thus relates to the process of creation and renewal discussed in the previous chapters of this study, a process in which procreation plays a central but not exhaustive role.

From the beginning (Gen 1), God never directs the promise/blessing of being fruitful toward a single isolated individual or collective. As Ellen Davis explains, “humans are blessed . . . with respect to the very same creatures of sea and sky who have just received their own blessing and charge to multiply. Therefore, the human vocation can only be fulfilled if we take our place among the non-human species.”

Similarly, God promises fruitfulness to the descendants of Abraham (17:6) and, after identifying Isaac as covenantal heir, specifically reiterates that promise to Ishmael (17:20). Accordingly, the conclusion that Davis draws about humans and other creatures also

---

20 This should not be understood as Abraham coaxing a concession from a reluctant deity, but rather as an example of Abraham’s special intercessory role. See Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 83.

applies in this instance: “Legitimate . . . fruitfulness cannot be secured to the detriment of [others] that are equally blessed by God.”\(^\text{22}\) Being fruitful is not a predicate of the individual as such, but rather a function of life in relationship with those who are, in a significant sense, different (Isaac has a covenantal role that Ishmael does not share, while humans uniquely bear the image of God).

Along similar lines, Westermann observes, “God’s creature is humankind only in community, only when human beings interact with each other.”\(^\text{23}\) As he underscores, Gen 2 is concerned not only with the physical complementarity of man and woman, but also with their interpersonal connection. Westermann traces this emphasis through the episode involving Cain and Abel. Although he moves away from it in later chapters, this study has maintained that the focus on “brotherhood” only intensifies.

In articulating his desire to be fruitful, Isaac becomes the first human that Genesis depicts as using the word הַרְפִּיָּה. Examination of the term’s role in Genesis has yielded another possibility for the lack that it identifies in Isaac’s life, namely community that is both heterogeneous and harmonious. In his brief treatment of the passage, Kaminsky interprets it in this direction. He characterizes Gen 26 as “likely illustrating the principle announced in Gen 12:3 in action” by “exploring how Isaac’s very blessedness might lead to strife or blessing depending on how others treat him.”\(^\text{24}\) Such an assessment is in keeping with the immediate context of Isaac’s statement, which comes at the end of a series of disputes with Philistines. Indeed, the text explicitly claims that Philistines envied Isaac’s prosperity ( Heb: ויהי שונים טובו; 26:14). However, a further layer of meaning is

\(^{22}\) Davis, “Propriety and Trespass,” 79.
\(^{23}\) Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 192.
\(^{24}\) Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 46.
suggested by the statement’s larger context as part of the “somewhat truncated Isaac story” sandwiched between two stories about Jacob and Esau.²⁵

Gen 26 places Isaac’s controversies with his neighbors squarely in the middle of more prominent conflicts. Not only does the chapter recount Isaac’s experiences among the Philistines between two stories of warring brothers, but it also echoes the dealings between Abram and Lot, and has Isaac describing his plight in a way that evokes squabbling sisters Leah and Rachel. By highlighting rivalry in this way, the text draws attention to the absence of Isaac’s counterpart Ishmael. In lacking a sustained, intimate relationship with a rival, Isaac stands out among the immediate progenitors of Israel. As it turns out, the two most distinctive features of the treatment of Isaac converge; Isaac’s strange, abbreviated story corresponds to his strange, abbreviated relationship with his brother. Ishmael’s departure diminishes Isaac and his ability to represent a family called to epitomize fruitfulness.

**6.2 Mother Outsider**

The relationship between Isaac and Ishmael begins in and is largely recounted through the relationship between their mothers Sarai/Sarah and Hagar.²⁶ The women’s story proves important to the present discussion not only because of its role in the ancestral traditions of Genesis, but also because of the reflections that it has inspired. Commentators often play up the identification of Hagar as הָגוֹרָה (“the Egyptian woman”) in order to claim this story as depicting a conflict based at least in part on racial or ethnic difference. Moreover, that both women are married to Abraham but only Sarah

²⁵ The quoted phrase is from Kaminsky (Yet I Loved Jacob, 46).
²⁶ Cf. Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 33.
becomes the mother of Israel gives the story considerable theological urgency and has made it an important site of reflection on the role of race in election.

This study will argue that Genesis does not depict a chosen race so much as a chosen raceless. Far from consolidating race, election works to undermine it, drawing people away from what had previously marked their identity to a new community constituted by God’s call. However, scholars often employ reading strategies that, intentionally or not, serve to undermine the text’s depiction of communality and bring it in line with modern perspectives. Particular attention will be given here to Phyllis Trible’s negotiation of the story and its relationship to contemporary readers. In taking up the dynamics of identification and marginalization in the reading of the biblical text, her treatment goes right to the heart of the conflict between the view of communal identity found in Genesis and the one enshrined in the dominant mode of Western appropriation of the Bible. Renita Weems’ interpretation of the story will also be engaged, both as a response to certain dynamics in Trible’s reading and as a means of using the Bible to articulate a vision of what Dube calls liberating interdependence.

6.2.1 An Ambiguous Narrative

Genesis depicts interaction between Hagar and Sarai/Sarah in two different places (16:1-16 and 21:1-21). Commentators often engage these texts as a single story in two parts. However, the vantage point adopted here suggests a different approach. An emphasis on fruitfulness led from Isaac to Ishmael, which in turn led to their mothers. Because this discussion of the mothers occurs under the auspices of a discussion about their sons, it will focus on the first passage, leaving the second passage to be discussed separately as a story (the only story, really) about the relationship between the sons.
Although the second passage contains further developments in the mothers’ story, the events that unfold there follow trajectories already established in the first passage. This approach does not assume the two texts’ independence from one another, but rather enfolds them both in the larger happenings of Genesis. The book presents the stories of the mothers and the sons as enmeshed so that this study’s decision to shift perspective between Gen 16 and Gen 21 comes down to a matter of convenience and does not reflect any such shift in the text.  

The two women have a complex association described in equally complex prose. Sarai/Sarah, the wife of Abra(ha)m, has power and status that Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, does not. But Sarai has not been able to bear a child, a problem made all the more vexing by God’s promise that Abram will become the ancestor of a “great nation” (Gen 12:2). This divine portent compounds the cultural stigma already adhering to childless women. Some ten years having elapsed since God’s declaration (Gen 16:3), Sarai perceives that God has withheld fertility from her. Pursuing such options as provided by her context, she suggests to Abram that Hagar should become her surrogate and he obeys, receiving Hagar as a wife (16:2-3). The result is electric, unfolding rapidly:

(16:4)

27 It should be noted that John W. Wevers does identify such a shift in the Greek version (Göttingen LXX) of Genesis. He observes, while the Hebrew describes Ishmael as the son “whom [Hagar] bore to Abraham,” in the Greek, “the relative pronoun has now become the subject of the verb taken as a genuine passive, thus, ‘who was born to Abraam.’ The change is not textually based but deliberate, gently telling the reader that it is Ismael rather than his mother Hagar who is important in the story” (Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis [Septuagint and Cognate Studies 35; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993], 302).

28 On the ambiguity of this narrative, cf. Brueggemann, Genesis, 151.

29 The text reports that Sarai אֲלִלְיַהָר (she has not given birth). It does not say אָצֵל אֶרֶץ אֲבָרָם (she has not become pregnant), leaving open the possibility of miscarriages.
He went in to Hagar and she became pregnant and she saw that she had become pregnant and her mistress counted as nothing in her eyes.

From this point on things become murky. The dynamic between Hagar and Sarai has clearly changed, but exactly how remains uncertain. Is it the role of mistress that Hagar disregards or is it Sarai herself? Is it simply a matter of hierarchy, with Hagar “rising above her station” now that she has gained the status of wife and mother? Or does she simply look down on the less fertile woman?30

Sarai complains to Abram שָׁבֵר הָאֵל (16:5), an enigmatic phrase that assigns him responsibility for either causing the situation (“my wrong is on your account”) or for redressing it (“my wrong is incumbent on you”). Abram either reminds Sarai that she holds power over Hagar or reinstates such a state of affairs (although Sarai is the first wife, Hagar could come to outrank her as the mother of Abram’s heir). He encourages Sarai to act towards Hagar as she sees fit, literally, to “do to her what seems right in [her] eyes.” Sarai afflicts Hagar, leading her to run away (16:6).

The Messenger of YHWH (aka, the Angel of the LORD, a figure often identified with the deity) finds her at a desert spring and addresses her:

“Hagar, maidservant of Sarai, from where have you come and where will you go?” And she said, “Because of/from the presence of Sarai my mistress I am running away.” (16:8)

30 Cf. Tr ble, who notes both possibilities, Texts of Terror, 12.
Then the Messenger of YHWH said to her, “Return to your mistress and let yourself be afflicted under her hand” (16:9).  

This exchange reveals a deity who is either complicit in Hagar’s oppression or strategic in helping her negotiate it, depending on whether one interprets the instruction to return as bolstering Sarai’s unconditional authority or as recognizing that Hagar is pregnant, alone, and without options. (To some extent, choosing among these possibilities also depends on whether one understands Hagar as running away at her own initiative or by Sarai’s design, a possibility highlighted in the translation by Everett Fox). The further directive that Hagar let herself be afflicted under Sarai’s hand closely echoes the language that Abram uses to tell Sarai that she holds the power in the relationship (שָׂרָי אִשָּׂא שֶׁבֶרֶךְ; literally, “your maidservant is in your hand”) and that the text uses to describe Sarai’s wielding of that power (לָאִנְצָה; 16:6). The shift from the piel ננה of Sarai’s oppression to the hitpael הנו of the response the deity prescribes for Hagar could be interpreted as a specific endorsement of Sarai’s harsh treatment or as a reminder of the agency that Hagar has in inhabiting her apparently powerless situation.

The Messenger of YHWH then promises to multiply Hagar’s seed beyond counting (16:10; an echo of the promise given to Abram in 15:5) and makes a pronouncement concerning Hagar’s pregnancy:  

See here, you are pregnant and you will give birth to a son and you shall call his name “Ishmael” [lit., “God Heeds”] because YHWH has heeded your being afflicted.


32 “Sarai afflicted her, so that she had to flee from her” (Fox, The Five Books of Moses, 69).
He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against all, and hand of all against him, yet in the presence of all his brothers shall he dwell (16:11-12; cf. Fox).

The birth of Ishmael either represents a very limited measure of divine sympathy for Hagar’s horrible situation, or it continues to point to a new way of living with it. On one reading, God offers Hagar abundant offspring as consolation for a life of subjugation and makes a rather depressing prophecy about the adversarial relationships that will characterize her son. On another reading of the encounter, however, the name Ishmael commemorates a transcendent perspective on Hagar’s situation, standing as a reminder that she and her unborn child need not be defined by the oppression she suffers.

Likewise, the prophecy points to the possibility of community without conformity—her son will have life on his own terms even if she goes back to Abram’s household.

Hagar responds by naming YHWH, which leads to the naming of the well at which their encounter takes place:

She called the name of YHWH, the one speaking to her, “You are God who sees me” [Fox: “You God of Seeing!”] for she said, “Have I actually gone on seeing here after his seeing me?” For this reason, the well was called Well of the Living-One Who-Sees-Me (16:13-14; cf. Fox).

Again, Hagar’s response could be reconciled with both readings of the encounter. She addresses God as either the Great Overseer of a slave such as herself, or as one who really sees her and has deep insight into her situation. This passage uses a 3ms qal verb (יִתְנַהַה) to describe the naming of the well, rendered here in passive form as the best way of conveying the generic quality of a 3ms verb and the text’s vagueness with regard to exactly who names the well and when. The text does not clarify the means by which the encounter becomes a matter of public record. Instead, it displays its etiological interest by
taking great pains to identify the location of the well, in sharp contrast to the concision with which it lays out the plot of the episode. Neither does the text report Hagar’s return. It picks up the story with the birth of Ishmael and then moves on.

6.2.2 Trible’s Text of Terror

On one reading of this story, Hagar rises above her station and is swiftly and harshly punished, with divine approval. Adopting such a perspective, Phyllis Trible emphasizes that hierarchy, not fertility, is at issue in the new way that Hagar looks at Sarai. She suggests, “although strife between barren and fertile wives is a typical motif in scripture, in this study the typical yields to the particular. Seeing, that is, perceiving her conception of a child, Hagar acquires a new vision of Sarai. Hierarchical blinders disappear. . . . Not hatred but a reordering of the relationship is the point.” However, the opportunity for “mutuality and equality between two females” is lost because “if Hagar has experienced new vision, Sarai remains within the old structures.” Trible summarizes, “in conceiving a child for her mistress, Hagar has seen a new reality that challenges the power structure. Her vision leads not to a softening but to an intensification of the system. In the hand of Sarai, with the consent of Abram, Hagar

33 Jon D. Levenson suggests, “the command to ‘submit to [Sarai’s] harsh treatment’ is shocking. It is the most pointed counter-example to the misleading overgeneralization, popularized by liberation theologians, that the biblical God is on the side of the impoverished and oppressed, exercising, as a matter of consistent principle, a ‘preferential option for the poor.’ In Genesis 16, Hagar confronts the twin immovable realities of her slavery and her surrogate motherhood. Each testifies to her status as an object to be possessed by others for their purposes, and God removes neither source of suffering from this oppressed woman. His interest, rather, is in the promise to Abram . . .” (The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], 93).

becomes the suffering servant, the precursor of Israel’s plight under Pharaoh. Yet no deity comes to deliver her from bondage and oppression; nor does she beseech one. Instead, this tortured female claims her own exodus.\textsuperscript{35} This strategy proves unsuccessful, however. “Identif\[ying\] with the oppressor,” God closes the door on any hope that Hagar’s new vision might yet prevail, sending her back to affliction under Sarai.\textsuperscript{36}

As Trible herself points out, this reading requires one to interpret recurrent scriptural motifs against their usual significance. Thus, she suggests that the dynamic between Sarai and Hagar relates only to their positions in the power structure and should not be understood in terms of “strife between barren and fertile wives.” Likewise, Trible notes that, defined most thoroughly by the Exodus, “the wilderness signifies escape from oppression, nourishment of life, and revelation of the divine.”\textsuperscript{37} However, her reading suggests that Hagar really underwent such a transformative process upon becoming pregnant, only to have it undermined by a divine encounter in the wilderness. In approaching the wilderness episode and enumerating its possibilities, Trible does not even consider the possibility that the encounter could yield true revelation. She maintains, “the divine action may either counter or confirm Sarai’s action. If the finding [of Hagar by the Messenger of Yhwh] counters the afflicting, then the flight of Hagar . . . signals a new direction that the deity enhances, encourages, and, in fact, empowers. But if the finding confirms the afflicting, then the flight of Hagar is a futile activity that the deity circumscribes, controls, and in fact, cancels.”\textsuperscript{38} These two possibilities assume that God

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Trible1985} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 13.
\bibitem{Trible1986} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 16.
\bibitem{Trible1987} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 15.
\bibitem{Trible1988} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 14.
\end{thebibliography}
will operate within the terms already established by the two women and take the part of one or the other. They do not leave room for God to offer any new insight into the situation.

In Trible’s account, such insight belongs only to Hagar, whom Trible frequently depicts in roles associated with God. In addition to having the most transcendent, transformative perspective, Hagar authors her own exodus and even becomes the Suffering Servant. This characterization makes sense as a way of ensuring that “all we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar’s story,” in that it confronts one of the biggest obstacles to such an engagement: the tendency to assume that Hagar is somehow responsible for her own suffering.

Readers often take a negative view of characters whose interests run counter to those of prominent biblical figures, whether the text supports such an assessment or not. Heroes of the faith receive the benefit of the doubt, often at the expense of those with whom they come in conflict, as readers look to justify the hero’s behavior and to find fault with his or her adversary. In this way, people try to explain the elevation of certain biblical characters by God and/or tradition as reflecting the superior righteousness of those favored. From this perspective, Hagar’s conflict with Sarai/Sarah and suffering at her hand must result from the bondwoman’s own shortcomings. However, in countering the tendency to blame the victim, whether in the Bible or in society at large, Trible moves to an opposite but similarly problematic extreme. By depicting Hagar as superhuman, she plays to the assumption that only the blameless victim is worthy of regard. Like the view she challenges, she interprets the conflict between Hagar and Sarai/Sarah through a

39 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 13, 8, 28. Although Trible does not invoke Jesus in this context, in the Christian perspective that her book assumes, Jesus is the servant who undergoes redemptive suffering on behalf of Israel.

polarity that places all goodness on one side and all evil on another. Such an emphasis on Hagar encourages a focus on evaluating the oppressed rather than responding to oppression.

By depicting Hagar as the embodiment of all that is central in Old Testament theology, Trible also attempts to counter a tendency to focus on the illustrious Israelite ancestors and ignore the Egyptian woman who serves them. In this, as in her response to the tendency described above, Trible attempts to bring about a change in those readers of the Bible who are also her readers. The nature of this change, however, remains unclear. Does she call on readers to resist a text that marginalizes Hagar or to reconsider a text that challenges their own habit of glossing over her? In other words, does the problem Trible highlights originate in the biblical text or its readers?

Trible explicitly identifies the culprit as the text and its producers, suggesting that “knowledge of [Hagar] has survived in bits and pieces only, from the oppressor’s perspective at that, and so our task is precarious: to tell Hagar’s story from the fragments that remain.”  

Elsewhere she uses even stronger language, describing Hagar as “belonging to a narrative that rejects her” and asserting the need “to recover her story from the fragments that remain.” In this way, she equates the perspective of the text and its producers with that of Abra(ha)m and Sarai/Sarah, so that the oppression of Hagar within the story becomes compounded in the telling. The unreliability of the text means that Trible’s role becomes one of subversion, identifying and resisting the strategies used to marginalize Hagar, including those embedded in the very telling of the story. The narrative’s form and its content both become suspect as Trible tries to construct an alternative account of the bondwoman from “fragments” within the canonical story.

Discussing Trible’s work, however, Brueggemann finds her attributing the marginalization of Hagar not to the text and its producers, but rather to the ways that certain readers have apprehended it. In the Editor’s Foreword to the book, he remarks,

... [Trible’s] method, when utilized with fresh questions, lets us notice in the text the terror, violence, and pathos that more conventional methods have missed. Indeed, this work makes clear how much the regnant methods, for all their claims of “objectivity,” have indeed served the ideological ends of “the ruling class.” What now surfaces is the history, consciousness, and cry of the victim, who in each case is shown to be a character of worth and dignity in the narrative. Heretofore, each has been regarded as simply an incidental prop for a drama about other matters. So Trible’s “close reading” helps us notice. The presumed prop turns out to be a character of genuine interest, warranting our attention. And we are left to ask why our methods have reduced such characters, so that they have been lost to the story.43

This account stands in stark contrast to Trible’s description of her own work. Here, she opposes “the regnant methods,” which “have indeed served the ideological ends of ‘the ruling class’” by reducing “a character of worth and dignity in the narrative” to “an incidental prop for a drama about other matters.” Her rhetorical approach liberates the text from the constraints of “more conventional methods” to allow unacknowledged elements of the narrative to emerge. Trible thus goes farther than other scholars in aligning with the text, and therefore with Hagar (et al) in her ethical confrontation with the reader.

Although Trible’s words indict the text, the substance of her reading confirms Brueggemann’s assessment that she takes issue not with the text, but with certain of its readers. She does not correct, supplement, or subvert the text, but rather the reading of it; the text serves as the basis of her critique, not its focus. Despite her claim that Texts of

---

43 Walter Brueggemann, Editors Foreword to *Texts of Terror* by Phyllis Trible, ix-x.
Terror undertakes a work of recovery, her readings against the text in that book do not make a significant methodological departure from her readings with the text in its predecessor and companion volume God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. In Texts of Terror, Trible does not construct an alternative version of Hagar’s story to counter the biblical presentation. Instead, as in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, she confronts the prejudices of readers with the nuances of the text.

The real shift between the two works lies in their different attitudes toward the deity. In Texts of Terror she reads not against the text so much as against the God depicted in it. The text still teaches and its lesson still affirms women, only this time it does so through the troubling behavior of its characters, including God, and the way in which its disconcerting elements evoke prominent biblical themes. Indeed, Trible calls upon the authority of the text to underwrite her challenge to readers, especially her fundamental assertion that a Christian or Jewish theology that does not reckon with the disturbing treatment of Hagar cannot be considered authentic: “Hagar is Israel, from exodus to exile, yet with differences. And these differences yield terror. All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar’s

44 Cf. Trible, Texts of Terror, xiii.
45 By asserting that “to subordinate the suffering of the four women [Hagar, Tamar, the Levite’s concubine, and Jephthah’s daughter] to the suffering of the cross is spurious. Their passion has its own integrity; no comparisons diminish the terror they knew” and that “to seek the redemption of these stories in the resurrection is perverse. Sad stories do not have happy endings,” Trible thus cautions against the “pitfalls” of certain ways of reading the “texts of terror” as part of a larger biblical story, not against the very concept of using ideas about redemptive suffering expressed in other biblical texts to derive theological significance from the “texts of terror.” The approaches that she condemns use the story of the cross and resurrection to dismiss the suffering of the four women; the approach she advocates uses such texts to enter into and dignify it.
story. To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith.⁴⁶ Were Hagar truly marginal to the biblical text, Trible could not claim such an imperative.

Trible describes storytelling as “a trinitarian act that unites writer, text, and reader in a collage of understanding. Though distinguishable and unequal, the three participants are inseparable and interdependent.”⁴⁷ As far as the biblical text is concerned, those three roles prove particularly difficult to disentangle. Scholars have no direct access to the process by which the biblical texts obtained their “final form” or to the people behind it. Those people and processes are “known” only through scholarly conjecture, in which the text itself constitutes the most decisive piece of evidence.⁴⁸ In biblical scholarship, the reader uses the text to construct the writer.⁴⁹ Moreover, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the very methods by which scholars engage the biblical text originated in concerns about the relationship between that text and certain of its readers. Trible’s “three participants” truly are inseparable and interdependent; biblical scholarship engages the text (and, accordingly, the writer) in a way already conditioned by its relationship to readers. The conflation of text and reader in Trible’s critique reflects the relationship between the two enacted in the Western appropriation of the Bible rather than a theoretical confusion peculiar to her own work.

---

⁴⁸ This statement refers to the history of the biblical texts themselves, not to the history of “ancient Israel.”
⁴⁹ Obviously, the composition of the biblical texts necessarily predates the reading of them. Even if the texts continued to develop as they were transmitted in oral and manuscript form, something had to be “written” before anything was “read.” Using Trible’s designation “writer,” which represents as the work of a single agent the entire process of the text’s creation and development toward its final form, I am making a Kantian-style distinction between the writer-in-itself, the inaccessible “one” actually responsible for composing the biblical text, and the writer-as-perceived, the writer as known to biblical scholarship.
As evidenced in Auerbach’s discussion of *Mystère d’Adam*, it is not just any reader whose point of view mingles so thoroughly with that of the biblical text as to create ambiguity about whether a particular outlook originates in the text or in the reader. Such confluence remains the prerogative of a certain set of readers whose identity derives in part from that kind of intimate relationship to the Bible. Certain remarks in Trible’s treatment demonstrate her focus on this particular group. In the examination of her portrayals of the biblical characters and the points of connection between them and contemporary readers, the identity of her intended audience becomes apparent.

Of the figures in “The Desolation of Rejection,” Hagar receives the most concrete characterization. Trible observes,

As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the man and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from afflictions, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.\(^{50}\)

Within this list of the ways Hagar’s experience connects with that of contemporary women, Trible singles out one and only one for further clarification. To the phrase describing Hagar as “the black woman used by the man and abused by the female of the ruling class,” she appends a footnote that explains, “while racial ties between the ancient Egyptians and black people are problematic, cultural affinities are certain. Hagar was an

African woman.” Trible does not give such an account of any of the other characterizations of Hagar, even though their literal applicability might be called into question. She does not discuss the continuities and discontinuities between the shopping bag and modest means of transporting goods in antiquity, nor does she compare and contrast the welfare system with the approaches to managing poverty found in ancient Near Eastern law codes. Such explanations are not necessary since readers can presumably recognize that an analogy is being made. But why should the reference to Hagar as “the black woman” be any different? And why does Trible juxtapose an oppression predicated on race (“the black woman”) with an oppressor identified by class (“the ruling class”)? As Renita Weems highlights in her discussion of this story (see below), privilege along the axis of race does not necessarily correspond to privilege along the axis of class, with oppressors having privilege by any measure while the oppressed remain uniformly deprived.

The reference to Hagar as “the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class” veers between the biblical text and contemporary concerns without doing justice to either one. As a reference to modern racial oppression, it seems incomplete in mentioning only one race (a racial distinction presumes the existence of at least two). As a characterization of the biblical text, it makes the unnecessary move of generalizing one woman’s problems with two specific people into a struggle with a “ruling class.” Nothing in Genesis suggests that Abram and Sarai have power over Hagar because they belong to some sort of privileged group. Rather, Sarai is personally her owner/employer and Abram is personally her husband.

51 Trible, Texts of Terror, 35, n. 78. Trible’s movement from race to culture as the basis of a shared blackness echoes Kenan Malik’s contention that culture has taken on the work once performed by race.
Trible handles the connection between Hagar and black women uncertainly. She seems to regard it as having some deeper significance than any of the other intersections between Hagar’s story and those of contemporary women, addressing its historicity rather than letting it stand as an analogy. In her view, Hagar’s plight is not merely like the plot of contemporary black women, it is their plight. In some contested but still powerful sense, Hagar is a black woman, a characterization through which the thousands of years separating her from contemporary women become as nothing in Trible’s eyes. This dual reference explains Trible’s use of the vague “ruling class” to describe those responsible for Hagar’s trouble. If Hagar really is (sort of) black, then Abraham and Sarah are . . . what exactly?

The next-to-last sentence of the essay identifies Abraham and Sarah and identifies Trible’s readers with them. Trible asserts, “all we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar’s story.” The reference to “heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit” appears to designate Jews and Christians respectively. The language derives from the New Testament book of Galatians, in which Paul explains,

. . . it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. . . . But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also (Gal 4:22-26, 29 NRSV).

---

52 Trible, Texts of Terror, 28-29.
Like Trible, Paul refers to children of Abraham by flesh and by spirit as a way of designating those who would now be identified as Jews and Christians. However, Paul associates the children according to the flesh with Hagar, while Trible depicts both groups as descendants of Sarah. In Paul’s usage, the association of the two groups with the two different mothers reflects the different ways in which their children were born. Hagar’s child was conceived through ordinary human means, while Sarah’s child was conceived miraculously by a woman incapable of ordinary reproduction. Indeed, Hagar’s child represents an attempt to resolve Sarai/Sarah’s barrenness through ordinary human means, but this “solution” only exacerbates the problem. These alternative paths to conception constitute the basis of Paul’s interest in the story, as they correspond so readily to the epistle’s primary point: the Galatians cannot guarantee their status with God through ordinary human means, by maneuvering themselves into membership in the Jewish people. Nor do they need to. Their relationship with God has been secured miraculously, through Christ. Paul’s argument thus turns on two different approaches to conception (as exemplified by two women), while Trible’s appropriation of it focuses on two different means of descent (from the same woman).

Trible’s adaptation of Paul’s language most likely attempts to give credence to Jewish self-definition, which casts Sarah and not Hagar in the ancestral role. However, the very delineation of descendants of Abraham according to flesh and spirit already implies a Pauline perspective. Altering Paul’s language does not make his statement ecumenical. Rather, it distorts the point he is trying to make, transforming it from a Christocentric statement about Gentile conversion to Christianity to a Eurocentric one about a racially defined Israel and its role as template for another group’s identity.  

---

53 Levenson highlights the irony that some of Christianity’s most offensive claims with respect to Judaism turn out to be the very theological moves that most reflect the continuity
Trible’s use of the flesh/spirit distinction pits biological descent from Abraham against spiritual affinity with him, thus evoking an Israel predicated on race and a Christianity inhabited only by Gentiles. For Paul, however, the contrast lies elsewhere. He does not equate being a Christian with being a Gentile, but identifies himself as a Jew and a follower of Jesus (e.g., Rom 11:1). And like most Jews, he considers himself to be both a literal and a spiritual heir of Abraham. Moreover, in his usage, “flesh” is not an ontological category denoting bodiliness as contrasted with ephemerality, but rather an ethical category denoting worldliness as contrasted with spirituality. Trible stands in a tradition that channels Paul as a way of appropriating the authority to define Israel, transforming its particular content into a typological framework, and thereby claiming it for Gentiles. From this perspective, Paul’s own Jewishness becomes irrelevant except as a means of authorizing this usurpation.

Examining Trible’s remarks about identification with Abraham and Sarah in conjunction with those about identification with Hagar, Trible’s typology and its role in her essay become more apparent. After having assembled such an extensive list of “the stories of contemporary women who identify with Hagar,” Trible specifically precludes such an identification among her readers, suggesting that “we” identify not with Hagar, but with Sarah and Abraham, or rather their children. The very specific identity that Trible assigns Hagar suggests through contrast the identity that she attributes to her readers. Trible’s circumspect language thus masks the same tendency evident in Matthew Henry’s assertion that “God has not commanded us to enslave negroes.” Like Henry, she

---

54 The word “literal” in this sentence remains deliberately vague as to the precise nature of the genealogical connection.

would probably identify her target audience as (Jews and) Christians. However, in suggesting that black women rightly identify with Hagar as one of their own but then assuming that “we” identify with Abraham and Sarah and not with Hagar, Trible reveals that the group she envisions gathered around the Bible does not include black people and is defined in opposition to them, despite the existence of black Christians and Jews.\(^{56}\) As is typical of Eurocentric approaches, Trible uses a modified Christianity to characterize her own people, labeled theologically but imagined as a race.\(^{57}\)

This contradiction becomes apparent as early as the introduction of *Texts of Terror*. Once again a list comparing the experience of biblical women with that of contemporary women accords special place to blackness. Trible explains, “choice and chance inspire my telling these particular tales: hearing a black woman describe herself as a daughter of Hagar outside the covenant; seeing an abused woman on the streets of New York with a sign, ‘My name is Tamar’; reading news reports of the dismembered

\(^{56}\) Compare Trible’s blanket assertion that “all we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar’s story” to Randall C. Bailey’s remark, “I am most surprised how often we oppressed people find ourselves identifying with the insiders in these texts, even though our own stories might be closer to those of the outsiders,” “They’re Nothing But Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives” in, *Reading From This Place* vol. 1 (eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995): 121-38, 138. This remark will be discussed below. Trible suggests that those who identify with Abraham and Sarah are also those who partake of their privilege and therefore must be brought to account for Hagar’s suffering. In contrast, Bailey recognizes that the oppressed are often among those who identify with the “insiders” even though they share the suffering of the “outsiders” in the text.

\(^{57}\) Or, in Trible’s terms, a “ruling class.” This notion allows Trible to connect Abraham and Sarah’s communal identity to that of her readers without having to make the kind of historical argument she uses to relate Hagar to black women. Cf. Trible’s reference to “Hebrew” as Sarah’s “nationality,” *Texts of Terror*, 27, a designation that her “intrinsic” perspective suggests is extremely problematic. Could Sarai/Sarah be said to have a nationality, having decisively separated from the people among whom she was born and raised and not yet become part of the new group that she will spawn? Does the concept of a Hebrew “nationality” make sense apart from the polity of Israel that in Genesis is still hundreds of years away from coming into existence? The designation makes more sense as a strategy to connect the biblical text to its modern readers than it does as an interpretation of the text itself.
body of a woman found in a trash can."\textsuperscript{58} The concise description of each contemporary woman provides the essential basis of her connection to the biblical woman whose story Trible recounts. Working backward in order to treat the most obvious example first, the dismembered body of the woman in the news reports connects her to the Levite’s concubine, who suffered the same fate. The experience of abuse and (presumably) homelessness links the woman on the streets of New York to the biblical Tamar, whom Trible describes as “the princess raped and discarded.”\textsuperscript{59} Likewise, blackness joins the contemporary woman to the biblical Hagar. As in the other list, Trible collapses two different frames of reference in discussing a black woman. The word “covenant” suggests a theological nuance to the woman’s sense of being an outsider, but Trible cites the woman’s blackness as the determinative factor in her experience of exclusion.

Although a community that draws upon the theological and the racial in these ways accords well with Trible’s depiction of her intended audience as heirs of Sarah and Abraham, it does not accord well with Genesis. The reference to “hearing a black woman describe herself as a daughter of Hagar outside the covenant” involves a number of assumptions that the biblical text does not bear out. In characterizing Hagar as a woman excluded because she was not the right sort of person, it assumes a strict dichotomy according to which one is either an insider or an outsider depending on whether or not one belongs to a proto-Israel defined in terms of blood. Genesis, however, does not classify people as either insiders or outsiders. The book presents a much wider array of subject positions. Rather than focusing on who is and who is not quite part of Israel, it depicts different varieties of belonging, of which membership in Israel is only one. Trible stands in a tradition of interpreting Genesis in accordance with the rules that govern

\textsuperscript{58} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 1.
\textsuperscript{59} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 1.
modern negotiations of communal identity, but this perspective undermines certain features of the text.

In Trible’s report, the black woman describes herself as outside the covenant; Genesis, however, does not allow for anyone to occupy such a position. The book depicts multiple covenants binding humanity and God, including one (the Noachic covenant) that includes every living human. These covenants, with increasingly narrow foci, are best represented as a series of concentric circles. From this perspective, there are no outsiders beyond the range of covenant with God, only insiders of various stripes. Even as a point of comparison between Sarah and Abraham and their servant Hagar, the designation “outside the covenant” does not quite make sense. Abra(ha)m is party to several covenants with God (Gen 15:18; 17:9, 19), one of which focuses on Isaac, but another of which (the covenant of circumcision) includes all of Abraham’s descendants and therefore all his wives.

The covenant of circumcision proves important in this connection for the way in which it conceptualizes the community implicated in the arrangement between God and Abraham. The covenant explicitly requires the circumcision of every male of Abraham’s household:

\[\text{While this study deals only with Genesis, it may be noted that this pattern continues in subsequent books, with priests and Levites singled out within Israel. In Genesis, the tensions between Joseph and his brothers attest to the varieties of belonging within Israel.} \]

\[\text{Only descendants and wives are mentioned here to maintain focus on Hagar. However, the covenant of circumcision explicitly includes all members of Abraham’s household, not only children and wives, but also servants (Gen 17:12-13), as will be explored below. Levenson distinguishes between promise and covenant, explaining, “though Ishmael, falling within the promise to his father, will be ‘a great nation’ and ‘a wild ass of a man’, he falls, nonetheless, just outside the covenant of Abraham and shall not inherit the promised land” (Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 97). This perspective neglects the covenant of circumcision.} \]

226
At eight days old, every male among you shall be circumcised, throughout your generations, whether house-born or bought with money from any foreigner, who is not your seed. Circumcised, yes, circumcised shall be your house-born and your money-bought (slaves), so that my covenant may be in your flesh as a covenant for the ages (Fox).

This stipulation immediately precedes the warning that:

But a foreskinned male, who does not have the foreskin of his flesh circumcised, that person shall be cut off from his people—he has violated my covenant (cf. Fox).

The double designation of the uncircumcised male reflects more than the clumsy and repetitive biblical circumlocution parodied in Monty Python and the Holy Grail. It highlights the dual nature of the commandment. The first designation invokes the uncircumcised body, while the second invokes the nonperformance of circumcision. Although circumcision is performed only on males, as a sign identifying a covenant people, it belongs to the group and not to individuals. Accordingly, if women are not circumcised, they nevertheless belong to the circumcising people.

Taken together, the broad applicability of the commandment to circumcise and the nature of the penalty for noncompliance function to define Abraham’s people in a thoroughly inclusive way. In sharp contrast to the rules governing American slavery and its aftermath, for example, this covenant does not allow for the existence of two distinct peoples within a single household. While the one-drop rule carefully differentiates between white parents and their black children, this covenant emphasizes the
incorporation of outsiders, not the exclusion of near-insiders. Notably, in its readiness to admit those who come from “foreigners,” whose connection to the household is secured only through money (רַמְשִׁית נַפְלָה מִלָּה), and who have no claim to descent (מָנָח לָלָתִים), the covenant of circumcision explicitly rejects any racial criterion for inclusion.

Certain reading strategies obscure this radical vision of community, however. For example, Fox explains, “the entire household, as an extension of the man’s personality, is to be brought into the covenant [of circumcision].” In this way, Fox suggests that the covenant does not break down boundaries between slave and master, but rather reaffirms them. The inclusion of slaves in the covenant reflects their subordination to the patriarch’s “personality” and their lack of any personality of their own. Instead of regarding the slaves as outsiders whose nearness becomes cemented through the covenant, Fox depicts them as nobodies defined by Abraham’s dominion over them. From this perspective, the stipulation concerning the household only addresses Abraham as an individual, not as the firstfruit of a new kind of community. Understood in this way, it no longer poses a problem for moderns accustomed to thinking of communal identity as predicated on blood.

A focus on Israel as the only consequential level of belonging leads many commentators to interpret the covenant of circumcision in light of the revelations that immediately follow it: that the promises made to Abraham in Gen 12 extend to Sarah and

---

62 Michael Omi and Howard Winant cite the case of Susie Guillory Phipps, who “unsuccessfully sued the Louisiana Bureau of Vital Records to change her racial classification from black to white. The descendant of an 18th-century white planter and a black slave, Phipps was designated ‘black’ in her birth certificate in accordance with a 1970 state law which declared anyone with at least 1/32 ‘Negro blood’ to be black” (Racial Formation in the United States [2d ed.; New York: Routledge, 1994], 53). This law requires six generations of intermarriage before the slave’s descendants may belong to the same people as the planter.

63 Fox, Five Books of Moses, 72, n. 12.
that Isaac will be the long-awaited heir. This perspective regards both covenants as similar in scope. Thus, Fox’s move could be interpreted as reconciling the assumption that the covenant of circumcision belongs exclusively to Israel with those features of the text that suggest otherwise. He uses the concept of a spillover effect to allow the covenant to affect people not actually included in it. The logic of the argument that Fox makes about household slaves could also be applied to Ishmael: despite his exclusion from Israel, the boy is affected by the covenant of circumcision because of his father Abraham.

However, the structure of Gen 17 calls this approach into question. It supports the opposite conclusion, that the covenant of circumcision conditions the subsequent promise and covenant that center on Isaac. The narrative confirms this assessment. Having revealed that Ishmael is not “the one,” it does not immediately lose interest in him and focus on Isaac. Instead, it recounts Ishmael’s circumcision before embarking on the story of Isaac’s birth. Ishmael stands alongside Abraham as his son (17:23-26), an intimacy that eventually occasions Sarah’s demand that he and Hagar be expelled (Gen 21:9-10). Ishmael thus occupies an important place in the family into which Isaac is born.

This study’s examination of Genesis has determined that both the book’s shape and its content emphasize Israel’s embeddedness in God’s larger work of (re)creation. As a result, Israel cannot be understood in isolation from that work and the networks that it sponsors. Moreover, the notion of fruitfulness explicated here indicates that divine differentiation does not detach the parties involved from one another, even though it might introduce new complications into the relationship. Differentiation operates in the context of relatedness. Kaminsky highlights the breadth of outlook inherent in the biblical concept of election. He observes, “the fact that the first narrative to struggle with the

64 On such divinely sponsored family strife, see Kaminsky (Yet I Loved Jacob, 31, 50).
issue of election [Cain and Abel, Gen 4] is so lopsidedly preoccupied with the non-elect strongly indicates that the concept of election was never assumed to be only for the benefit of the elect, but it was always about God’s plan for the whole world, the elect and the non-elect alike.” Notably, this perspective requires one to consider the first eleven chapters of Genesis as pertaining to the central concerns of the book. Once it is recognized as beginning in Gen 1 rather than Gen 12, “the story of [YHWH’s] election and covenant with Abram and therefore with Israel” turns out to be a story about the relationships binding all creation, including the various constituencies that make up Abraham’s household. Just as beginning with Gen 12 distorts the significance of the call of Abram by severing that episode from the developments of which it forms a part, so a neglect of the more inclusive elements of Gen 17 leads to a misapprehension of the chapter’s more particular strains.

At issue is the nature of the covenant community that centers on Isaac. Trible depicts that community as a race, although she invokes a variety of euphemisms (ethnicity, nationality, and class) in describing it. This characterization is not explicit; it emerges in the opposition between “Hebrew” and “Egyptian” that plays such an important role in her account of the “desolation of [Hagar’s] rejection.” Trible summarizes her reading by asserting, “read in light of contemporary issues and images, [Hagar’s] story depicts oppression in three familiar forms: nationality, class, and sex.

67 This is not to claim that ethnicity, nationality, and class are only euphemisms for race. Each concept designates something different, but modern accounts of communal identity often conflate them with each other and with race, as occurs in Trible’s usage. Cf. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 48-50; Love L. Sechrest, “A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006), 30-31, 45-47, 50-53, 58.
68 The phrase comes from the title of the chapter in which Trible discusses Hagar’s story.
Hagar the Egyptian is a maid; Sarah the Hebrew is her mistress. Trible thus invokes “Egyptian” and “Hebrew” as markers of a difference between Hagar and Sarah that provides one basis for Hagar’s oppression. The juxtaposition of the two terms here suggests their equivalence as categories of identity; the context implies that they should be understood as designations of nationality.

There are several problems with this perspective. While “Egyptian” can be explained as denoting some sort of affiliation with “Egypt,” “Hebrew” lacks any such obvious point of reference, a situation reflected in the variety of scholarly proposals concerning the word. According to Koehler & Baumgartner, “present research recognises five interpretations of hab/piru [a term in the El-Amarna letters sometimes equated with] yîrVbIo ['Hebrew’].” These take the word as meaning:

a) “the name of a nation”
b) “firstly a social group, and only secondarily used to indicate the name of a nation”
c) “a lower class Israelite in the pre-exilic community” (they specify that this “has no connection with hab/piru”)
d) “a loosely connected ethnic group which is not simply to be identified with the Israelites but to which they belonged”
e) something “between a and b (d)”

The discussion of yîrVxIm is considerably shorter. Koehler & Baumgartner simply note that the word is the gentilic of MŠyårVxIm (“Egypt”) and define it as the noun or adjective “Egyptian.” The ambiguity of Abra(ha)m and Sarai/Sarah’s situation compounds the problem raised by the ambiguity of the term “Hebrew.” Having broken with their place of

---

69 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 27.

origin, the pair live as sojourners. This makes it difficult to consider them attributing much significance to their “nationality,” if they can even be said to have one. They do not identify with the polity in whose territory they live or the one from which they came. In an age without passports or the mentality that governs their use, the category “nationality” may not apply to everyone.

Given the difficulties involved in trying to connect Abra(ha)m and Sarai/Sarah to a Hebrew “nation,” it becomes likely that Trible uses “nationality” as a synonym for ethnicity rather than as a designation of political affiliation. The category of ethnicity would seem to apply more readily to the couple’s situation. In modern usage, it describes an identity that can travel and that does not depend on the vicissitudes of personal choice. However, as a means of characterizing the couple in their capacity as progenitors of Israel, this perspective too has problems. Wouldn’t Abraham and Sarah have the same ethnicity as Lot and his daughters? But they are no more part of Israel than Hagar herself. Projecting the later groups onto their ancestors while maintaining the idea of biological transmission requires one to interpret ethnicity like blue eyes, as a product of genetic variation within a family that shows up among its members in different and unpredictable ways—until endogamy guarantees the regular appearance of the recessive trait. How else could incest between a father and his daughters produce multiple ethnic groups? If one interprets the call of God as assigning Abram a new ethnicity, then one has already acknowledged that ethnicity is a social construction and not a biological reality. Moreover, if ethnicity is malleable, it does not make sense to regard Hagar as ineligible to bear the son of “the covenant” because, as Trible implies, she belongs to the wrong group. After all, Sarai belongs to the same ethnic group as Abram because she is his half-sister, because she is his wife, or because God changes her name and explicitly includes
her in the covenant. Comparison with Lot calls into question the first reason, while the other reasons could apply to Hagar as readily as Sarai.

In depicting a contrast between “Hebrew” and “Egyptian” as fueling the conflict between Hagar and Sarai/Sarah, Trible perhaps interprets the text’s frequent identification of Hagar as “the Egyptian.” But this interpretation conflicts with another aspect of the text: the word “Hebrew” never appears in the Hagar story. Although Genesis only uses the term to describe people within what eventually becomes Israel, there is no reason to assume that it could not apply to anyone else. It never appears in any of the stories concerned with distinguishing those who will become the ancestors of Israel from those who will not, and there is good reason to regard this omission as intentional.

Whatever its meaning, the word “Hebrew” has a very specific function in Genesis, occurring when the people thus designated need to be situated in relation to some sort of trans-communal social order.\(^7\) It first shows up when the narrator calls Abraham a “Hebrew” in the course of describing the patriarch’s involvement in a showdown involving a number of local kings (14:13). The term explains his relationship (or lack thereof) to the combatants. It does not appear again until the setting shifts to Egypt in the last section of the book. Joseph is the only one to identify himself with the term “Hebrew,” and he does so only after having been brought as a slave to Egypt and identified as such by his mistress (39:14, 17). Even then, the identification is indirect: Joseph mentions having been “stolen from the land of the Hebrews” (40:15), an expression which could be interpreted as placing some distance between himself and the term by applying it to the land rather than to himself.

---

\(^7\) Cf. Koehler & Baumgartner, I:782.
If others look at Abraham and see a Hebrew, they may be reacting to anything from the way his body looks to his social class or his way of life. If the designation eventually becomes another way of describing Israel, it cannot have that function in Genesis. It cannot name the covenant community that runs from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. Gen 12 makes clear that this community cannot be identified with any extant group. And during the period narrated by Genesis, there are simply not enough members in the new group for it to have a designation on par with “Egyptian.” Accordingly, if Abraham and Sarah are “Hebrews,” they are not the only ones. The name must associate them with some larger group. Other people do not know (or care) that God has called Abraham to be part of something new, so they describe the patriarch in terms of the categories available to them.

In Genesis, “Hebrew” refers to Abraham and Sarah as seen by other people in specific contrast to the way in which they are seen by God. The connotations that the word has in other parts of the Hebrew Bible cannot necessarily be attributed to its appearance in Genesis. Moderns assume the permanence and stability of communal designations and identifications, so that a “Hebrew” is a “Hebrew” anytime and anywhere. In this, they have been trained by the colonial census. However, communal identity does not simply reside in a person’s DNA. It develops and shifts in the course of

72 Donald L. Horowitz’ distinction between membership criteria and membership indicia of identity is helpful here. Membership criteria refer to a group’s self-definition, while membership indicia refer to the means by which people determine others’ communal identity. Horowitz explains, “indicia are evidence of identity; unlike criteria, they do not define it. They are shorthand; they develop after criteria have been adopted (however tacitly). As surrogates, indicia of identity are probabilistic and subject to contradiction, much as the wearing of a uniform or the insignia of an organization can be contradicted by reference to an authoritative roster of members. The confusion between the two arises in part because long usage of an indicium may result in its being treated increasingly as [a criterion]. . .” (“Ethnic Identity,” in Ethnicity: Theory and Experience [eds. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975]: 111-40, 119-20. Cf. Sechrest, “A Former Jew,” 92-93.
social interaction, with different features becoming salient under different circumstances. For example, Kenyans coming to the United States move from a context in which their tribe functions as the primary way of distinguishing them from other types of people to a context in which their race assumes that role. In one setting social identity resides in names, while in another it resides in skin color. Groups are configured and reconfigured, so that those who might be considered rivals by one reckoning (e.g., Luos and Kikuyus) become members of the same group by another (blacks). With different people at different times the same person might be East African (rather than West African), Anglophone (rather than Francophone), or urban (rather than a village dweller). The same designation may also take on different nuances in different contexts. A person describing someone as “Jewish” may be differentiating her religiously from a Catholic, ethnically from an Italian, or culturally from someone who prefers bacon and eggs to bagels and lox. Or they may be using a stereotype to characterize the appearance or attitude toward money of someone who would not be considered religiously, ethnically, or culturally Jewish. Understanding a term such as “Hebrew” means understanding it contextually and situating it in relation to the various negotiations through which identity is perceived, projected, and embraced. In Genesis, the word functions as a part of the story, not as vocabulary through which it is told.

73 Looking ahead, it makes sense to assume that (in biblical rather than historical perspective) the term “Hebrew” became synonymous with Israel during the long years of Egyptian sojourn and slavery. The Joseph story suggests that Egyptians defined those in Israel as “Hebrews.” Insofar as Egyptians controlled the lives of those thus designated so that their role in society was determined by their identification as “Hebrews,” it makes sense that the group would come to internalize the name (cf. Anderson’s discussion of the colonial census). Having lived as Hebrews, they naturally come to see themselves as such, a process already at work in the Joseph story. The involvement of a “mixed multitude” in the exodus may bear witness that the were not the only “Hebrews” in Egypt at that time.
Gen 12 makes clear that in responding to God’s call, whatever Abram has been he will be no longer. In Genesis, geographical displacement takes precedence over “nationality,” as reflected in the preference for taking an indigenous Canaanite wife for Isaac over returning him to Abraham’s ancestral land should a potential wife from there be unwilling to travel (24:3-8). In this text, the ideal wife is not so much one that shares in the bloodline as one that shares in the experience of being formed through displacement. This woman will journey at the instigation of a word that has been passed on to her, to a destination and a marriage that will only subsequently be revealed. Genesis suggests that reasons other than race underlie God’s particular delineation of the line that leads to Israel. Kaminsky asserts,

Those who view election as simply an assertion of ethnic superiority not only overlook the Bible’s rather subtle portrayals of those not chosen, but also fail to reckon with the unusual facts that tend to surround the chosen children and their mothers. Why is the elect child frequently born to a woman who has trouble bearing children, and why is the elect child (as well as the non-elect one, at times) subject to suffering and grave danger resulting in death or a death nearly averted? Also, what is one to make of the pervasive conflicts between rival sibings, rival wives, and/or husbands and wives? The failure to take theological stock of these facts has resulted in the tendency by some to misunderstand exactly what election entails. 74

Kaminsky thus emphasizes the role of certain kinds of experiences in defining the elect. From this perspective, the selection of Sarah rather than Hagar to become the mother of Israel has less to do with her “ethnicity” than with her infertility and the fact that she has willingly undertaken Abraham’s journey. 75

74 Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 35.
75 Although the text does not convey Sarai’s willingness to go with Abram as clearly as it does Rebekah’s willingness to go with the servant (24:58), as a free woman she most likely had more of a choice than the slave Hagar.
At the same time that Abraham has left his former life behind, whatever he will be he has not yet become. Much of the drama in Genesis derives from the glaring discrepancy between Abra(ha)m’s circumstances and the promises of God. Commentators often ignore the peculiarity of Abraham’s existence, preferring to regard the patriarch as simply a stand-in for Israel. On the surface, such a perspective seems to accord well with the family storytelling approach employed here, in that it emphasizes Abraham’s role as a representative of the family. However, such a perspective neglects the possibility that his liminality reflects something essential about the family that traces its beginnings to him, so that even in his awkward grouplessness, he somehow epitomizes them.  

Such features of the text as the renaming of Abram and Sarai confirm this assessment. Scholars often emphasize the name changes in Genesis as ways of unifying different traditions or even groups by equating two ancestors with one another. Whether one accepts this explanation or not, the name changes can also be understood from a family storytelling perspective as continuing to have meaning even now, when the idea of Abram and Abraham as originally separate refers to a matter of scholarly conjecture rather than communal experience or memory. The name changes underscore for the reader the process of becoming that characterizes the book. When they first enter the story, the ancestors are not yet Abraham and Sarah. They have names that are not the names by which they are known in most of the Hebrew Bible and by which they are

76 Cf. Elizabeth Stone’s description of the way in which her “first” family story already conveyed something central about her family’s identity and values: “I . . . noticed that our most idiosyncratic family conviction--that the arts are supremely important and certainly more important than money--was there even in that first story, when my great-grandmother chose as her true love that talented but poor postman” (Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us [rev. and enl. ed.; New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004], 6). See above, ch. 2.

77 Cf. the discussion of genealogy above, ch. 2.
invoked by the family (e.g., in standardized liturgical prayers). These other names evoke the familiar ones by their similarity to them but remain different, thereby keeping the reader mindful of the fact that a familiar name is not being used. Like the observance of Shabbat, in which different ways of doing everyday things promote mindfulness of the day as a day apart, these different versions of familiar names remind the family that this text depicts a time apart, a time when the usual points of reference were not yet in place and the family was still in the process of becoming itself.

As for the prominence of the designation “Egyptian” in the text’s references to Hagar, its purpose resides in forging intertextual (interstory) links, not in highlighting communal divisions. Rather than identifying “nationality” or “ethnicity” as a determinative factor in Sarai/Sarah’s mistreatment of Hagar and in God’s “rejection” of Ishmael, it underscores the oppression of an Egyptian slave by those whose descendants will be oppressed as slaves to Egyptians. Trible herself highlights this inversion: “The verb afflict (‘nh) is a strong one, connoting harsh treatment. It characterizes, for example, the sufferings of the entire Hebrew population in Egypt, the land of their bondage.

Ironically, here [16:6] it depicts the torture of a lone Egyptian woman in Canaan, the land of her bondage to the Hebrews.”

The one-sided references to “Egyptian” in the Hagar story may thus be contrasted with the one-sided references to “black” in Texts of Terror. Trible’s repeated use of a single racial classification does reflect a racialized view of humanity governing her attitude toward the biblical characters and her readers. Of all the women in Trible’s list of those who have inspired her work, only the black woman is raced and her race constitutes her experience. Trible thereby establishes blackness as a deviation from the default mode

---

of personhood, reserving the unadorned word “woman” for a person who is not black. She only sees race when she looks at this “black woman,” and then she sees only race. In this way, she suggests that blackness is the most important aspect of the identity of those thus designated. As it turns out, Trible’s reference to “a black woman” both describes and enacts the woman’s exclusion from “the covenant.” It is not Genesis that defines the woman as an outsider because of her race, but Trible herself. Although sympathy for the woman motivates Trible’s engagement of Hagar’s story, the peculiar visibility of blackness in her treatment reaffirms the marginality imposed on the woman because of her race.

Trible relies heavily on a particular vision of communality in engaging the text and characterizing its relevance to her readers. Assuming continuity in the categories of communal identity from the Bible to her own society, she uses those categories to relate contemporary readers and situations to the biblical text. In her interpretation, Hagar’s story helps Trible’s readers live out their identity, an identity that turns out to be defined

79 Consider the difference between Trible’s description and an alternative formulation that refers to (for example) a woman describing an experience of exclusion predicated on race and possibly gender. In a structurally parallel item of the list, Trible mentions seeing “an abused woman.” The adjective “abused” reflects an action. More specifically, it reflects an encounter with an abuser of some sort. The reference to the “dismembered body of a woman” likewise encapsulates an encounter. In contrast, the adjective “black” is static, denoting a state of being rather than a story with a before and an after. In the list, the other women have experiences while this woman has only a race. The encounter in which blackness becomes the basis of exclusion is here absent. Moreover, in the sentence the woman’s blackness stands outside the self-description that Trible hears, leaving the relationship between Trible’s reference to “a black woman” and the woman’s self-description unclear. The sentence implies a connection between the static condition of being black and the woman’s position “outside the covenant.” The discussion of the term “Hebrew” above suggests the importance of remaining open to the possibility that, if the woman indeed alluded to her blackness, she may not have been invoking it as a predicate of her personhood, but may rather have been acknowledging the system of classification that she was made to inhabit. In other words, she may not have been calling herself black. She may have been observing that others called her black. This clarification is not meant to suggest the possibility of a racial misclassification or a person’s desire to belong to one race rather than another. Rather, it highlights the way in which the very concept of race might be experienced as an imposition.
as much by sharing Abraham and Sarah’s position in “the ruling class” as by sharing their “faith.” Trible admits to reading the Hagar story “in light of contemporary issues and images.” Her resulting inability to transcend the dynamics of marginalization that she highlights speaks to the limitations of her approach to relating text and reader.

6.2.3 Weems’ Text of Succor

Like Trible, Renita Weems engages Hagar and Sarah in a book devoted to biblical women. Weems describes the essays in Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible as “creative reconstructions of the possible emotions and issues that motivated biblical women in their relations with each other.” Assuming that “a common thread of sacred female experiences continues to bind centuries of women,” she presents her readings not as “fact,” but rather as “responsible and realistic testimonies of the ways in which women sometimes perfectly, other times imperfectly, love themselves and one another.”

Weems also shares with Trible an awareness of a connection between the biblical Hagar and the experience of contemporary black women. However, Weems employs a more nuanced version of Trible’s typology and interprets the ambiguous text in another direction. Moreover, while Trible assumes that her audience will identify only with Abraham and Sarah, Weems not only assumes an identification with Hagar among her readers, but also encourages them to identify with both women.

---

80 Trible, Texts of Terror, 27.
81 She explains, “the assumption is simple: despite differences in time, culture, lifestyles, attitudes, biblical women were compelled by the same passions as we--love compassion, hope, jealousy, and fear” (Renita J. Weems, Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible [San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988], x).
82 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 1.
Many of the differences between the two treatments reflect the different goals of the books in which they appear. Trible aims to disturb and deliberately deprives her readers of such sources of consolation as the notion of civilizational progress, a contrast between Old and New Testaments, the cross, and the resurrection, lest anything keep the reader from fully reckoning with the troublesome aspects of the tales she tells. \textsuperscript{83} Weems, however, sets out to produce “the kind of book which irascible women, hungry for stories of women they can recognize and a God they can trust, could snuggle up with and rejoice when reading.” \textsuperscript{84}

These divergent approaches correspond to the different audiences envisioned by the two works. Weems writes “unapologetically with African-American women in mind as a way of reminding us that we are not an afterthought to salvation. . . .” \textsuperscript{85} Unlike \textit{Texts of Terror}, \textit{Just a Sister Away} explicitly names its primary addressee and identifies that addressee with black women rather than through a contrast with them. Although she does not engage Trible directly, Weems thus structures her own work to counter the very tendencies that shape \textit{Texts of Terror}. While Trible operates firmly within the colonization of the Bible, Weems proceeds from the awareness that such a way of conceptualizing the Bible relegates some people to the status of “afterthought,” alienating them from the biblical stories and from God. \textit{Just a Sister Away} proposes to reconceptualize the relationship between the Bible and its readers by placing (some of) those marginalized by the Western Bible at the center of its womanist approach.

Notably, Weems does not address black women exclusively. She explains, “\textit{Just a Sister Away} was written for those of us who are [left] hungry” by dominant approaches to

\textsuperscript{83} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 2.  
\textsuperscript{84} Weems, \textit{Just a Sister Away}, viii.  
\textsuperscript{85} Weems, \textit{Just a Sister Away}, ix.
biblical interpretation, a group that includes black women but is not limited to them. Weems maintains that “we all benefit greatly when black women regain their voices,” describing her work as “an audacious attempt to probe beneath the surface of biblical texts to discover a place for everyone in the Kingdom [of God].” Her womanist approach does not attempt to replace the exclusivism of the Western Bible with a new exclusivism of its own focused on black women, but rather reflects a commitment to “whole people, both men and women.” Weems is thus quite explicit about the life and norms of the family with whom and for whom she reads the Bible.

While Trible labors to draw her readers into Hagar’s story and shock them into concern for her plight, Weems assumes that her readers are intimately acquainted with those subjects. She suggests, “for black women, Hagar’s story is peculiarly familiar. It is as if we know it by heart.” Accordingly, revisiting and reworking the basis of that identification functions as a necessary preliminary step in her treatment. Weems shares Trible’s emphasis on an ethnic difference between Hagar and Sarai, but pushes her readers to consider the other dimensions of the story as well. She argues, “the differences between the two women . . . went beyond their ethnic identities, beyond their reproductive capabilities. Their disparities were centered in their contrasting economic positions. And economic differences have, on more than one occasion, thwarted coalitions and frustrated friendships between women.” Weems thus addresses readers painfully aware of the determining role that race or ethnicity plays in their experience and

86 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, viii.
87 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, ix.
88 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, ix.
89 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, ix.
91 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 3.
works to sensitize them to the dynamics of class. Her essay encourages readers who immediately recognize themselves in Hagar to become aware of what they have in common with Sarai.

Weems is somewhat more explicit than Trible about distinguishing biblical and contemporary negotiations of communal identity. She observes, “the easiest thing in the world would be to make a case out of the ethnic differences that separated Hagar and Sarai--differences today which would manifest themselves between an African woman and a Hebrew woman, a woman of color and a white woman, a Third World woman and a First World woman.” It remains unclear whether this statement highlights the categories contemporary readers might employ in characterizing Hagar and Sarai while distancing those categories from the biblical text, whether it points to similar dynamics in the biblical text and in the modern world that might be named differently in each context, or whether it emphasizes continuity between the divisions that produce tension in the text and in the modern world. Weems offers only this qualification:

\[\ldots\] it would not be totally fair to make the Old Testament story of Hagar and Sarai carry all the weight of the history of race relationships in the modern world. Yet the similarities between the biblical story and the reality of the relationships across racial lines among women today are undeniable. Like our own situation, the story of the Egyptian Hagar and the Hebrew Sarai encompasses more than ethnic prejudice. Theirs is a story of ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation. Theirs is a story of conflict, women betraying women, mothers conspiring against mothers. Theirs is a story of social rivalry.

It appears that Weems uses a distinction between race and ethnicity to identify points of similarity and difference between communal identity in the biblical text and in the

---

modern world. “Race” designates a uniquely modern history, while “ethnic prejudice” names a structurally similar but more widespread phenomenon. In any case, her critique of the race/ethnicity focus has less to do with concerns about anachronism than with the tendency to overlook other forms of difference, particularly economic difference.

Weems’ use of the ethnic paradigm to engage this story poses many of the problems that have already been noted in relation to Trible’s interpretation. Nevertheless, such an approach functions differently in Weems’ treatment than it does in Trible’s. For Trible, the ethnic reading brings Genesis in line with her own outlook, as evidenced in the position of “the black woman” in *Texts of Terror*. This merging of her perspective on social reality with the biblical text exemplifies the colonizing approach to issues of identity and difference found in *Mystère d’Adam*. The ethnic reading serves a different function for Weems, however. She does not fully share in the authority that being Western confers on Trible. Rather, she writes from the position of the one who has been seen and classified and made to inhabit that social identity. Her viewing the story through the lens of ethnicity should therefore be understood as a response to this situation, a way of allowing the Bible to speak to the particular experience of living blackness. Weems addresses the problematics of the Western Bible by working to create a similar project around a more inclusive community of readers.

Two points of comparison illuminate the most significant differences between Trible’s and Weems’ readings: their depictions of Hagar and their depictions of God. In Trible’s reading, Hagar emerges as a woman of superhuman courage and insight who

94 As observed in the course of this study, the West defines itself in such a way as to (at times) exclude people it might otherwise appear to incorporate, as in the examples discussed here of theological labels masking the role of race in delineating community membership. Despite these dynamics, Weems’ residence in the United States and affiliation with its academic institutions gives her a measure of authority that someone in Namibia might not share.
suffers through a cruelly exploitive system and a largely indifferent God. Weems also depicts Hagar as the one consistently on the short end of the stick. She celebrates the bondwoman’s strengths but also finds in her a victim’s weakness and tendency to let her oppression define her: “If we are committed to the whole truth, we cannot dismiss Hagar’s participation in this story. Notice her pathetic sense of herself. In many ways, by acting as a passive victim throughout, she participated in her own exploitation. We admire her for her courage in getting out of the abusive relationship with Sarai (Genesis 16:6). But we are disappointed that in the end she did not have the wherewithal to remain gone. Hagar did not even have the strength to define herself.” Weems does not hold Hagar responsible for her situation, but she does hold her responsible for her negotiation of it.

Dealing with “texts of terror” in a Bible assumed to propound the social norms of its Western readers, Trible necessarily regards God with suspicion. Within the Eurocentric reconfiguration of the Bible, asserting the goodness of God functions as a way of affirming that “the system works” and the reader need not be troubled by a story such as Hagar’s. Divine intervention mitigates human responsibility. Moreover, issuing a challenge to the status quo requires her to question the God implicitly or explicitly understood to have ordained the proper place for every kind of person.

For Weems, the task is different. Her target audience faces the same struggle that she attributes to Hagar: whether or not they will accept the self-definition imposed upon them by an oppressive system. The Eurocentric reconfiguration of the Bible attributes a divine origin to that system and its strategies of definition. Presenting her readers with “a God they can trust” therefore involves dissociating God from that matrix. If the God of

---

95 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 12.
Abraham is not the God of Hagar also, then the women that Weems addresses have no reason to read the Bible. In interpreting the encounter between Hagar and God, Weems therefore picks up on different possibilities in the text than those highlighted by Trible, such as Hagar’s reference to her mistress and her inability to name her destination, and concludes, “could it be that the angel had no other choice but to send the runaway slave back to the reality in which she had defined herself? The Egyptian woman was part free and part slave. She had fled, signaling her desire to be free, yet she had to return to her mistress’ house because she continued to see herself as a slave.”

Weems’ engagement of the story nurtures an identification with Hagar even as it cultivates an identification with Sarai/Sarah. Moving beyond a black-and-white view of power and privilege, Weems addresses her readers as both sufferers and potential perpetrators of oppression: “None of us is safe from the ravages of a society which makes room for only a chosen few and keeps at bay the vast majority. For those of us who are educated and employed, there is always the potential to be a Sarai; and, lamentably, there are far too many opportunities in a capitalist society for her to surface. Yet most of us are just a paycheck away from Hagar.” In her treatment, Hagar and Sarai/Sarah represent (respectively) oppressed and oppressing women, each one making decisions that keep them from the mutual relationship they should enjoy “as women in a society that seemed to reward only men.” Weems maintains, “we must remember this story for its piercing portrayal of one woman’s exploitation of another woman.”

---

96 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 13.  
97 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 11.  
98 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 12.  
99 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 14.
Although she suggests that her readers combine characteristics of both women, in regarding Sarai/Sarah and Hagar as types of privilege and oppression, Weems attributes the very flatness to the biblical characters that she specifically challenges in her readers. Her reading therefore reinforces the monolithic approach to privilege and oppression even as it explicitly works to undermine it. Entering into a dichotomizing gaze within the text encourages readers to view the world around them in terms of those same dichotomies. Recognizing the complex interplay of privilege and oppression in the lives of contemporary readers is but a step away from recognizing such an interplay in the lives of the biblical women. In providing both a model and a mandate, such a recognition offers a more solid basis for reading towards liberating interdependence, or in biblical terms, fruitfulness.

6.2.4 Hagar and Sarai Beyond Black and White

As Weems highlights, the story of Hagar and Sarai/Sarah has undeniable resonance with the experience of American slave women impregnated by their masters and then vilified by their mistresses. She observes, “the story of the Egyptian slave and her Hebrew mistress is hauntingly reminiscent of the disturbing accounts of black slavewomen and white mistresses during slavery. Over and over again we have heard tales about the wanton and brutal rape of black women by their white slavemasters, compounded by punitive beatings by resentful white wives who penalized the raped slavewomen for their husbands’ lust and savagery.”\(^{100}\) The biblical story cannot be simply equated with that story, but it should not be too quickly distinguished from it. It provides a much-needed occasion to reflect upon the manifold injustices of slavery and the

---

\(^{100}\) Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 7.
complex legacy it has produced. Moreover, one cannot see beyond black slaves and white mistresses without seeing them first. As Randall Bailey observes, there is something deeply problematic about the way in which people bracket their own experience of marginalization from their reading of the Bible so that their own suffering does not translate into increased sensitivity to others. He asserts, “the use of the outsider/insider motif within the canon is a literary trap into which the reader can too easily fall. I am most surprised how often we oppressed people find ourselves identifying with the insiders in these texts, even though our own stories might be closer to those of the outsiders. . . . Oppressed people who have slavery in our ‘communal story’ read Gen 9:19-28 and root for Shem and Japheth, instead of wondering why Ham and Canaan are being maligned.”

Bailey suggests that ignoring contemporary dynamics of marginalization while engaging the biblical text results in dangerously narrow vision.

For this reason, and because the story told through this reading has been actualized in a way that continues to shape the present, the reading offered here endeavors to build on rather than replace the approach to engaging the story that takes Hagar and Sarai/Sarah as types of oppressed and privileged women. Indeed, the high level of ambiguity in the text invites such a double reading. As developed by Weems, for example, the ethnic reading can help narrate the present, describing contemporary realities in the midst of which the Bible is read. In other words, the value of such a reading lies not so much in its ability to account for the text (which is questionable) but rather in its ability to account for the world of contemporary readers as they encounter the text. However, as Marx has famously remarked, the point is not to describe the world, but to change it. Such change comes only by moving beyond the Western Bible and its

racial/ethnic/national/cultural approach to defining the family gathered around the text. 

Genesis itself depicts a contest of definitions, with such figures as Abraham and Joseph characterized in one way by other people and in another way by God. The book thus acknowledges the role of other people in constructing social reality but reserves final authority for God, whose ways of seeing are not human ways of seeing. A reading such as Weems’ can help explore what it means to live as a Hebrew (as the term is used in Genesis) but the book addresses a family constituted by the divine word, one that looks to that word as the ultimate arbiter of its identity. A double reading that acknowledges the contemporary dynamics of communal definition while relativizing their import thus follows the example set by Genesis itself.

The same points used to compare Trible and Weems (audience and goals, depiction of Hagar, and depiction of God) can also encapsulate the way the present reading develops theirs. Trible’s audience and goals fit squarely within the colonizing approach to the Bible, enshrining within the biblical text the gaze that designates people according to their race and takes that identification as determinative of their place in the (vertical or horizontal) social ladder. Weems’ audience and goals require her to reconceive the Western Bible in order to find a place for those who have been excluded. She develops a means of relating reader and text that follows similar rules but allows more people to play. Although Trible writes to afflict the comfortable and Weems writes to comfort the afflicted, both accept the validity of race/ethnicity as the foundation of communal identity and a starting point for biblical interpretation. In contrast, the present reading insists that the basic premise of the colonized Bible must be discarded. The text should not be read as establishing or operating within the currently regnant categories of

102 This point will be developed more fully in the next chapter.
communal identity. Only when readers remain aware that such categories are not absolute can they fully reckon with the negotiation of the topic in Genesis.

The present reading also departs from Trible and Weems to develop a more complex view of Hagar and of the power dynamics governing her relationship to Abram and Sarai. Commentators have rightly emphasized the power differential between the two women; nevertheless, Trible and Weems exaggerate the situation by placing all power in the hands of Sarai. Hagar could be read as participating in rather than just suffering from the abuse of privilege that characterizes her story. Such a perspective clarifies through contrast the notion of fruitfulness, yielding deeper insight into the logic of oppression and helping explain why the oppressed so easily slip into the role of oppressor.

Reassessing Hagar’s response to her pregnancy constitutes an important first step in developing a more nuanced understanding of the character. Both Trible and Weems resist the notion that, after becoming pregnant, Hagar comes to view Sarai in a negative way. Trible construes the transformation in Hagar’s perspective as positive, with her pregnancy leading her to a new, nonhierarchical conception of the relationship. Weems reads the passage as conveying the idea of “contempt,” but remarks, “whether Hagar’s contempt for Sarai was real or imagined on Sarai’s part, we can only guess. (After all, the story is told more from Sarai’s point of view than Hagar’s.)”  

Weems then considers the possibility that “the pregnancy awakened something in the slavewoman, something that previously lay dormant,” naming as possible options “her sense of self-worth,” “her sense of purpose and direction,” and “the prospect of being loved unconditionally by her child.” Weems’ conclusion approaches Trible’s reading: “The child growing inside her

103 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 5.
104 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 5-6.
was proof that she was more than a slave: she was a woman.”

Such reluctance to entertain the possibility that Hagar did indeed manifest contempt towards Sarai should be understood in terms of Trible’s and Weems’ larger goals, as a means of resisting the tendency to blame the victim. Hagar’s alleged contempt becomes a reason for Abram to suggest that Sarai take matters into her own hands, and for Sarai to afflict Hagar. Challenging the basis for Sarai’s behavior therefore helps call the behavior itself into question. However, if one begins by acknowledging that people often manufacture reasons to punish those over whom they have power and that Sarai mistreated Hagar, one may move beyond this position while avoiding the pitfalls it was designed to preempt.

In this connection it is worth noting that not all scholars share Weems’ perception that the story favors Sarai’s point of view. Brueggemann observes that the narrative “is structured as a Hagar story,” suggesting that “only by inference is this story concerned with Abraham and Sarah.”

Susan Niditch observes, “the author works hard to rationalize and justify the emotions and actions of Abraham and Sarah (21:12-13). Yet while reading this story one has the distinct feeling it is being told from Hagar and Ishmael’s point of view.”

Even though Niditch refers to another portion of the text, her remarks demonstrate that the narrator of Genesis does not simply side with the ancestors of Israel and replicate their perceptions, but rather lets other perspectives compete with theirs. Accordingly, the narrator’s describing Hagar’s behavior in the same terms used by Sarai does constitute a third-party perspective and suggests the accuracy of Sarai’s impression.

---

105 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 6.
106 Brueggemann, Genesis, 152.
The word ⵙⳐⳜ, here translated in conjunction with ⵙⳐⳜ as “count as nothing,” provides an important clue as to the nature of Hagar’s new view of Sarai. In this episode it suggests what I will call a nobodying gaze, a way of identifying someone as unworthy of basic human regard.\textsuperscript{108} It is an othering, dehumanizing gaze, the antithesis of what Weems would call sisterly. Trible attributes such a gaze to Sarai when she remarks, “for Sarai, Hagar is an instrument, not a person.”\textsuperscript{109} Denying the vision of human relatedness that Genesis conveys through the rubric of family, this outlook constitutes a precondition of oppression. It conceptualizes a certain person or group of people as outside the range of one’s social obligations, thereby justifying any manner of inhumane treatment.

Even within Hagar’s generally powerless condition, her fertility gives her a measure of privilege. As Weems remarks, “despite her marriage to Abram and all the social and economic privileges that came with such a union, Sarai’s barrenness made her a woman to be scorned.”\textsuperscript{110} Weems depicts Sarai as a woman whose experience of oppression fills her with resentment rather than compassion, so that she exploits the woman over whom she has power rather than cultivating a relationship of mutuality with her. Using the insight that Weems applies to her readers, though not to the biblical text, it becomes apparent that the same description could also apply to Hagar. Although so many dynamics favor Sarai (e.g., election, social status), one dynamic favors Hagar, and she immediately turns it against Sarai.\textsuperscript{111} This observation matters not as a way to justify

\textsuperscript{108} Such a nuance is a matter of interpretive judgment here and should not be attributed to all uses of the word.
\textsuperscript{109} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 11.
\textsuperscript{110} Weems, \textit{Just a Sister Away}, 3. She focuses on Sarai’s barrenness as driving Sarai’s behavior toward Hagar, but does not entertain the possibility that it also drives Hagar’s behavior toward Sarai.
\textsuperscript{111} Weems’ highlighting of an ethnic difference between the two women has more to do with contemporary readers than with the text itself. Even if one accepts the relevance of the designation “Hebrew” to this text, the story is set in a time in which being “Egyptian” presumably
Sarai’s treatment of Hagar or to reassign blame among the various characters involved. After all, there are too many unanswered questions. Rather, it points to the way in which the logic of oppression governs both the oppressor and the oppressed. The difference between Sarai and Hagar turns out to be not so much an ethical difference as one of opportunity. Privilege provides an occasion to differentiate oneself from “others,” and potentially to dominate them. That Sarai becomes oppressor and Hagar oppressed reflects a discrepancy in power between the two women, not a discrepancy in character. Trying to explain the willingness of oppressed people to buy into other manifestations of the rhetorical strategies used against them, Bailey refers to “an acculturation process whereby the oppressed adopt the ideology of the oppressor.” This reading of the Hagar and Sarai/Sarah story takes his observation a step further, suggesting that liberation requires more than resisting the ideology of the oppressor. It must resist the ideology of oppression, which may well be shared by the oppressed. Like Hagar, they may be more interested in turning the tables on the oppressor than in finding a new, nonhierarchical way of coming together. Accordingly, achieving the mutuality expressed in the biblical concept of fruitfulness requires a new vision of one another and of the relationship. In the present reading, such new vision comes from God.

Sight plays a prominent role in the story of Hagar and Sarai/Sarah. The terse narrative abounds with references to seeing, from the new way that Hagar looks at Sarai counted for more than being “Hebrew.” Such advantage as Sarai enjoys by virtue of her communal affiliation I have designated by “election,” although at this stage in the story it is not clear to what extent Abram’s election extends to Sarai.

For example, did Hagar retaliate because she had been provoked? Would Sarai have treated Hagar with more respect if she herself had not been so belittled by her circumstances? What role does Abram play? Is he really loyal to his wife or did the wife-sister episode in Egypt demonstrate a readiness to ditch her in favor of someone more fertile?


Cf. Trible, Texts of Terror, 18.
after becoming pregnant with Abram’s child (יְלָעֵת יַעֲרִיתָה; 16:4, cf.16:5) to Abram’s suggestion that Sarai do to Hagar “what is good in your eyes” (כְּשֶׁאָתָה; 16:6), Hagar’s designation of YHWH as “you God of Seeing!” (יִבְיָר שֹׁאָל), and her mysterious explanatory speech (יִבְיָר יִוָּעֶל; 16:13). In the continuation of the story, this emphasis continues. Sarah becomes enraged by the sight of “the son of Hagar the Egyptian that she bore to Abram” (רַגְלָעַת יָבְאִית; 21:9) and her subsequent demand that he and Hagar be driven from the household is extremely heinous in Abraham’s sight (כְּשֶׁאָתָה רַגְלָעַת; 21:11, cf. 21:12). When they run out of water, Hagar situates herself at a distance from Ishmael so that she will not see him die (רַגְלָעַת רַגְלָעַת; 21:16). Responding to the child’s cries, God opens her eyes so that she sees a well (רַגְלָעַת רַגְלָעַת יַבְיָר; 21:19). Together, the emphasis on sight and the encounter with YHWH suggest that the narrative turns on Hagar’s learning a new way to see from a God whose vision impresses her such that she bestows a corresponding name upon the deity. Ironically, the attempt to “recover” Hagar’s story has denied her the centrality in the narrative that a YHWH-centric reading suggests was hers to begin with.

Although the text offers support for the reading that YHWH primarily buttresses Sarai’s authority, the family context renders such an interpretation suspect because it conflicts with the family’s experience of God. For a family tracing its origin to the divine word, an encounter with God such as Hagar experiences portends a transformation of some sort. The family knows YHWH as a (re)creating God, one not likely to initiate a relationship with someone only to reinforce her circumstances and leave her unchanged. A number of family stories and customs commemorate the life-altering consequences of encounter with YHWH, of which Jacob/Israel’s limp and the dietary tradition it inspires provides a particularly graphic example (Gen 32:33). In Trible’s reading, God pushes Hagar back into the posture of subservience from which she had strayed, while in
Weems’ reading, “the angel had no other choice but to send the runaway slave back to the reality in which she had defined herself.” Unlike the present reading, neither interpretation regards the encounter with God as injecting something new into the situation. Both depict God as constrained by the terms established by Hagar and Sarai.

Those commentators who emphasize a difference between Hagar in Gen 16 and in Gen 21, when she next appears in the text, usually attribute the change to the conflicting perspectives of different sources. Thus, Speiser suggests that “the personality of Hagar as here depicted [does not] bear any resemblance to that of her namesake in the other story. So complete a dichotomy would be inconceivable in the work of the same author, on in a fixed written tradition.”

That Genesis attributes the transformative encounter with God to Hagar rather than Sarai underscores the breadth of the concept of fruitfulness. In this way, the book calls into question Weems’ assertion that “Hagar and Sarai are introduced only in so far as the role they play in being used by God to demonstrate the faithfulness of the divine promise to Abram: the promise that God would grant to Abram a legitimate heir who would, in turn, be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-4).” More is at stake in Genesis than the matter of how Abram will get his long awaited son; the patriarch’s role in the divine plan goes beyond his reproductive capabilities. From the word “go” (12:1), he is not only the ancestor of the people who will realize God’s plan to bless the nations, but also the firstfruit of the new kind of community that God has called into being. Accordingly, the promise of Gen 12:1-3 begins to be realized (or not) in the

115 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 13.

116 E. A. Speiser, Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes (Anchor Bible 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 156. One might ask whether he would make a similar case for the portrayal of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts, assigning Paul the persecutor of Christianity and Paul the proclaimer of Christianity to different authors or traditions.

relationship between Abram, Sarai, and Hagar, not when Sarai finally bears Isaac. From this perspective, Abram’s relationship with Hagar is not just a means to an end. It is, in important ways, an end in itself. One might just as well describe God’s dealings with Abram as subordinate to God’s dealings with Hagar as the other way around.

Recognizing that God’s promises define Abram’s present as well as his future proves important to the family that traces its beginning to those promises. It provides a model for living out its distinctive identity when the circumstances envisioned in God’s promises are not fully in place. For example, scholars often highlight the way in which Genesis spoke to exiled Judeans struggling to figure out how to be the people of promise when they are not living in the land of promise. As Boyarin and Boyarin explain, “the biblical story is not one of autochthony but one of always already coming from somewhere else.”

The exile in turn has become a metaphor for the way in which Jews and Christians variously construe the discrepancy between the realities of their existence and the fullness of the life God intends for them.  

### 6.3 Imitation of Covenant Life

After the report of Ishmael’s birth and naming (16:15), the text next encounters him thirteen years later, on the occasion of his circumcision (17:23-26). Several chapters

---


119 For example, N. T. Wright explains, “most Jews of [the second-temple] period, it seems . . . believed that, in all the senses which mattered, Israel’s exile was still in progress. Although she had come back from Babylon, the glorious message of the prophets remained unfulfilled. Israel still remained in thrall to foreigners; worse, Israel’s god had not returned to Zion” (*The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, 1 [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 268-69). See also, e.g., 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11.

256
intervene before Hagar or Ishmael reenter the narrative, during which the text depicts another prediction of the birth of Isaac, the dysfunction of Lot’s family, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham’s passing off Sarah as his sister (again).

The second episode of the drama concerning Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham begins by introducing another character into the volatile mix: Sarah’s son Isaac. This installment readily takes on the colors of the previous narrative (however interpreted), in addition to manifesting some ambiguity of its own. The text describes Isaac’s birth as the fulfillment of the divine word concerning Sarah, highlighting the age of the new parents and the improbability of such a conception. It reports that Abraham honors the covenant of Gen 17 by circumcising Isaac on the eighth day, after which Sarah exults:

Laughter has God made for me. Anyone who hears will laugh for me. And she said, Who would have declared to Abraham: Sarah will nurse sons? Well, I have borne him a son in his old age! (21:6-7, cf. Fox)

Sarah puns on her son’s name (פֶּרֶס, “he laughs” or “he will laugh”), so that the juxtaposition of this speech with the report of Isaac’s circumcision echoes the Jewish naming ceremony held in conjunction with a circumcision. Such an observation does not assume the antiquity of the tradition, but rather points to a connection between an aspect of the story and a family practice.

On the surface Sarah’s speech seems straightforward enough. However, subsequent developments in the narrative raise questions about how exactly Sarah’s reference to nursing a son should be interpreted. Commentators frequently place a section or paragraph break at this point, taking the account of Isaac’s weaning in 21:8 as the
beginning of a new unit. In this way, they depict Isaac’s weaning as the beginning of
the events of the next few verses:

Then Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, that she had borne to Abraham, laughing
and she said to Abraham, Drive out this bondwoman and her son
because the son of this bondwoman shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac.

The structure of the narrative suggests that Isaac’s weaning somehow conditions Sarah’s
push to have Hagar and Ishmael expelled from the household. Many commentators
regard the notice of Isaac’s growth and weaning as naturally inclining his mother’s
thoughts toward his future. Westermann argues that 21:8 depicts a triumph over the threat
of infant mortality: “The child has survived this first and particularly dangerous stage of
his life, and it could be expected now that he would continue on.” In his view, Isaac’s
successful negotiation of one the critical junctures of the life cycle prompts Sarah’s
“uncompromising and relentless intervention on behalf of her son and his future.”

This perspective makes good sense of the narrative timing of Sarah’s intervention.
Nevertheless, a further possibility remains. The weaning of Isaac may provide the
opportune time for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael because Hagar was the one doing
the nursing. By some accounts, serving as a wet nurse typically fell to someone in
Hagar’s position. Sarah’s speech may emphasize that she has reserved that role for

120 E.g., von Rad, Genesis, 232; Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 336; Nahum M. Sarna,
The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 146;
Wevers, Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis, 301; Brueggemann, Genesis, 177.
herself, despite her advanced age and the rigors of breastfeeding. Alternatively, her words may be more symbolic, reflecting an attempt at nursing that was ceremonial or otherwise of short duration, or emphasizing her biological motherhood as opposed to her previous reliance on a surrogate. Much depends on Ishmael’s age, an unresolved matter in this narrative. A straightforward reading through Genesis suggests that he is a teenager at this point (17:25), making it unlikely that Hagar would be in a position to nurse both boys. However, this text gives indications that he is significantly younger (21:14-15). As von Rad summarizes the problem, “doubtless the narrator considered Ishmael a small child whom Hagar had to carry, then put down, etc. By Priestly computation, however, Ishmael must have been sixteen or seventeen years old at this time (chs. 16:16; 21:5, P). At the price of a very difficult sentence stylistically, the redactor altered the text of v. 14 without thereby removing the inconsistency.”

Von Rad thus uses a source critical distinction to explain that two texts that took different views of Ishmael’s age were awkwardly combined in the present form of Genesis. Sarna emphasizes the continuity of the narrative, maintaining that this text should be read in a way consistent with the prior notice that Ishmael is a teenager at this point in the story. The family storytelling approach offers an alternative resolution. As noted above, accuracy and consistency prove less important in family stories than meaningfulness to the family. Thus, it may be important to the family that Ishmael was circumcised at thirteen, while this story requires him to have been only a few years older than Isaac. Preserving the integrity of the way

---


123 Lyke’s comparison of Gen 21:8-21 and Gen 22:1-14 suggests that the parallels between Ishmael and Isaac should be considered as another possible reason for the way Ishmael’s
these stories matter to the family may have outweighed interest in carrying through a logical chronology. Ishmael’s significance may be more clear when the sequence of events in his childhood is obscured.

The ambiguity as to whether or not Hagar nursed Isaac parallels the ambiguity as to whether or not Sarah went through with her plan to claim Ishmael as her own son. These arrangements create a certain fluidity in the relationships between the mothers and the sons, suggesting that readers should not be too quick to accept Sarah’s neat division of the household. Both women potentially stand in a mothering role toward both children. That Hagar and Ishmael relate to God differently than do Sarah and Isaac should not obscure the close community in which the four live. The notion of fruitfulness emphasizes that these are not competing circumstances, but corresponding ones.

Although Sarah’s complaint to Abraham conveys her attitude toward Hagar and Ishmael clearly enough, the text does not quite specify what exactly Sarah saw that elicited such a vehement response. Heightening the uncertainty, the LXX includes the phrase “with her son Isaac.” However, as John W. Wevers explains, the phrase does not necessarily provide additional information about the scene Sarah witnessed. Rather, it conveys the allusion to Isaac’s name in the Hebrew verb: “The plus is not textual in origin but rather due to the translator’s attempt not only to translate but also to interpret the point of the Hebrew word play.”

---

age is construed in this narrative, “Where Does ‘the Boy’ Belong?” Notably, Isaac’s age in Gen 22:1-14 is also a matter of dispute.

124 I am referring here to the Göttingen LXX.

125 Wevers, Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis, 302. Westermann disagrees with this assessment, suggesting that “it is probable that with the Gk and the Vg [Vulgate] the sentence is to be completed with as both the sense and the rhythm require. It is not to be assumed that the verb is a play on the name Isaac, because Ishmael is its subject, apart from the fact that all previous uses derive from the Qal” (Genesis 12-36, 339).
Accounts of Sarah’s provocation can be grouped into three categories. First, if one reads Sarah’s affliction of Hagar in Gen 16:6 as intended to drive her rival away, then her appeal to Abraham here simply continues in that vein. On this reading, the very sight of Ishmael provokes her. A second approach construes Ishmael as engaged in some objectionable activity. Citing Galatians as an example, Westermann dismisses this perspective as “biased,” advocating instead a third approach. He maintains, “it is a peaceful scene that meets Sarah’s gaze; but it is precisely there that she senses danger for her own son, as v. 10 expresses it.”

Von Rad explains, “the picture of the two boys playing with each other on an equal footing is quite sufficient to bring the jealous mother to a firm conclusion: Ishmael must go! Every year he, the older one, becomes a stronger rival for Isaac, and at last he will even divide the inheritance with him.” Although Westermann largely agrees with this assessment, he objects to the characterization of Sarah as jealous. Rather, he argues,

> It is . . . an uncompromising and relentless intervention on behalf of her son and his future that moves her. . . . This is full of meaning for such an early form of society: the future of a woman lay with her own son and nowhere else. Hagar’s son, “whom she had borne to Abraham,” threatens both her son’s and her own future, even though he is also Abraham’s son. And so he must go. The question of “inheritance” is merely symptomatic. What Sarah is providing for is her son’s future. To censure Sarah’s demand from the point of view of individual ethic or our own religious attitude is to fail to see that Sarah is engaged in a struggle for her own very existence; in later forms of society such struggles are transferred to the social or political sphere, while here they take place within the family circle.

---

127 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 232. While Von Rad offers a clear articulation of the third approach, it should be noted that he deems it impossible to adjudicate between the second and third approaches.
Westermann emphasizes the injustice of stereotyping Sarah as a scheming woman and insists on an appreciation of the circumstances that, in his view, necessitate her stance. Abraham is less than thrilled with Sarah’s proposal, but God encourages him to go along with it:

But the matter was extremely heinous in Abraham’s sight on account of his son. And God said to Abraham, Don’t let it be heinous in your sight because of the boy and because of your bondwoman. Everything that Sarah says to you, obey her, because by Isaac will seed be reckoned to you. But also the son of the bondwoman—a great nation will I make of him, for he too is your seed (21:11-13, cf. Fox).  

God’s intervention in the dispute between Abraham and Sarah would seem to call into question the application of the concept of fruitfulness here. If the community between Isaac, Ishmael, and their mothers is so important, why does God push Abraham to agree to Sarah’s plan? Weems considers the possibility that Sarah’s plan represents a necessary response to the deeply dysfunctional dynamic between the two women: “Perhaps it was best for everyone involved for the slavewoman and her child to leave Sarah’s house. (Sometimes we need a shove—even from our enemies—to make us stand on our two feet.)” Weems thus follows the line of interpretation that distinguishes Sarah’s intentions in calling for the expulsion from God’s intentions in supporting it.  

129 I have included the word הָיוֹן (“great”) here, which is not found in the MT but has strong support in the versions (Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate). Cf. Speiser, Genesis, 154; Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 337, 341.  
130 Weems, Just a Sister Away, 15. She does not regard this perspective as justifying Sarah’s behavior, noting that “there is a difference between a shove and a kick.”  
131 Cf. Von Rad, Genesis, 232-33; Sarna, Genesis, 147.
Recognizing God and Sarah as independent actors helps facilitate the further insight that this episode constitutes an installment not only in the ongoing relationship between Hagar and Sarah, but also in the ongoing relationship between Abraham and God. Placing this story in the larger context of that relationship yields a perspective that helps make sense of God’s action here. The expulsion of Ishmael is not a singular event, but rather part of a larger pattern that begins before him and continues after him. This pattern includes Abram’s departure from יִבְרָאָם יָהֹֽוָא (“his father’s house”) and the parting of ways between Abram and Lot, reaching a climactic point when Abraham stands on Mt. Moriah poised to carry out the horrifying command to sacrifice Isaac. Seen in this light, Gen 21 is not a narrative about getting rid of the outsiders, but rather part of God’s peeling away the layers of relationship until Abraham stands alone with the deity who has given him the promise of founding a people and then systematically deprived him of every logical means of fulfilling it. Until the relationship between Abraham and God has been constituted correctly, none of the others will work. Fruitfulness begins with the seed, the encounter between God and Abra(ha)m from which everything else grows.

Commentators often highlight the parallels between Ishmael’s experience in Gen 21 and Isaac’s experience in Gen 22. Larry Lyke details “a consistent compositional strategy seen . . . in Gen 21:3, 8-14 and Gen 22:2. The purpose of this strategy is to draw attention to the parallels between Isaac and Ishmael and between the stories in which Abraham is faced with the loss of his two sons.” Describing this strategy, Kaminsky observes, “chapters 21 and 22 of Genesis are artfully drawn together by a tight web of

---

132 Cf. Levenson, who notes, “without the complex and suspenseful drama of Ishmael’s expulsion, the aqedah, the stunning story of the binding of Isaac in 22:1-19, could not be told in the way it is” (Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 109).

133 Cf. Levenson, who remarks, “the absurdity of the promise to Abram is underscored by its immediate derailment” (Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 84, see also 85-90).

linguistic echoes, allusions, and curious grammatical constructions that blur the
distinction between the two sons of Abraham in the mind of the reader.” This literary
technique may perhaps be compared to the blurring of the distinction between Jacob and
Esau in Gen 27. In each instance, the distinction between the two brothers is both deeply
significant and easily effaced. Blurring the distinction between the two brothers
highlights the mutability of identity, demonstrating that communal identity does not
simply exist, but is always a matter of perspective and a product of negotiation. The
move also underscores the element of arbitrariness in election, challenging the idea that
God’s choices are dictated by some inherent quality of the brothers themselves. As
Douglas explains, “God’s choice is unconstrained. His election is never deserved. The
converse is also true: demerit does not explain misfortune . . . . There is no way that a
person could merit being chosen by God. He chose Israel freely, and his prophecies and
promises became Israel’s destiny.” Rather than implying an air of inevitability to the
outcome, Genesis suggests that Ishmael might well have been in Isaac’s position and
Jacob in Esau’s.

In other biblical texts, this arbitrariness becomes even more prominent, with the
casting of lots providing the means of differentiation. The differing fates of Abraham’s
two sons are invoked (though not exactly duplicated) by the two goats of the Yom Kippur
ritual described in Leviticus 16:7-10. One is released into the wilderness, while the other,
chosen by lot to belong to YHWH, is sacrificed. Observing this parallel and others,

136 Cf. Kaminsky, who observes, “God’s choice of the elect remains shrouded in
mystery and is not dependent on human action” (Yet I Loved Jacob, 41).
138 The differences between the two texts should also be noted. In addition to the
mysterious Azazel who receives the wilderness goat in Lev 16 and has no obvious counterpart in
Gen 21, two different kinds of sacrifice are mentioned in Gen 22 (יִשָּׁנְבֹּעַ) and Lev 16 (יִנָּפוֹפָל).
Mary Douglas insists, “the repeated evocation of uneven complementarity, one element being chosen, the other freed, cannot be ignored.”\(^{139}\) She explains this aspect of the text in terms that resemble the notion of fruitfulness discussed here: “The pairs are not so much uneven as different; respecting their difference is symbolic of completion and totality. A body cannot be composed entirely of eyes, or hands.”\(^{140}\) In this way, she describes Ishmael’s and Isaac’s separation and differing destinies as evidence of the essential connection between them.

Scholars do not always take stock of this arbitrariness, instead regarding the story of Isaac and Ishmael as driven by some inner necessity residing in the characters themselves rather than the will of God. This tendency is compounded by the propensity of moderns to dehumanize characters that they identify as racially (or otherwise) mixed, regarding such characters as symbols of the encounter between two groups rather than as people.\(^{141}\) From this perspective, Ishmael becomes the son of Abraham doomed to suffer exclusion because he has the wrong kind of mother.\(^{142}\) When the text is interpreted in this way, the references to seed in 21:12-13 emphasize Ishmael’s divided heritage and its necessary consequences. Thus, Towner identifies “a subtext” according to which Ishmael becomes the symbol of the encroaching Other: “The religion of Canaan will pollute the religion of Israel if the lines between them are not kept clear. Although he is Abraham’s son, Ishmael represents through his mother the culture and religion of Canaan and of

\(^{139}\) Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 250.

\(^{140}\) Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 251.


\(^{142}\) Thus, Trible suggests that “Ishmael becomes the object of divine rejection precisely because Hagar, not Sarah, is his mother (17:15-21)” (*Texts of Terror*, 19). In this way, she employs a dichotomy in which Ishmael remains strictly outside the blessings of God. Moreover, as discussed above, her reading emphasizes Hagar’s communal identity as determining her outcast state.
Egypt. He is the Other, beloved to be sure, but alien just the same.\textsuperscript{143} Westermann, however, reads in this text a logic that directly contradicts this position. He observes that “the expulsion of Ishmael limits the people which calls Abraham its father to the single line, the descendants of Isaac. The particular history of this people demands that it be separated from the ‘son of the maidservant,’ as God himself had ordered.” In contrast to Towner, who appeals to Hagar’s foreignness, Westermann highlights “the particular history of this people” as responsible for the distinction between Ishmael and Isaac. Westermann thereby represents the difference between the two boys as circumstantial rather than inherent.\textsuperscript{144} Moreover, he maintains, “God’s blessing goes also with Ishmael: he is to be ‘a great people’. Contrary to the friend-foe mentality, a relationship of Israel

\textsuperscript{143} Towner, \textit{Genesis}, 179. Levenson directly challenges the suggestion that religious difference provides the essential basis of the contrast between Isaac and Ishmael, maintaining, “the difference between Isaac and his older half-brother Ishmael . . . has to do with the establishment of a favored lineage and the acquisition of the rights of the first born through divine grace and its manifestation on the human level, parental favoritism. It is not a matter of religious practice” (“The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” in \textit{The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel} [eds. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; Leiden: Brill, 2004]: 3-40, 14).

\textsuperscript{144} Along similar lines, Sandra Patton attributes to adoptees a heightened awareness of the cultural studies truism that “all human identities are socially constructed.” She explains, “those of us who were adopted into our families--whether across or within a racial category--often go through life acutely aware that our identities have been put in place by outside forces, that who we are is not ‘natural’. Not only are adoptees often aware that we would have been fundamentally different people had we been raised by our birth parents, but our sense of identity as constructed yet somehow arbitrary, is heightened by the feeling that there are other lives we could have lived, other people we could have been, had some small circumstance surrounding our birth or adoption been different. The knowledge that the choice of which family is allowed to adopt which child is made by a social worker according to the policies and practices guiding the agency erases all sense of identity as ‘natural’, that is, as being acquired by birth” (\textit{BirthMarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America}, [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 21). In Genesis, election functions in much the same way as adoption does in Patton’s account. God could have made a different choice. The \textit{story} of election reiterates this point to members of the family who experience having been born into their position. God’s action is never allowed to recede into the background, but rather becomes an active part of each generation’s consciousness. As Stone explains, “family is always jerry-built and has to be reconstituted every generation” (\textit{Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins}, 14).
with other peoples is retained from the early period. Abraham as father, despite the emphasis on the one legitimate line through Isaac, has a significance which bridges the gap to other peoples.” While Towner draws from the story a typical lesson concerning the maintenance of racial boundaries, Westermann recognizes the way that it undermines such an absolute us/them distinction.

Like Westermann, Brueggemann offers an assessment of this text’s theological implications that tries to hold together the assertion of connectedness and the differentiated divine engagement. He maintains, “the Ishmael presence suggests two things. Seen vertically, with reference to God, it asserts that God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God’s concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line. Seen horizontally, from the agenda of Abraham-Sarah, Ishmael is a temptation not to trust the promise. The very child who discloses the passion of God for the outsider is no small threat to the insider.” Although Brueggemann acknowledges God’s commitment to Ishmael, he still characterizes him as outsider rather than recognizing the limitations of an insider/outsider dichotomy for conveying the dynamics of the Genesis narrative. In addition, the horizontal dimension of his analysis depicts Ishmael as the embodiment of the circumstances surrounding his conception, challenging those circumstances through Ishmael himself. Brueggemann follows the Pauline interpretation in characterizing the difference between the two sons of Abraham as predicated on the means of their conception, but focuses on Ishmael as “a temptation not to trust the promise” rather than on Abraham-Sarah’s lack of faith in conceiving and perhaps in subsequently relating to

---

the child. However, if Ishmael were the problem, his departure should have brought resolution. Instead, “after these things,” God presents Abraham with an even more extreme test (22:1).

Kaminsky highlights the way in which conventional hallmarks of election cluster around Hagar and Ishmael, prompting readers to wonder about their status:

. . . while Abraham is promised progeny, before the announcement of Isaac’s birth in chapter 17, God had not yet specified the matriarch of the elect line. And even when Sarah is named as the bearer of the promised child, the reader continues to have reason to wonder whether Hagar and Ishmael are dis-elected for a variety of reasons. In terms of Hagar’s position in relation to Abraham and Sarah, a number of things raise the expectation that she, rather than Sarah, is the mother of a chosen child. While some of these markers, such as the fact that she is the first person to receive a specific oracle announcing the birth of a special child and the only person to name the Deity, occur before Isaac’s arrival, others occur after Isaac’s arrival. Furthermore, Hagar and Abraham share a common destiny, as do Isaac and Ishmael [in Gen 21-22]. . . . That Hagar is a slave who is persecuted and then has her child endangered by those who have enslaved her calls to mind the story of another specially chosen one, Moses.

Concerning Ishmael, Kaminsky remarks, “his status is strikingly ambiguous in that for a non-elect child, Ishmael has more markings of election than perhaps any other non-elect person in the whole Hebrew Bible. Even when it becomes crystal clear that Ishmael is not the chosen child, he is blessed by God to father many progeny (Gen 17:20; 21:13; 25:12-17), and he is even given the sign of the elect, circumcision (Gen 17:25). Even more striking, Ishmael, like Isaac, has a death-nearly-averted experience. . . .” He concludes, “all of these facts indicated that while Ishmael is ultimately excluded from God’s covenant and thereby is non-elect, his case is the least clear-cut instance of dis-election in

147 The word “conceiving” is used here to refer to Abram and Sarai’s idea of using Hagar to obtain a child for themselves.

148 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 34.
the Hebrew Bible, and even after his non-elect status is confirmed, he still inherits those portions of the promise made to Abraham that deal with progeny, nationhood, prosperity (Gen 17:20), and divine presence (Gen 21:20).” After amassing so much evidence of Ishmael’s elect status, Kaminsky’s focus on “the elect line” and “the chosen child” require him to characterize him as non-elect. He notes that Ishmael “is given the sign of the elect, circumcision,” but still describes him as “excluded from God’s covenant.”

If one assumes that only one of Abraham’s sons can be elect and that election corresponds to being part of the line of Israel, then this is the only possible conclusion. However, this story could perhaps better be understood as illustrating differences among the elect, along the lines of the differences between Levites and members of Israel’s other tribes. Kaminsky offers support for such an analogy when he observes that “passages . . . in Genesis suggest that part of this blessing [of the families of the earth through Abra(ha)m mentioned in Gen 12:3] comes about through mediatorial services rendered by Abraham and Israel.” God’s singling out Abraham and his descendants among the “nations” thus involves assigning them a special ministerial role, as did singling out Levi among the tribes of Israel: “YHWH separated the tribe of Levi to carry the coffer of YHWH’s covenant, to stand before the presence of YHWH, to attend on him and to give-blessing in his name, until this day. Therefore Levi did not have an inheritable portion along with his brothers; YHWH is his inheritance” (Deut 10:8-9, Fox). Exodus uses similar logic to describe Israel’s position in relation to other peoples: “If you will hearken, yes, hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be to me a special-

149 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 34.
150 Citing the example of Joseph and Judah, Ellen Davis observes, “I never know for sure that if I am ‘chosen,’ someone else is not” (“Class Notes” for OT 11. Duke Divinity School. September 4, 2003).
151 Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob, 83.
treasure from among all peoples, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex 19:6, Fox). Considering Isaac and Ishmael as differently elect rather than as elect and non-elect simply extends Levenson’s and Kaminsky’s observation that the shape of Genesis highlights the way in which God’s dealings with Israel form part of a larger divine plan to bring blessing to all. The example of Noah affirms that, while covenant and election belong especially to Israel, they do not belong exclusively to Israel. Reinforced by the colonial census, the modern emphasis on the race or ethnic group as the most important level of belonging creates the expectation that differences between groups (or ancestors of groups) be of a different order than differences within groups, and that identity must ultimately be reducible to simple binaries: yes or no, in or out, Israel or not. Genesis, however, takes a more subtle view.

Outside of an appreciation for the way in which God’s dealings with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac involve Hagar and Ishmael, the text only loosely hangs together. Recognizing the role of fruitfulness thus proves important to making sense of the logic of this portion of Genesis. Brueggemann repeatedly remarks on what he regards as its structural peculiarity. For example, he observes that “this report [of Isaac’s birth] seems oddly detached from what has gone before.” Likewise, discussing chapter 16, he finds that, “from the perspective of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, the story is oddly presented. It is structured as a Hagar story. . . . Only by inference is this story concerned with Abraham and Sarah.” Towner depicts Gen 21 as a kind of hodgepodge, tying up loose threads so that the narrative can move forward: “Chapter 21 functions as a conclusion to matters left pending and a bridge to the latter years of Abraham and Sarah.

152 Note, however, Kaminsky’s caution that the Hebrew Bible does not depict election as a duty to be discharged and then relinquished (Yet I Loved Jacob, 84-85).
153 Brueggemann, Genesis, 180.
154 Brueggemann, Genesis, 152.
In the category of bridge to the future combined with fulfillment of a past promise is the birth to Abraham of a son by Sarah (vv. 1-8). The melancholy end of the story of the first son, Ishmael (vv. 9-21), and the little noted account of the treaty with Abimelech (vv. 22-34) tidy up other matters that had been left unresolved.155

The inauguration of the new relationship with Abimelech should be regarded as a response to the rupture in the relationship with Hagar and Ishmael, not an unrelated event that needs to be gotten out of the way before the narrative can proceed. Abraham cannot live out his divinely instituted identity in isolation. Lest the events of Gen 21:1-21 and God’s part in them lead readers to miss the importance of community across difference, Genesis devotes the remaining verses of the chapter to the establishment of the treaty. A similar move occurs earlier in the book, when the parting of the ways between Abram and Lot is immediately followed by an affirmation of the continuing relationship between them (Abram comes to Lot’s rescue when he is taken captive in a war 14:12-14). There also the structure of the text upholds fruitfulness in the face of a development that might call it into question.

Sarah’s aftermath presents a direct contrast to Abraham’s. Not coincidentally, after she asserts and enacts her independence from Hagar and Ishmael, her presence in the text becomes minimal. Her death and burial are reported, but she does not act or speak again. Commentators generally interpret the abrupt mention of her death in relation to the (near-)sacrifice of her son Isaac. Without disputing the validity of that perspective, it may be observed that the conclusion reached in the case of Isaac also applies to Sarah: the departure of Hagar and Ishmael diminishes Sarah’s ability to represent a family called to epitomize fruitfulness. Accordingly, her presence in the text becomes as shadowy as

155 Towner, Genesis, 177. Cf. 183.
her son’s, and her involvement in an episode as significant as the binding of Isaac in Gen 22 must be read between the lines.

Notably, the treaty is not the only item on the agenda in the meeting between Abraham and Abimelech. The two also resolve a dispute concerning a well (21:25-26). Von Rad regards this as an unexpected development in the narrative: “The attentive reader notices immediately (especially in the apparently unmotivated break, the leap in thought between v. 24 and v. 25) that in the agreement between Abimelech and Abraham two things are being handled which lie on quite different legal planes.”

Speiser, however, finds nothing amiss in the arrangement of the text, maintaining that “the narrative can be logically interpreted as it stands.” He explains, “there is only one formal occasion with two parts to it, instead of two separate pacts--or two different sources. That the proceedings are linked to the dual aetiology of the name [Beersheba]--seven and oath--is a characteristic of the times, and certainly not inconsistent with the character of the E document.”

Commentators often remark on the similarities between this story and portions of Gen 26. For example, von Rad remarks, “the narrative about Abimelech’s covenant with Isaac is, in the history of saga, a variant to ch. 21.22 f. (E).” However, the role of Gen 21:22-34 in its narrative context suggests that the parallel narratives should not be regarded as a doublet reflecting different paths of development for a single story any more than God’s promises of blessing to Abraham, Isaac, and then Jacob should be interpreted that way. Gen 26 should be understood as a development of Gen 21, not a mere repetition of it. The latter episode intentionally recalls the earlier one, and, thereby,

156 Von Rad, Genesis, 235-36.
157 Speiser, Genesis, 160.
the events that led up to it. Isaac’s encounter with Abimelech not only invites a comparison to Abraham and his negotiation of a similar situation, but also revisits the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, a defining moment in Isaac’s life. In reaching an accord with his Philistine neighbors, he regains a measure of what he lost at that time.

The structure of the text highlights the connection between relationships involving different layers of the family of Abraham and those involving members of that family and others. Both Gen 21 and 26 use a kind of sandwiching technique. Gen 21 sets a narrative concerning Isaac and Ishmael (21:1-21) in the middle of two encounters between Abraham and Abimelech (20:1-18; 21:22-34). Likewise, Gen 26 sets a narrative concerning Isaac and Abimelech (26:1-33) in the middle of two encounters between Jacob and Esau (25:22-34; 27:1-28:9). In this way, the book maintains a juxtaposition between the two levels of relationship and invites a comparison between them.

Interactions within the family of Abraham parallel interactions between the family of Abraham and those outside it.

According to most commentators, Isaac’s preference for Esau constitutes a retrograde insistence on primogeniture. In favoring the elder son, he chooses against the will of God as revealed to Rebekah. On one level, Isaac’s attitude toward his sons demonstrates a struggle to accept the ways of God that are not like human ways, but on another level it may well reflect his desire to embrace the particular vision of community into which he has been summoned. The text explains

\[\text{Isaac loved Esau because wild game was in his mouth (Gen 25:28).}\]

---

Translators and commentators often interpret this statement as attributing Isaac’s love for Esau to that son’s ability to satisfy one of his personal cravings. However, it may depict Isaac reacting to a quality that Esau has rather than to a favor that he provides. Isaac’s special affection for his outdoorsy son may derive at least in part from a perceived similarity between that son and Ishmael. From this perspective, their relationship becomes a second chance at the fruitful family life he and his brother were denied, or more simply, it becomes the channel for his feelings of loss.\footnote{Cf. Douglas’ reference to the Leviticus writer “mourning the loss of the other half [of the uneven pairs]” (Leviticus as Literature, 250). Note the apparent Freudian slip in her reference to “Jacob and Israel, Judah and Joseph, Jerusalem and Samaria.”}

Genesis depicts Isaac and Ishmael burying Abraham together (25:9), but offers no details about the encounter between them. In contrast to the stories of Jacob and Esau or Joseph and his brothers, the text does not describe a reconciliation between them or a rekindling of their relationship. Like so much of Isaac’s experience, their relationship must be read between the lines of what the text does report, leaving considerable latitude for interpretation. As with Rebekah’s barrenness, the drama of Isaac and Ishmael’s rivalry and reconciliation may have been submerged and displaced, so that the scene with Abimelech comments indirectly on Isaac’s relationship with Ishmael. Following Benno Jacob, Westermann depicts Isaac’s accord with Abimelech as a landmark event: “The word שֵׁשֶׁת becomes particular emphasis here in v. 29, and again in the closing sentence in v. 31. The dispute between Isaac and Abimelech ends with a ‘final peace’; Isaac takes leave of him ‘in peace’. B. Jacob points out that a dispute of this kind, ending with a final peace occurs for the first time in the patriarchal story.”\footnote{Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 429. Cf. B. Jacob, Das Erste Buch Der Tora: Genesis (repr. New York: Ktav, 1974), 559.} On the one hand, as Westermann points out, “this peace is made possible only by means of [YHWH’s]
blessing which he had promised to Isaac (v. 3) and conferred on him (v. 13), as the king of the Philistines himself has to acknowledge. On the other hand, however, Isaac identifies the reconciliation with Abimelech as essential to his ability to realize the blessing (26:22). Kaminsky describes the emphasis on sight in the Hagar/Sarai/Isaac/Ishmael narrative as related to this point. Discussing the Joseph story, he observes, “the strong association between the notion of seeing and the human or divine face recurs too frequently in these sibling stories to be coincidental. . . . [T]he Joseph narrative may be hinting at a connection that runs through the stories of Jacob and Esau, and Isaac and Ishmael, and all the way back to Cain and Abel. That is, if one hopes to see God’s face and thus receive God’s blessing, one must be reconciled with one’s brother.” Through the sandwiching technique that juxtaposes narratives focused on Abraham and Abimelech with one focused on Isaac and Ishmael, and one focused on Isaac and Abimelech with ones focused on Jacob and Esau, Genesis suggests that “one’s brother” extends beyond the children of one’s father. For the family that traces its beginnings to the call of YHWH, kinship means so much more.

6.4 Conclusion

The overriding significance of race in modernity has led interpreters to assume that, wherever an ethnic difference can be identified in the biblical text, it plays a similarly determinative role. Moderns have gravitated toward readings of Genesis that interpret the book in accordance with the rules that govern communality as defined by race and ordered by the colonial census. Assuming that communal identity is inherent,

unitary, and immutable, such readings miss the way that Genesis depicts it as
preeminently a product of negotiation.

This study has sought to move beyond a black-and-white view of Genesis that
reads the book in terms of a strict dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. It has
done so by highlighting the way in which expressions such as “the promise” and “the
covenant” obscure the existence of multiple promises and covenants in Genesis. The
book does not depict a single mode of relationship to God according to which inclusion
and exclusion may be measured. Moreover, the implication of all living creatures in the
Noachic covenant (9:12) precludes anyone from occupying the position of outsider.
Every living being stands in covenant relationship to God.

Interpreters grouping the characters of Genesis into the two categories of insider
and outsider generally do so on the basis of membership in (proto-)Israel. While the layer
of the people Israel is obviously of great import, it is not the exclusive focus of Genesis.
Much of the book involves situating Israel in relation to the other spheres of God’s
activity. As Kaminsky explains, membership in Israel does not correlate to being “saved”
rather than “damned.” It does not distinguish the recipients of God’s redemptive action
and love from legions of hapless outsiders. Rather it serves as one of many concentric
circles describing the relationship between God and various humans, and it is not the
innermost among them. These circles should not be understood as reflecting a kind of
caste system. Genesis precludes such a hierarchical view by suggesting that the center
exists for the margin as much as, or more than, the other way around (Gen 12:1-3).

164 Cf. Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in Ethnicity
and the Bible (ed. Mark G. Brett; Biblical Interpretation Series 19; Leiden, New York: E. J. Brill,
1996): 143-169, 149.
165 E. g., Yet I Loved Jacob, 135.
Genesis also runs counter to modern supremacist notions by beginning to establish a relationship between election and dispossession that is developed further in other biblical and post-biblical traditions. Abram’s entering into a special relationship with God requires him to forsake his father’s household and his homeland and the social definition that they supply.\textsuperscript{166} Likewise, the Levites receive special cultic prerogatives but are not assigned tribal land.\textsuperscript{167} In this connection, one might also consider Catholic nuns, who share special intimacy with God as “brides of Christ” but who thereby forgo human marriage.

This idea of election as a costly privilege finds further support in the “very close relationship between being chosen and suffering a death or nearly averting one.”\textsuperscript{168} Kaminsky further observes that such a symbolic death transforms the identity of the one who undergoes it: “The near-death experience erases any claim by the human parents, who in each case surrendered the child to his death, thus allowing for God to claim the surviving person for himself in an uncontested fashion.”\textsuperscript{169} The rabbinic conversion ceremony brings all these elements together. The process of conversion testifies to the mutability of identity, a point underscored by the convert’s being placed within a new

\textsuperscript{166} Accordingly, Boyarin and Boyarin observe, “there is… a sense in which the convert becomes the ideal type of the Jew” (“Diaspora,” 317).

\textsuperscript{167} Boyarin and Boyarin find similar logic in rabbinic Judaism’s attitude toward power and place, arguing, “[the] displacement of loyalty from place to memory of place was necessary not only to transcend the loss of the Land but to enable the loss of the Land. Political possession of the Land most threatened the possibility of continued Jewish cultural practice and difference. Given the choice between an ethnocentricity that would not seek domination over others and a seeking of political domination that would necessarily have led either to a dilution of distinctiveness, tribal warfare, or fascism, the Rabbis chose ethnocentricity” (“Diaspora,” 331). An evaluation of this assertion lies beyond the scope of this study, but its relevance to the present discussion warrants its inclusion here.

\textsuperscript{168} Kaminsky, \textit{Yet I Loved Jacob}, 34, describing Levenson, \textit{Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son}.

\textsuperscript{169} Kaminsky, \textit{Yet I Loved Jacob}, 36.
genealogy. In addition, Shaye J. D. Cohen finds in the liturgy a similar understanding of election as a costly privilege. The would-be-convert “is greeted with a double question: ‘Why have you decided to approach (us) to be converted?’ (A3) and ‘Do you not know that Israel(ites) at this time are pained, oppressed, harassed, and torn, and afflictions come upon them?’ (A 4-5). To this double question he replies with a double response: ‘I know and am unworthy’ (A7, the only time in the ceremony that words are placed in the convert’s mouth).”

Douglas observes that “in a religious context being consecrated is the [preferred] destiny,” but describes this point as less obvious than it has been made out to be:

. . . between Isaac and Ishmael, the first accepted the constraints of the covenant, and the second was allowed to go free. When the Lord prophesies to Hagar that her son Ishmael would grow up to be a ‘wild ass of a man’ (Gen 16:12), that meant unconstrained, nothing pejorative, but with some of the implications we might have for a lion ‘born free’. There is no judgement against Ishmael, he is neither immoral nor destined to an unhappy or godless life. He is not condemned, he is free to roam the wilderness and will be a great prince.

The position of the non-elect (or, better, the less elect) brother thus has an allure all its own.

It is no coincidence that, as Kaminsky observes, “the highest flights of Israelite universalism are achieved not through a weakening of Israel’s particularistic identity, but through a deepening of Israel’s sense of her unique identity.”

171 Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 250. The contrast between the brother who accepts the constraints of the covenant and the one who is allowed to go free should be understood in relative terms. As has been highlighted here, Ishmael also accepts certain covenantal constraints.
172 Cf. Douglas’ observation that for an animal, “to be classified unclean ought to be an advantage for the survival of the species” (*Leviticus as Literature*, 142). Douglas understands the distinction between clean and unclean animals as the analogue of the distinction between elect and non-elect humans.
Genesis makes two major points about communal identity. Although the book recognizes the role of social definitions imposed by other people, it emphasizes that, as the chosen raceless, the family’s identity derives from the word of God. Genesis does not deny the functional reality of such constructions as race, nationality, and ethnicity, a point reflected in the book’s selective use of the designation “Hebrew.”

However, while modern negotiations of communality often take these categories as absolutes, Genesis insists that they have only limited applicability to family members and cannot provide the ultimate arbiter of their personhood or their relationship to God. At the same time, the notion of fruitfulness highlights for the family the importance of living in diverse community. This idea could be used to construct a model for living with the differences described by race, nationality, and ethnicity as long as one recognizes that Genesis itself refers to such divinely instituted differences as created by election (for example) and not to differences of human origin. In this way, the book retains the ability to speak to the problematics of identity as construed in a modern context without losing the ability to speak beyond them.

---

174 Cf. Sechrest, who observes, “the oft acknowledged constructed, or imagined, nature of race and ethnicity is in tension with the tangible social effects of racial and ethnic identity in many societies. In other words, race is real, even if is also imagined” (“A Former Jew,” 32).
7. The Genesis of the Western Reader: Nationalism, Theology, and Culture

“Nationalism is the Judaism of the secularized”

--Jon Levenson

Jon Levenson argues that the presentation of Israel’s beginnings in Genesis establishes the priority of Israel’s theological identity over its national identity by not allowing the polity any existence independent of YHWH’s call. He therefore maintains that “Israel has no profane history, only a sacred history.” As the discussion thus far has demonstrated, however, scholarship has not dealt with Israel in accordance with this aspect of the text’s structure. Instead, it has constructed Israel’s profane history as a template for narrating the story of the West (or its constituent parts).

A rearrangement of Genesis implicitly or explicitly governs most modern treatments. Rather than taking the first eleven or so chapters as the starting point of the book, the scriptural canon(s), and Israel’s story, scholars demote them to the status of preface, taking the call to Abram in Gen 12 as the beginning of what E. A. Speiser terms “biblical history proper.” Attempts to contextualize the book historically generally perform a similar function, placing the people earlier than the theology. Conjecturing about the way in which the text reflects and responds to the circumstances of its production, scholars often neglect the peculiar shape of the textual construct. The (reconstructed) history fills in the silences of the text itself so that Israel is not really absent from the beginning of its own story. Equally problematic, such a move takes the


nature of Israel as a known commodity, so that Genesis operates within extant understandings of communal identity rather than making its own statement about the terms in which communality is conceived.

Developing an alternative approach for historically-oriented scholarship that avoids these pitfalls is beyond the scope of this study. However, in interrogating modern discomfort with Israel’s late arrival to its own story, this chapter might inform such an undertaking. The reluctance to contend with that feature of the text belongs to a broader tendency to gravitate toward readings of Genesis that interpret the book in accordance with the rules that govern communality as defined by race and ordered by the colonial census. Assuming that communal identity is inherent, unitary, and immutable, such Eurocentric readings miss the way that Genesis depicts it as preeminently a product of negotiation.

Communal identity has become an important site of contemporary interest in the Bible. However, in considering the way in which biblical negotiations of the topic speak to contemporary concerns, most treatments focus on the continuity between biblical and modern conceptualizations. For example, the overriding significance of race in modernity has led some interpreters to assume that, wherever an ethnic difference can be identified in the biblical text, it plays a similarly determinative role. However, examination of Genesis suggests that readers have been too quick to emphasize ethnicity as a governing dynamic in many of the book’s stories.

Describing the distinction between ancient and modern approaches to communality as “overwrought,” Steven Grosby argues that “the example, *par excellence*, of the image of th[e] primordial objects of a land and a people in the formation of a
nation is the ‘promised land’ and the ‘chosen people’ of the nation of ancient Israel.”

Accordingly, he highlights “the contribution that the study of the ancient Near East and Orient can make to the study of medieval and modern Europe by deepening our understanding of nationality.”

This conceptualization of the Bible regards nationality as the link between the text’s ancient producers and its modern recipients, a point most influentially articulated by Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder describes the ancient Hebrews as modeling nationhood for moderns: the Hebrews were a nation like the Germans are (or should be) a nation.

Viewing the Hebrews from this perspective not only assimilated them into modern notions of personhood and collectivity, but also provided a basis for Gentile identification with biblical Israel. Understood as typical rather than particular, Israel no longer presented an obstacle to Gentile engagement of what Auerbach describes as the Bible’s universal history. Indeed, seeing Israel as a stand-in for their own group (or for Western Civilization) became the means for Gentiles to conscript the Bible into service to their community. As a result, Western readers did not need to find a place in the biblical story--it was always already their own. The Bible was a part of their heritage, and took its place among everything else that comprised that heritage. Accordingly, far from threatening to overwhelm Western readers’ reality, the Bible’s universal history served to reinforce the universal pretensions of Western modes of organizing reality, adding its authority to that already assumed.

As this interpretive trajectory demonstrates, the process of developing a perspective from which to engage the Bible has also functioned as a process of


developing a basis for appropriating it as one’s own story. The choice of framework for conceptualizing Israel’s story thus closely relates to the problem of identification with biblical Israel. As a result, concerns about communal identity are never far from biblical scholarship, even when it claims to be most disinterested; indeed, the very shape of those claims reflecting that role. The tendency to prioritize biblical Israel’s “national” identity over its theological identity reflects the conception of the nation as a way to consolidate the identity of the Western reader and articulate the Bible’s relevance to a post-Christian Christendom.\(^5\) As Jonathan Sheehan argues, that relevance now derives from the Bible’s status as an expression of culture and its position in Western Civilization.\(^6\)

In the introduction to *Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern*, Grosby examines the intimate relationship between the Bible and the West:

Is it the case that the ability of the various and at times seemingly conflicting meanings of the Hebrew Bible to resonate within us, and the extent to which the Hebrew Bible has become a constitutive element of the Occidental tradition, are consequences of the Bible having incorporated within itself many of the problems of life that confront us today? To be sure, considerations of any number of social factors and constellations of power are necessary to historical analyses. Nevertheless, this incorporation of many of the problems of life is confirmed by the persistence of the image of a chosen people and promised land throughout subsequent European history.\(^7\)

For Grosby, the Hebrew Bible’s importance to the West derives from its ability to speak to a common humanity by evoking issues of mutual concern. Westerners remain fascinated by the Hebrew Bible because they have so much in common with it.

\(^5\) This statement highlights an aspect of the rise of the modern nation. It does not claim to provide a complete description of that process.
Sheehan challenges this perspective, demonstrating that the state of affairs Grosby describes does not reflect a natural affinity between biblical and Western concerns so much as an intentional process of reshaping the Hebrew Bible in order to create (or maintain) such an affinity. Grosby emphasizes a resemblance between biblical and modern notions of nationality that reflects continuity over time, a continuity so strong that he refers to European history as a continuation of the Bible (“subsequent European history”). Sheehan offers a very different account of the correspondence between “biblical ideas of nationality: ancient and modern.” In his view, the relationship between reader and text preceded the points of comparison that Grosby cites as the basis for that relationship.

Sheehan’s account of what he terms the Enlightenment Bible points to the underlying reason that the full manifestation of family in Genesis has received so little sustained attention. It suggests that the way in which many reading strategies revise the book to conform to modern notions of communality reflects the origins of those strategies as means of appropriating the Bible to reinforce extant identities. Going a step further than Auerbach and Anderson in relating modernity to the Bible, religion, and/or theology, Sheehan specifically attributes the development of the “Western” reader to issues arising in the reception of the Bible. He examines the relationship between national and theological modes of conceptualizing identity, highlighting the role played by the Bible in defining each of them. His account illustrates the inadequacy of characterizing the Enlightenment or the biblical scholarship it produced in terms of a secularizing tendency. Instead, it depicts what could be called a Christian theological impulse to

---

8 Grosby also challenges the idea that “secularization, and the attendant fragmentation of public life that the term has come to imply, is . . . characteristic of the declining significance of religion in modern life.” He expresses discomfort with “the neat and tidy periodizations that are so popular in many historical analyses” (Biblical Ideas of Nationality, 8). While Sheehan
preserve the relevance of Scripture in a changing world. However, the phenomenon is perhaps better cast in more basic terms in order to highlight the blurring of Christian and “secular” concerns and relate it to the focus of the present study. Even as the assertion became increasingly problematic, the practitioners of Enlightenment have been unwilling to give up the deeply rooted sense that the Bible belongs to them in a special way. As a result, both the Bible and its modern readers bear the mark of this struggle.

This chapter will complete this study’s argument by drawing together the various Eurocentric exegetical tendencies identified here and locating them within an analysis of the current moment in biblical studies. It will then offer some concluding reflections highlighting the way in which this study has responded to that moment.

7.1 Translating Biblical Authority

This study engages Sheehan’s description of the Enlightenment Bible as a compelling way of situating certain tendencies in the interpretation of Genesis within larger trends in biblical studies. It utilizes his historically-driven account as a way of understanding the current shape of the discipline, particularly the close relationship between methodological choices and ideological concerns.

Understanding the influence of the Enlightenment begins with considering it from a new perspective. Sheehan challenges the common characterization of the Enlightenment as “a philosophically powered assault on religion,” instead taking a different view that enables him to explore its largely unexamined creative consequences for religion. He attributes his study’s different picture of the role of religion in the

emphasizes the religiosity of modernity (e.g., The Enlightenment Bible, ix), Grosby emphasizes the secularity of antiquity.
Enlightenment to its focus on Germany and England, in contrast to the emphasis on France in other works. He observes that Protestant countries had to negotiate a changing relationship to the Bible, a need not shared by Catholic countries like France. This negotiation proved determinative not only for modern biblical studies, but also for modernity itself.

The term “Enlightenment” in Sheehan’s usage designates

the new constellation of practices and institutions--including scholarship and scholarly techniques, translations, book reviews, salons, academies, new communication tools, and new or revived techniques of data organization and storage--that the eighteenth century used to address a the [sic] host of religious, historical, and philosophical questions inherited from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution.

According to him, the present shape of biblical studies (and of the Bible itself) originated in the desire of the devout to find a place for the Bible and a way of accounting for its authority amid these developments. He observes, “if the answer to the question ‘Why should I read the Bible?’ was, before 1700, overwhelmingly ‘because it reveals the means to your salvation,’ by the middle of the eighteenth century, Protestant answers began to proliferate, jostle, and compete with the standard one. In a sense, the Enlightenment Bible was this series of alternative answers.”

Sheehan highlights four main categories of alternative answers--philological, pedagogical, literary/poetic, and historical--each producing its own view of the Bible, each enjoying its heyday. Despite their divergent and even contradictory emphases, each of the four modes also contributed to the makeup of the “cultural Bible” that currently remains ascendant. The term “Enlightenment Bible”

9 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, xii.
thus covers a variety of positions and practices, rather than pointing to a single perspective or text.12

This new kind of Bible went along with a new kind of biblical scholar, one for whom scholarly distance now replaced piety as the precondition of scholarship and essential virtue. Although impartiality remains a largely unquestioned ideal in biblical studies, Sheehan draws attention to its potential to constrain scholarship: “Even as it proved scholarship’s freedom from zealotry, the embrace of impartiality also put certain restrictions on the activity of the scholar. Real-world objects could be discussed, but only from a distance, and actual interference with these objects became, at least for now, a violation of the rules that enabled criticism to function.”13

The Enlightenment also saw the Bible’s authority become dependent on human communities in a new way. Even as they themselves evolved, the community and its mores served as a fixed point of reference around which understandings of the Bible orbit. Although the particular understanding of how the community is constituted changed over time, the sense of belonging to a “we” and of knowing who “we” are remained constant. The Bible had to be reimagined in order to accommodate the changing needs (and changing definitions) of the community. Meanwhile, beginning with the Reformation, communities looked to the Bible to provide legitimation for their transformations.14

12 “Enlightenment Bible” could thus be compared with “Septuagint,” which designates the ancient project of translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek, not a single manuscript or translation.
13 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 106.
14 Sheehan notes, “biblical authority was the battle cry of a host of new religious movements that together promised to alter forever the complexion of European society. Anabaptism, Calvinism, Spiritualism, Zwinglianism: the list swells with reform movements that claimed as their theological, political, and social inspiration the words of the biblical text” (The Enlightenment Bible, 1).
The Reformation represents a decisive moment in which people suddenly felt disconnected from the Bible and negotiated this problem in a way that set the stage for future responses. In contrast to the view that regarded the Bible as authoritative because the Church proclaimed it as such, the reformers located authority in the text itself by virtue of its status as the Word of God. In this way, they acquired credibility for themselves and for their movement(s). As Sheehan remarks, “to say ‘scripture alone’ was to invest reform and reformers with the very authority of God, before which no human institution--church or state--might stand.”  

The reformers’ heavy emphasis on the authority of the text easily obscures the authority they simultaneously conferred on the reader. However, the reformers themselves were not unaware of this consequence of their stance. They feared that the democratization of authoritative biblical interpretation might unleash a kind of theological anarchy: if vernacular translations were encouraged, how could the proliferation of new translations and new theologies be kept under control?

Sheehan’s account emphasizes the relationship between the Enlightenment’s dismantling and its reconsolidation of authority. Accordingly, he terms the explosive production of new vernacular translations a “big bang” succeeded by a “big crunch” that saw “the project of biblical translation [grind] to a halt and a canon of vernacular Bibles [set] into stone.”  

For the reformers, freedom for the Bible ultimately meant that it “had to be extracted from its Catholic superstructure” and resituated in a new authorizing tradition. The “tools of extraction” also helped forge this new superstructure. First, “scholarship and inspiration provided internal legitimation of the biblical text,

15 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 1.  
16 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 4.  
17 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 14.  
18 The particular dynamics discussed here did not originate with the Reformation. Sheehan finds them already at work in the legends surrounding the origins of the Septuagint (The Enlightenment Bible, 5).
guaranteeing the living connection between the contemporary vernacular Bible and the apostolic church that Protestants so venerated.”¹⁹ The transference of authority away from the Catholic Church and its tradition to the Bible itself gave new importance to the original biblical texts and new impetus to biblical scholarship. Sixteenth-century artwork casts Martin Luther in the roles of Saints Matthew and Jerome but surrounds him with the tools of scholarship rather than a halo.²⁰ Secondly, “political power provided external legitimation of the biblical text, guaranteeing the living connection between Bibles and the authority vested in kings since Paul himself proclaimed the divine origins of princes (Rom. 13).”²¹ In England, James I became the one who first invested the version known as the King James Bible with the authority it still enjoys today.²² By doing so he reconsolidated his own authority, undercutting the popular Geneva Bible and empowering a new version that did not pose a threat to his sovereignty.

Bestowing access to a divine word that trumped all human authorities, the democratization of authoritative biblical interpretation had social and political ramifications as well as theological ones. It therefore posed a challenge not only to the Catholic Church, but to all human institutions. More is at stake in biblical interpretation than personal piety and the religious establishment(s). The wide-ranging consequences of the way people relate to the Bible suggest that “people of faith” are not the only ones with a vested interest in the shape of biblical scholarship. However, the discipline’s self-analysis tends to ignore what Sheehan describes as the Enlightenment’s reconsolidation of authority, focusing only on its liberating effects. Understanding the development and

---

²² The other name of this translation, the Authorized Version, also enshrines the political aspect of its origin.
significance of the Eurocentric exegetical approaches highlighted in this study requires attention to the other side of the Enlightenment story.

7.2 Reimagining Scripture for a Reimagined Community

Describing the four modes of the Enlightenment Bible, Sheehan explains the rise to prominence of the interpretive strategies that disincline scholars to find in Genesis the beginnings of a framework for Israel’s story. He contextualizes the tendency to view the biblical texts as compilations of fragments whose primary significance lies in their ability to offer glimpses into a (historical) reality beyond themselves. He also explores the process that bound up the concept of nation with the Bible, “inserting the Bible into the heart of culture”\(^{23}\) so that Israel’s story became Germany’s and England’s national treasure and the Bible became central to the idea of Western Civilization. Rather than being primarily descriptive in intent, these approaches were developed to read the Bible in such a way that it becomes the book moderns need it to be. Instead of challenging and transforming its readers’ reality, it then adjusts to conform to that reality, as demonstrated by readers from Auerbach to Trible.

7.2.1 The Philological Bible: “From Text to Document”

This study has contrasted approaches that regard Genesis as constructing a framework for understanding reality with approaches that situate it within another such framework. It has also emphasized the way in which a disregard for the literary shape of the book’s “final form” has influenced perceptions of its meaning. Sheehan traces the

\[^{23}\text{Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 220.}\]
origins of these tendencies in biblical scholarship to what he terms the “philological Bible,” describing the transformation of the Bible from text to document and corresponding shift in the job of professional interpreters from reading to reconstruction.

He explains that the abundance of textual variants in biblical manuscripts created anxiety about the reliability of scripture, an anxiety resolved by displacing authority onto an original text underlying extant manuscripts. Reconstruction of this original text thus became a scholarly imperative. Once a matter of concern, manuscript error became the textual critic’s most important ally because any individual manuscript derived its importance not from the interpretations it might sponsor, but rather from the evidence it might provide about the original text. This development was furthered by the idea of the textual unconscious—the notion that scribes unwittingly left traces of their own historical context in the manuscripts that passed through their hands. Biblical manuscripts were no longer texts to be read, but rather material objects, documents to be examined for the sake of the information they might yield about something beyond themselves.24 This approach “implied that the theological message of the biblical texts was in no way relevant to the kind of scholarship done on the biblical documents. The question of error represented this change at its most dramatic.”25

7.2.2 The Pedagogical Bible: Universalizing Scripture

Another hermeneutical issue highlighted in this study, the problem of the Bible’s universal scope and particular focus on Israel, begins to find expression in Sheehan’s account of the “pedagogical Bible.” This mode of biblical scholarship was characterized

---

by its exceptionally free translations, arising from a desire to rework the Bible in keeping with modern sensibilities. This reworking generally meant liberating it from its Hebrew/Jewish form to uncover its universal content.\textsuperscript{26} Although Sheehan’s discussion focuses on a different historical moment and reflects a different means of apprehending the Bible, it depicts the same process apparent in \textit{Mimesis}: the Bible’s place in the community depends on the disappearance of Hebrew.\textsuperscript{27} Severing the Bible from its Hebrew origins serves to guarantee its universal relevance. Once the particularity of biblical Israel has been thus dismantled, nothing remains to restrain the reader’s appropriation of the Bible’s universal history.

In chronicling the challenge of maintaining an identification with the Bible through the process of negotiating a changing relationship to it, Sheehan observes a differential relationship to the two divisions of the Christian scriptural canon. He remarks, “the ‘air of antiquity’ was most stifling around the Old Testament, and for good reasons. It was no accident that, when scholars sought to reinvest the Bible with moral and pedagogical virtues, they turned to the New Testament, since it was the New Testament that offered the traces of Christianity ‘within the limits of reason alone.’”\textsuperscript{28}

New approaches to the Bible had left the Old Testament in a precarious position. At one time, prophecy served as “the sinew that tied Old and New Testaments, Jews and

\textsuperscript{26} Sheehan cites and unpacks an exceptionally “colorful” account of this process from Johann Lorenz Schmidt, the man behind the 1735 Wertheimer Bible: “‘When shit lies in the street in front of the houses, it is, in that place, an evil thing. But as soon as someone carries it off to the fields, the same stuff is no longer disreputable and contributes to the fertility of the land’”. Clearing away the shit might be an appropriate metaphor for Schmidt’s task. And the shit, in this case, was the Hebrew idiom, which may have been proper to the ancient Jews but which stood as a barrier between modern man and the truths of the Bible” (Sheehan, \textit{The Enlightenment Bible}, 128-9). The official title of the Wertheimer Bible was \textit{The Divine Scriptures from before the Times of Jesus}.

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Sheehan, \textit{The Enlightenment Bible}, 146.

\textsuperscript{28} Sheehan, \textit{The Enlightenment Bible}, 151.
Christians, ancients and moderns together” in the Providence of God. However, the eighteenth century saw the loss of this “guarante[e] of the integrity of the Scriptures,” making it difficult for Christians to know how to relate to the Old Testament. Sheehan identifies this disintegration as “the precondition of the ‘eclipse of Biblical narrative’ that Hans Frei has so carefully unpacked, that separation between the narrative form of the Bible and the ‘separable subject matter . . . now taken to be its true meaning.’” As a consequence of all these developments, “affirmations of the distance between Hebrew and modern became increasingly commonplace in the early eighteenth century.”29

7.2.3 The Poetic Bible: Identification and the Politics of National Literature

In light of these developments, the reclamation of the Old Testament became the goal of the “poetic Bible.” Sheehan’s account of this mode of the Enlightenment Bible links the reconceptualization of the Old Testament’s relationship to (certain) Christians with the reconceptualization of their communal identity. In relating the rise of the prevailing modern assumptions about peoplehood to the problem of identification with biblical Israel, his analysis sheds considerable light on the tendency to prioritize Israel’s national identity over its theological one.

Sheehan describes the poetic Bible as proceeding through two stages. At first the chasm between Hebrew and modern was bridged through poetry, translations that sought to help readers connect to the Bible by means of a direct encounter with “divine passion” or universal human emotion. However, these solutions proved insufficient:

Neither pure history nor pure aesthetics . . . could by themselves articulate how the Old Testament ought to stand in relationship to modern readers because, as Johann Gottfried Herder was the first to clearly see, this normative “ought” could not entirely be supplied from within history or aesthetics alone. It was an “ought” that had always been supplied by religion, in particular, by the typological reading that had subsumed [the Old Testament] to New Testament theology. But in the absence of theology, it was an “ought” that needed a different source of legitimacy. Herder and the generation of poetic translators that extended well into the nineteenth century found this “ought” in the politics of national literatures.30

At this point it is worthwhile to recall Anderson’s assertion that nationalism as an outlook derived its potency from its ability to address the complex of needs once managed through religion. Because of its role in a comprehensive interpretive system, the end of the reign of the typological precipitated a crisis at the level of community formation. Sheehan ties the belief in the unity of the Bible to the coherence of the universal Christian community: “At the very moment that toleration gave up the idea of the universal Christian community … as the normative model for European society, it also gave up the universal and unitary Bible. Just as Christians resigned themselves to the fact that Jews were unlikely to forswear the Torah, they also resigned themselves to the increasing disconnection between this Torah and Christian hopes for salvation.”31 Faced with a need left unsatisfied by this reconfiguration, Herder found that translation could provide a new path to wholeness, or better, a path to a new kind of wholeness that could claim the same urgency and relevance as that which had been lost. Rather than looking to Bible translation as a means to encounter God, he upheld it as a means to encounter his own people, very specifically conceived as the German nation.

30 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 168.
31 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 151.
Taking a view of national literature similar to that articulated by Auerbach, Herder held that juxtaposing the literature of a foreign nation to one’s own through translation would throw both peoples into relief, enabling each to be seen for what it really was. It could, therefore, lead the community to another kind of self-understanding, helping it become, for example, German: “The perfect translation . . . would establish the borders and frontiers between nations and peoples, just as it would inaugurate controlled diplomatic exchange across that frontier. As such, then, translations were political events that helped to produce the historical entities that we call nations and peoples, by establishing what is the same, and what is different.”

32 Invoking Anderson, Sheehan concludes, “the fragmentation of the sacred Christian community that welded together Old and New Testaments was . . . embraced, and the fragments collected within entities called nations.”

In this embrace of fragmentation under the rubric of the nation, the Hebrews were not merely one occasion for application of a general principle, but rather central to the idea’s development. Sheehan observes, “more than any other ancient peoples, the Hebrews functioned as a model for Herder to understand the relationship between nations and their literatures.”

34 Like traditional Christian theology, Herder views biblical Israel as a singularly important precedent for the contemporary community. However, while Christian theology had looked to Israel in its capacity as the people among whom YHWH dwells, Herder looks to “the Hebrews” as the exemplar of nationhood. In this way, he decisively reverses the order established in Genesis, taking the national as the primary basis of identity and identification. The emerging emphasis on nations as a fundamental

33 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 173.
aspect of human existence transformed the sphere of operation for Christian theology, putting it on a playing field always already conditioned by the national. Accordingly, Sheehan observes that from the end of the eighteenth century, “the simple faith that Christ could be a universal moral teacher disappeared, and was replaced by more nationally and racially circumscribed stories.”

The process evident in Auerbach’s treatment of Mystère d’Adam thus goes a step further here, as Herder explicitly identifies the German nation as the natural and appropriate perspective from which to engage the Bible. The tension that the Church Fathers identified between the competing claims of social convention and Christian doctrine is specifically excluded here, as it was in the discussion of Mystère d’Adam; the nation stands as a given prior to any reading of the Bible. The modern concept of nation, as well as its actualization in the German nation, becomes part of the foundation for biblical interpretation. As a result, there can be no question of the Bible overcoming its readers’ reality, at least as far as national orientation is concerned. Instead, there is what Anderson describes as “a competitive, comparative field,” on which one nation (the Hebrew) encounters another (the German). Notably, this is not the encounter of equals. Analyses of Herder’s thought suggest an imperialist tendency implicit in his notion of translation. Sheehan specifies that for Herder, “translation was not simply...a means of establishing ‘world literature’ as an object of appreciation. It was always an act of

35 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 146.
37 See, e.g., Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 172. This claim refers to the assumptions behind and consequences of Herder’s perspective. It is not a reference to his personal feelings about imperialism.
appropriation as well.”

The Bible here appears as a resource available for exploitation in the service of the very reality it was once said to overpower.

Biblical translation thus served the goal of social formation, specifically national social formation. The Bible demonstrated the vital role a national literature could play in the life of a people, a lesson from which Germans could benefit. Moreover, understanding the Bible as Hebrew national literature made clear the best means of adapting it into German national literature. The idea was that, “through differentiation and emulation, Hebrew poetry would be transfigured into an exemplar of German national literature.” Using the template offered by the Hebrew Bible, Germans could construct their own literary monument in the service of their own national identity. Despite producing several translations of its own in hopes of realizing this goal, this program naturally gravitated toward an already established translation. In the Luther Bible it found “a text that was so intimately familiar to German readers that it would look very much like the word of God itself.” Only such a translation could displace the Hebrew originals and possess an authority fully independent of them.

7.2.4 The Historical Bible: Sacrality and Objectivity

Sheehan subtitiles his treatment of the final mode of the Enlightenment Bible “The Archival and Alien Old Testament,” highlighting the desire of the “historical Bible” to disrupt readers’ assumed familiarity with the text by emphasizing the distance between them. In keeping with this goal, scholars marshaled geographic, cultural, philological

38 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 171.
40 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 175.
and natural historical data in order to cultivate an awareness of the Bible as an ancient text written by an ancient people and therefore at variance with everything modern.

On the surface, then, the historical Bible would seem to represent the polar opposite of the poetic Bible, in that “estrangement [was] its purpose” rather than its enemy. However, this contrast masks an important commonality between them. As Herder demonstrates, assertions of difference can stem from an underlying belief that the universal applicability of one’s own experience and perspective qualifies one to properly characterize others. Thus, although the historical Bible shifted attention away from the subjectivity of the scholar, it nevertheless was (and is) deeply invested in the process of constructing scholars’ own communal identity. Like the character discussed by Auerbach, in describing ancient Israel and its neighbors, scholars unwittingly describe themselves.

From the perspective of the present study, then, the poetic Bible and the historical Bible are best understood as two sides of the same coin. His discussion of the poetic Bible tells the story of identification with and appropriation of biblical Israel; his discussion of the historical Bible explains how such a subjective process acquired an air of objectivity. Under the rubric of the poetic Bible, Sheehan describes the use of a notion of communal identity to relate moderns to biblical Israel. Under the rubric of the historical Bible, he describes the way in which the categories through which moderns conceive themselves and biblical Israel came to be regarded as embedded in the nature of reality rather than socially constructed and contingent.

Sheehan observes that proponents of the historical Bible undertook and underwrote eastward expeditions to gather information that they then reported through a veil of objectivity. While in many respects these expeditions represented another

41 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 181.
installment in a long tradition of European exploration of the “Orient,” those undertaking them made a point of distinguishing themselves from earlier voyagers and their writings from the familiar genre of travel narratives. Such travelers presented their work in a way that obscured their own role as participants in the encounter with the Orient. Rather than structuring their writings in accordance with the experiences and perceptions of a narrating subject, scholarly travelers utilized organizational categories depicted as objectively legitimate, not arising from any particular point of view. Nevertheless, despite this dramatic shift in presentation, their activities and observations were not so far removed from those of their predecessors.

Of particular significance is the connection made between disavowing theological concerns and claiming scholarly objectivity. In sharp contrast to the New Testament and Patristic emphasis on faith and purity of heart referenced by Auerbach, proponents of the historical Bible embraced disinterestedness as the preeminent virtue for biblical interpreters. Concerning this “principle of knowledge through alienation,” Sheehan remarks, “spiritual vision. . . would become a kind of blindness: the missionary could not help but substitute comforting theological familiarity for the reality of the alien landscape of Palestine and the Near East. In a secular inversion of the mythical Teiresias, only those blind to spirit might see the truth of the place, its rarity and its peculiarity.”42 However, these scholars were still in the service of a community and a comforting familiarity. Their real point of departure was in their means of defining that community. As Sheehan explains via Johann David Michaelis, the historical Bible was

\[\ldots\text{for everyone: ‘for Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics. . . for Socinians, even for enemies of religion.’ It would be a Bible for a new, post-theological age: ‘my intention is to introduce into the Bible no religious system at all,’ for any such introduction would deny the Bible its rights as the ‘communal well of knowledge’}\]

42 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 198.
for Christians. . . . Just as the decline of Christian allegory made it possible for the Greeks to stand as a pure spiritual resource for a liberated modern age, so too did the decline of Christian theology make possible a purely nonpartisan translation, a well of knowledge for German readers of all religious persuasions.43

Scholars partook of an authority gained by forsaking theology, but their work was hardly less perspectivally driven simply for presenting itself as such. For them, “objectivity” meant refusing to take sides in the theological controversies that surrounded them and focusing instead on the common denominator shared by the disputing parties. If they were not all Lutherans, they were all Germans. If they did not all belong to Christendom, they were all Westerners. Scholarly disinterest was thus only “objective” in a limited sense, but appeared as such because it embraced biases so widely held as to be safely taken for granted.

The quotation above also demonstrates the extent to which designating the historical Bible as post-theological is misleading, if one takes post-theological to mean independent of Christianity (Sheehan does not). As Anderson explains, traces of the previous mode of conceptualizing the community adhere to the new construction. The slippage between the Bible as a well of knowledge for Christians and for Germans suggests that these categories were not entirely distinguished even by those who proclaimed themselves most free of theological commitments. As in Auerbach’s treatment of Mystère d’Adam and Trible’s reading of the Hagar story, there is a confluence of Christian and secular means of characterizing the community. The new(ly conceptualized) community is thus a Christian secular one, with the two modifiers coloring and reinforcing one another. Accordingly, if Christianity no longer matters as a

43 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 213-4. All emphasis Sheehan’s.
theological system, it nevertheless retains importance as a social signifier. The works discussed in this study suggest that the idea of the “West” developed as a post-Christian Christendom.

Thus, despite its very different way of presenting itself, the historical Bible makes use of the same assumptions about community that govern the poetic Bible’s appropriation of the Bible as national literature. While it did open up new avenues of inquiry, biblical scholarship’s declaration of independence from theology did more to yoke scholarship to an alternative vision of community than to liberate it from all external concerns. The community no longer gained coherence by living together in the common story provided by the Bible, but rather by adopting the common stance of members of the nation, race, or Western Civilization in relation to all others.

Although Sheehan cites him as a leading proponent of the poetic Bible, Herder provides a glimpse into the workings of the historical Bible as well. Indeed, the very presence of both tendencies in a single one of his works demonstrates their compatibility and perhaps interdependence. Without requiring widespread assent to all the details of his philosophical program, his perspective can be used to illuminate the emerging mode of organizing the world’s peoples (including biblical Israel) in order to attain self-knowledge.

In the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, Herder approaches the Bible from the perspective common to practitioners of the historical Bible. Rather than possessing a framework for understanding reality, it shows up in his work as “Eastern testimony” to be

---

44 Thus, for example, in 1858 Abraham Geiger deems it necessary to “argu[e] forcefully that entry into German society should not require conversion to Christianity” (Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 42).

45 As I hope is clear from its broader context, this statement should not be taken as referring to two distinct periods in history, but rather to a decisive move in relation to a long-standing ideological tension.
interpreted in accordance with another framework\textsuperscript{46}--Herder’s unfolding schema of
universal human development.\textsuperscript{47} Nevertheless, enough authority seems to linger over the
biblical text that, after referencing the Tower of Babel story from Genesis 11, Herder
deems it necessary to clarify that “I only in fact meant to cite [it] here as a poem.”\textsuperscript{48} This
attitude towards the Bible should not be interpreted as impiety. Herder does not reject
theology, he redefines it, identifying the human as the measure of the divine.\textsuperscript{49} This
orientation gives him considerable common ground with Michaelis, in that his work aims
at what is more generally human rather than embracing any sort of doctrinal particularity.
Herder simply takes the further step of arguing that theology is best served by an
approach that takes an examination of human nature and experience as its starting point.
Theology does not shape his work--it comes into play after all the primary conclusions
have been drawn, and its appearance then most likely reflects the particular argument he
is opposing.

While the attention Herder devotes to subjectivity differentiates him from
practitioners of the historical Bible, it also makes his work useful for illuminating theirs.
Without specifically embracing this purpose, his account explicates the conditions of
possibility for an antiquarian scholarship. On the one hand, he allows for the substantial
differences between peoples that enable a people remote in time and/or space to be

\textsuperscript{46} Compare Michaelis’ reference to the Bible as “this remarkable fragment of Oriental

\textsuperscript{47} Sheehan observes a similar trajectory in S. R. Driver: “The Jews, [he] later wrote,
‘were a nation like other nations of antiquity. . . .they passed through similar phases of mental
growth and similar stages of culture’” (\textit{The Enlightenment Bible}, 252).

\textsuperscript{48} Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Treatise on the Origin of Language,” in \textit{Herder:
Philosophical Writings} (trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster; Cambridge: Cambridge University

\textsuperscript{49} Cf. Sheehan: “The Bible was the Word of God . . . only because it represented what
[Samuel] Coleridge famously called ‘the living \textit{educts} of the imagination.’ It was divine because
of its human qualities, in other words” (\textit{The Enlightenment Bible}, 247).
classed as alien and other—the historical Bible’s fundamental distancing move. On the other hand, he articulates a universal view of humanity and human development that ensures that the other can be known despite these differences. Moreover, the significance he assigns to a broad sphere of interest and activity as distinguishing humans from animals (and more developed nations from less developed ones) helps establish that those in a position to observe a wide variety of others are thereby qualified to characterize and categorize the whole of humanity. In other words, he explains why the explorers understand the explored better than they understand themselves. Herder thus outlines a basis for postulating distance and then overcoming it, and for the authority of the scholars who undertake that task. Last but not least, his description of the other as a tool for forging the self guarantees the relevance of antiquarian scholarship.

No less than the poetic Bible, then, the historical Bible was engaged in a work of social formation. Its reluctance to acknowledge this purpose corresponds to the particular identity it reinforced: the role of the rational interpreter with the ability to develop an interpretive framework comprehending all peoples was specifically and characteristically Western. Only a Western subjectivity could be equated with objectivity. Indeed, possession of a mind properly attuned to the nature of reality constitutes a defining point of contrast between Westerners and others, as discussed in relation to Mystère d’Adam’s Adam. Thus Edward Said remarks, “to speak of scholarly specialization as a geographical ‘field’ is, in the case of Orientalism, fairly revealing since no one is likely to

50 Cf. Sheehan (citing Robert S. Leventhal): “Antiquity was foreign, but never so much that its difference could not ‘ultimately be resolved in some commonality’” (The Enlightenment Bible, 213).
imagine a field symmetrical to it called Occidentality.”

It is from the West that one sees and classifies; the Occidental is the lens, not what comes under its purview.

As is implicit even in Herder, the West’s intellectual authority gained impetus from Europe’s imperial activities; scholarly observation was intimately bound up with political domination. Said explains, “the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient’s part.” Such a statement might be taken as a simple truism but for the fact that “the determining impingement on most knowledge produced in the contemporary West (and here I speak mainly about the United States) is that it be nonpolitical, that is, scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief.” Said devotes considerable attention to what he terms “the distinction between pure and political knowledge” that regards them as strictly unrelated spheres. He argues that while degrees of partiality exist, the belief that real knowledge stands wholly apart from social life is unwarranted and unproductive: “What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that ‘true’ knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not ‘true’ knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. “The general liberal consensus” fosters a strong resistance to what ought to be the rather obvious observation that the circumstances brought about by European imperial expansion impacted the way

53 This point is also reflected in Trible’s depiction of blackness as a departure from an unmarked identity rather than as one racial identity among many. In her account, whiteness is not seen—it is the vantage point from which others are seen.
54 Said, Orientalism, 7.
55 Said, Orientalism, 9.
56 Said, Orientalism, 10.
European scholars interacted with and thought about the world. Imperialism and colonialism gave Europeans the mobility to study other people and places so essential to antiquarian biblical scholarship. As Said details, the proliferation of European rule and the proliferation of knowledge about the world’s peoples worked together.

Said focuses his study on the Islamic Orient, construed as the intimate opposite of the Christian West. Although biblical studies enters into his discussion only peripherally, this distinction suggests the especially ambiguous status of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. At once Oriental and Christian/Western, it straddles this dichotomy. Sheehan depicts the Enlightenment Bible as means of coming to terms with this hybridity, which the West’s changing relationship to the Bible and evolving understanding of itself made increasingly apparent and problematic. In keeping with this understanding of the Bible’s peculiarity, he describes the work of historical biblical scholars as both typical of Orientalism and distinct within it. He observes, “suddenly the inner domains of Europe’s own virtual heartland were ripe for investigation. The childhood, not of an abstract, primitive, Rousseauian ‘man’, but of a very concrete European and Christian man, was to be laid bare in the investigation of the familiar terrain of Arabia and the Levant.”57 For the scholarly pioneers who undertook this investigation, the Bible was a text that simultaneously embodied the (collective) self and mediated the other. It thus reinforced the identity of “a very concrete European and Christian man” from two directions, providing both a point of identification and a point of contrast. In this way, the Bible’s two opposing qualities came together in the service of a new mode of identity, bringing the problem of a changing relationship to the Bible (highlighted by Sheehan) and a shifting conception of cosmos and community (highlighted by Anderson) full circle. This

new mode replaced theology as the basis of a communal identity stable in itself and secure in its possession of the Bible.

Trible’s depiction of the Bible’s relationship to contemporary readers stands well within the Enlightenment Bible tradition. As in Sheehan’s account of the Historical Bible, Trible presents the categories of her analysis as arising in the nature of things rather than in the outlook and experience of the one perceiving them. Although at one point she explains, “in this book my task is to tell sad stories as I hear them,” other descriptions of her method not only dispense with any reference to the role of her subjectivity in shaping her work, but also suggest that such a role is negligible, if it exists at all. Thus, Brueggemann hails Trible’s ability to facilitate an unmediated encounter between “the unhindered text and the listening community.” This immediacy between reader and text corresponds to Sheehan’s account of the Literary Bible. As is common in that mode of the Enlightenment Bible, she relies heavily on a particular vision of communality in engaging the text and characterizing its relevance to her readers. Assuming continuity in the categories of communal identity from the Bible to her own society, she uses those categories to relate contemporary readers and situations to the biblical text. In her interpretation, Hagar’s story helps Trible’s readers live out their identity, an identity that turns out to be defined as much by sharing Abraham and Sarah’s position in “the ruling class” as by sharing their “faith.” Trible admits to reading the Hagar story “in light of


59 Brueggemann, “Editor’s Foreward” to *Texts of Terror* by Trible, ix. It is important to recognize that Brueggemann’s remarks originate in a comparative assessment of Trible’s work, even if they subsequently move into a more absolute frame of reference. Trible’s rhetorical approach differs strikingly from source critical approaches (for example) in according a primary role to the received text rather than rearranging it to conform to the scholar’s perception of its earlier stages. In other words, Trible engages the text as text, not as evidence of some reality behind the text.
contemporary issues and images.”

Her resulting inability to transcend the dynamics of marginalization that she highlights speaks to the limitations of her Enlightenment Bible approach to relating text and reader.

7.3 The Cultural Bible: We Who Are Heirs of Sarah and Abraham by Flesh and Spirit

In describing the nexus of social formation and spiritual formation that structures modern understandings of the Bible, Sheehan’s account of the “cultural Bible” sheds further light on the “we” of Trible’s address quoted in this section’s title. The notion of culture drew together the Enlightenment Bible’s multiple manifestations (philological, pedagogical, poetic/literary, and historical). Sheehan traces this notion to Herder “who, more than anyone in his time, defined what . . . future generations would call ‘culture’” -- the “‘entire living picture of the ways of life, customs, needs’ of a nation.” From its inception, culture (Bildung) was conceptualized as the property of nations and articulated in relation to the Bible. Herder conceived culture at the intersection of language, religion, and nationhood. This emerging perspective implied that theology was best understood as an element of religion, inseparable from a nation--a people and its language. As Sheehan explains (with reference to Benjamin Jowett), “the Bible and its religions were products of the ‘mind of a nation’ . . . and therefore ‘prior to the thoughts of individuals; no one is responsible for them.’” Rather than conveying a universal

---

60 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 27.
64 This gloss is not intended to define “nation,” but rather to flesh out the concept and draw attention to certain of its component parts.
history comprehending all of reality, the Bible was a repository of an ancient culture made the repository of a modern culture through a monumental act of translation (the Luther or King James Bible). Sheehan argues that the Enlightenment Bible “transform[ed] [the Luther Bible]. . . from a book about theology to one embedded in cultural heritage.”

The conceptualization of the Bible as essentially cultural facilitated “the invention of a cultural religion, a religion arranged under the heading of culture.” The cultural Bible also precipitated an increasing dissociation of Christianity from the biblical texts. Although the Bible continued to enjoy divine authority, a distinction was made between biblical theology and dogmatic theology, “spawned from the sense that the heterogeneous (and historically determined) theologies of the biblical authors had to be distinguished from prescriptive Christian dogma.” Together with the view of religion as a cultural phenomenon, this development contributed to a Christianity conceived as only hinted at in the biblical texts, or even independent of them. At the same time, many heralded Christianity’s relationship to social institutions, furthering its association with national or Western culture. All this meant that people looked at the Bible as fitting into a story about what it means to be human (or German or Western or Christian) rather than telling a story about what it means to be human. The role of the biblical texts was to reinforce identity, not reconstruct it.

The rubric of culture formalized nationalism’s relationship to religion, allowing national or ethnic designations and theological designations to work together in defining

---

66 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 225.
67 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 228.
the community. The Bible thus retained its centrality to the community, but functioned in a new capacity as both it and the community were reconceptualized. Sheehan argues that Bible translation did not simply reflect modern nationalism, but rather served to undergird it. Correspondingly, Christian theology’s social aspiration was articulated in terms of the new vision of culture. “Culture” went beyond subordinating the theological to the national; it reconceived the theological as equivalent to the national.70

Accordingly, as Christianity became increasingly associated with national and/or Western culture, it was able to dispense with theology without significantly compromising its integrity. Beyond the Bible, beyond theology, culture had moral efficacy. Culture thus inherited the normative force of Christianity. Scholarship’s contention that the Bible should be treated as any other book found its corollary in the notion that any other book, by virtue of its status as cultural text, could function as scripture.71 The Bible’s immersion in the rubric of culture thus meant that social formation was spiritual formation; the two processes were inseparable.72

At the same time that “culture” fulfilled the ambition of those with avowedly religious motives to recapitulate their community and its relationship to the Bible, it also facilitated the transformation of biblical scholarship. Sheehan describes the cooperation of scholarly ambition and religious yearnings enshrined in the idea of culture:

Not only was the concept itself invented in the language of religious analysis, but it also consistently described a sacralized space of communal heritage. The forging of a cultural Bible was thus one key move in the broader development of

70 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 233.
“culture” per se. The cultural Bible allowed scholars to imagine an unbroken and universal spiritual heritage, one unaffected by particular religious commitments, unaffected by belief or unbelief. It enabled the culture-religion axis to articulate freely. And it allowed religion itself to become a cultural phenomenon par excellence.73

“Culture” provided biblical scholars with an analytical framework to characterize the biblical texts and make sense of them across the antiquarian divide, establishing an analogy between the modern and the ancient world that carried all the immediacy of such earlier models as prophecy. “Culture” also enabled biblical scholarship to reject theology and thereby claim objectivity, while still commanding a significance endowed with the sacred and thereby retain the special relevance adhering to scriptural interpretation.

Like Anderson, Sheehan challenges the tendency to invoke the secular and the Christian as strictly opposing categories, identifying the way in which a merger between them has been constitutive of modernity. That Trible addresses her reading of the Hagar story to a community identified theologically but imagined as a race demonstrates the extent to which the distinction between the two ways of conceptualizing the communal self has eroded.

7.4 Eurocentrism and the Individual Scholar

Launching an effective response to Eurocentrism in biblical studies requires a nuanced appreciation not only of its ideological makeup, but also of its impact on scholarly work. Said’s study of Orientalism offers biblical scholars considerable insight on this score, although the book has been largely misunderstood by them. Said explains that his task in analyzing Orientalism is not to draw attention to a particular set of racist

stereotypes and call for their abandonment, but rather to highlight the ways in which a set of assumptions have defined the contours of scholarship and set parameters constraining its evolution.

This point can be illustrated with an example from a work discussed here. As mentioned above, Herder articulates the now familiar contrast between a “developed” and a “developing” world. Although what it means to be “developed” seems to shift (Herder refers to cultural development while contemporary usage focuses on technology), the certainty that the West has it and that others don’t remains unchanged. For this reason, Said suggests that the fact of the contrast is more important than the specific content of the contrast. He maintains, “Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine.”

Said further maintains, “we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do... is at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe.” As Sheehan explains, biblical studies performs a similar function. Despite its insistence on an antiquarian and/or textualist rigor, it continues to prioritize what Said refers to as schematic incorporation on the European theatrical stage over accuracy in describing the text. Thus, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman make a stunning departure from their antiquarian precision to describe biblical

74 Said, *Orientalism*, 42.
books as “the literature of the Western world,” even as they indicate that the biblical authors lived in the “ancient Near East” and that the people who currently live there are not Western.

In tracing the operations of Orientalism, Said does not single out bad people for condemnation, although he does take more of an interest in individual thinkers than does his mentor Michel Foucault. Instead, he focuses on understanding the larger dynamics revealed in their work. For example, he explains, “that Balfour and Cromer. . . could strip humanity down to such ruthless cultural and racial essences was not at all an indication of their particular viciousness. Rather it was an indication of how streamlined a general doctrine had become by the time they put it to use—how streamlined and effective.”

Said argues that scholars did not perpetuate Orientalist assumptions because they were personally racist (although they may well have been). On the contrary, they did so because they were scholars and those assumptions had achieved such authoritative status in scholarly discourse that they ensured scholars looking at certain places would see “the Orient” and understand that Orient in opposition to the West.

Biblical studies has yet to develop such an awareness that ideology runs deeper than, and sometimes even contrary to, the personal feelings of individual scholars. Accordingly, discussions of scholarly subjectivity often take the form of exposés, while responses to them focus on the character of the scholar in question, asserting that he was

---


77 E.g., Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 37.

78 This is not to argue that the people who produced the Bible are the same people living there now (or that they’re not). It is only to observe that Finkelstein and Silberman decisively classify the area and its inhabitants as outside the West, thereby problematizing their reference to literature arising there as “Western.”

a nice guy, a smart guy, had nothing against “those people,” etc. Many view ideological impurity as a kind of contagion, deeming it best to shun those scholars found to be infected with it. By doing so, they misconstrue the nature of the problem and manage to both overreact and underreact to it. They overreact by assuming that finding evidence of a problematic ideology means that a scholar and his or her output should be entirely cut off—that they have nothing to contribute but disease. However, they also underreact by assuming that quarantining the tainted ones guarantees the health of the rest of the discipline. While it is good that racism, sexism, etc. have largely come to be perceived in negative terms, the stigmatization of these biases has not helped the discipline move beyond them. In order to come to terms with the more troubling aspects of its history, biblical studies needs to discard the notion that bad people produce bad scholarship and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the ways ideological commitments structure the discipline and its output.

In describing the Enlightenment Bible, Sheehan underscores his emphasis on methodologies and their consequences rather than the proclivities of individual scholars: “Rather than align dispositions, this chapter aligns intellectual and more particularly scholarly practices. Rather than looking just at what Pietists thought about religion, in other words, I want to look at what they did with the documents that for millennia have given Christianity its solid textual core.” This perspective has considerable advantages for engaging a topic as highly charged as communal identity and its role in shaping

80 E.g., Jonathan Skinner, “Orientalists and Orientalisms: Robertson Smith and Edward W. Said” in William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment. (ed. William Johnstone, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 189; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 376-382. I am using gendered language here because the examples that immediately come to mind all involve male scholars (e.g., Wellhausen, Albright, Robertson Smith), a circumstance that is not surprising given that Hebrew Bible has been an overwhelmingly male discipline.

81 Sheehan, The Enlightenment Bible, 59.
scholarship. Not only does it recognize that the consequences of an approach or argument prove no less significant for being unintended, but it also diffuses the tension arising from the assumption that an ideological analysis of scholarship inevitably implies an *ad hominem* attack on the scholar. As Trible’s discussion of Hagar demonstrates, holding assumptions or advancing arguments that marginalize a group of people does not necessarily correlate to feeling hostility toward them. While Trible develops her theological reading of Genesis along racially exclusive lines, she manifests obvious sympathy for “the black woman” who inspires her to engage Hagar’s story. Troublesome attitudes in scholarship cannot simply be shed like a snakeskin when the discipline decides to move on. Expressions of such attitudes should not be taken as isolated occurrences unrelated to the real content of scholarly work. They play a role in framing larger debates within the discipline, influencing even those who think they have rejected them. Sheehan demonstrates that the very tools of scholarship bequeath an ideological legacy that must be actively engaged if it is not to be passively transmitted.

The dynamics identified by Sheehan and Said make it imperative for biblical scholars to recognize that contextualizing the text does not begin and end with the ancient world. The contemporary context of the text’s reception merits far more attention than it has received. It is not enough to identify the tropes, generic conventions, and historical situations that shape the biblical texts without considering the circumstances that shape the way in which scholars perceive both antiquity and the text. Cultivating an awareness of one’s social location is a start, but identifying the groups to which one belongs does not raise the larger and equally important question of how one conceptualizes group membership and its significance. It is easy to assume that one has transcended racism because one has a positive opinion of “those people.” However, as this study has emphasized, some of the very moves by which one distinguishes “us” from “them”
already encode assumptions about how communal identity works that Genesis does not bear out.

In the family storytelling approach, this study has found a way to hold together the constitution of the reading community and the interpretation of the biblical text. Drawing attention to the text’s reception, it has considered alternative ways of conceptualizing the relationship between the Bible and those who call it their own. Explicitly engaging this issue has enabled this study to be intentional about its own approach, receiving the insights of prior scholarship while recognizing in Genesis a challenge to modern assumptions about communality that such scholarship has generally occluded.

The present study has sought to do more than read from the Bible the perspective on communal identity that moderns read into it. Hearing Genesis speak to “the problems of life that confront us today” in a way that goes beyond ventriloquism requires critical engagement of the appropriation of the biblical texts and a willingness to accept tension between them and the social mores of the “Western” reader. The diminution of family in Genesis reflects more than the collateral damage that inevitably occurs when one interpretive goal displaces others. It reflects the conflict between the aims of the Enlightenment Bible and a view of communality in Genesis that flies in the face of those aims. Because those objectives played a formative role in the constitution of academic biblical studies, such a conflict does not require a conscious intention on the part of any individual interpreter, although such conscious intentions are much in evidence.

Sheehan’s analysis demonstrates why the process of reconceiving biblical interpretation and rereading Genesis has more relevance than just its potential to yield a fresh perspective not governed by the prevailing assumptions about communal identity. Such an endeavor renegotiates the path along which those assumptions developed,
undermining the considerable authority that they enjoy by demonstrating that they are not self-evident and universal. For those who wish to effect a change in the structure of intercommunal relations, engaging the West thus, on its own terms, not only provides an incentive to dialogue, but also portends a more thoroughgoing transformation in that it focuses dissent on the very foundations of the status quo rather than just its manifestations.

For those who struggle to reconcile their attraction to Christianity with their horror at its historic relationship to the colonization of their homelands, recognizing the process that made the Bible into the English book that they received undermines the West’s claim to sole mediation of the Bible of traditional Christianity. Indeed, such a recognition implies that Christian biblical interpretation not closely aligned with Western mores should not be considered simply a form of resistance from the margins, but rather a kind of reclamation of the center.

Decolonizing the Bible also recovers a powerful and authoritative subversive voice. This is not to assert that, read in the appropriate way, the Bible is in every place simply and straightforwardly what (post)moderns might call liberative. Rather, it points to the way in which, by pushing its reading community to think in ways that do not come naturally, it can inspire a process of reimagination that extends to the very terms in which such concerns are conceived.

________________________________________

8. Postscript

Genesis is central to both hegemonic and counterhegemonic conceptions of communal identity. Read one way, the book undergirds contemporary assumptions about the nature of communality and the categories through which it is constructed. Read another way, however, it undermines them. This project has considered these two readings of Genesis, their asymmetrical approaches to the book, and the intersection between them.

The first reading takes the biblical text as closely aligned with the social mores of certain of its readers and has therefore been designated as Eurocentric. This study has narrated the way in which the Eurocentric approach to Genesis has sought, through its appropriation of the book, to resolve a crisis of communal identity. Making use of Benedict Anderson’s account of the relationship between the imagined community of the nation and religiously imagined communities, as well as Jonathan Sheehan’s account of the Enlightenment Bible, it has argued that the Bible has been instrumental in the construction of the idea of the West as a post-Christian Christendom. Certain ways of reading the Bible arose to help the West articulate its sense of itself and its others. Accordingly, taking up the topic of communal identity in Genesis has allowed this project to try to make apparent the often-unacknowledged ways in which concerns about communal identity shape the discipline of biblical studies and its engagement of the text. Phyllis Trible’s reading of the Hagar and Sarah story helps illustrate the way in which the
Enlightenment Bible blends theological and racial conceptualizations of the community gathered around the biblical text.

The family storytelling approach to biblical interpretation developed here has allowed this study to hold together the constitution of the reading community and the interpretation of the biblical text. In a Eurocentric reading of Genesis, the constitution of the reading community governs engagement of the biblical text. Conversely, in the YHWH-centric reading advocated here, the biblical text governs the constitution of the reading community. This study has reopened the question of what it means to be an “us” rather than leaving participation in an “us” as an (often unacknowledged) *a priori* condition of all interpretation. In doing so it has not denied the existence or the significance of such preexisting commitments, but rather refused to regard those commitments as fixed and final.

The YHWH-centric reading begins with several observations. As noted in the Introduction, Genesis depicts Israel as, so to speak, arriving late to its own story. The book repeatedly employs a gesture of deferral. Creation postpones a focus on Israel, coming before any form of election. The centrality of family in Genesis puts off a focus on “nations,” although they remain within view. The recurrence of geographical displacement delays the existence of a settled, stable community. Together, creation, family, and displacement present identity as something contingent and in progress. If, as Steven Grosby argues, “nationality” consists especially of “the belief in the existence of a designated trans-local territory which ‘belongs to’ a specific trans-tribal/clan/city-
kingdom people,”¹ then Genesis anticipates but systematically withholds nationality from Israel. The book concludes with Israel not yet a people, not yet in its place.

In addition, Erich Auerbach describes the Bible’s universal scope and particular focus on Israel as challenging Gentile readers, pressing them to situate their histories within its all-encompassing structure. Correspondingly, Jon Levenson describes the shape of Genesis as challenging Israel. He attaches special importance to the fact that the promise to Abra(ha)m predated an Israelite people, so that “Israel has no profane history, only a sacred history.”²

This perspective depends on taking the first eleven chapters of Genesis as the starting point of the book and of Israel’s story. Far from marking a radical new beginning wholly apart from the previous material, the call to Abram in Gen 12 derives much of its meaning from the narrative that precedes it. As reflected in the frequent use of kinship terminology and the genealogical format, that narrative emphasizes family as a means of conveying a vision of cosmic relatedness. For the modern reader accustomed to thinking of family in narrow terms, Genesis explodes the boundaries that define one’s own as one’s closest biological affines, extending the rubric of family even to the universe itself.

More is at stake in Genesis than the matter of how Abram will get his long awaited son; the patriarch’s role in the divine plan goes beyond his reproductive capabilities. From the word “go” (12:1), he is not only the ancestor of the people who will realize God’s plan to bless the nations, but also the firstfruit of the new kind of

community that God has called into being. This study has highlighted the biblical concept of “fruitfulness” as a hallmark of human flourishing. As depicted in Genesis, being fruitful is not a predicate of the individual as such, but rather a function of life in relationship with those who are, in a significant sense, different. Accordingly, the promise of Gen 12:1-3 begins to be realized (or not) in (for example) the relationship between Abram, Sarai, and Hagar, not when Sarah finally bears Isaac. From this perspective, Abram’s relationship with Hagar is not just a means to an end. It is, in important ways, an end in itself. One might just as well describe God’s dealings with Abram as subordinate to God’s dealings with Hagar as the other way around. In its content and in its structure, Genesis emphasizes the centrality of fruitful relationships between family members, in all the breadth with which the book develops the idea of kinship.

This study has sought to move beyond a black-and-white view of Genesis that reads the book in terms of a strict dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. It has done so by highlighting the way in which expressions such as “the promise” and “the covenant” obscure the existence of multiple promises and covenants in Genesis. The book does not depict a single mode of relationship to God according to which inclusion and exclusion may be measured. Moreover, the implication of all living creatures in the Noachic covenant (9:12) precludes anyone from occupying the position of outsider. Every living being stands in covenant relationship to God.

Interpreters grouping the characters of Genesis into the two categories of insider and outsider generally do so on the basis of membership in (proto-)Israel. While the layer
of the people Israel is obviously of great import, it is not the exclusive focus of Genesis. Much of the book involves situating Israel in relation to the other spheres of God’s activity. As Kaminsky explains, membership in Israel does not correlate to being “saved” rather than “damned.”

It does not distinguish the recipients of God’s redemptive action and love from legions of hapless outsiders. Rather it serves as one of many concentric circles describing the relationship between God and various humans, and it is not the innermost among them. These circles should not be understood as reflecting a kind of caste system. Genesis precludes such a hierarchical view by suggesting that the center exists for the margin as much as, or more than, the other way around (Gen 12:1-3).

Genesis also runs counter to modern supremacist notions by beginning to establish a relationship between election and dispossession that is developed further in other biblical and post-biblical traditions. Abram’s entering into a special relationship with God requires him to forsake his father’s household and his homeland and the social definition that they supply.

This study’s challenge to the colonization of the Bible is both methodological and exegetical. From an exegetical standpoint, it has challenged Eurocentrism by finding in Genesis a vision of communality that, in emphasizing the importance of living out the relatedness of all humans to one another and to God, holds the potential for more fruitful relationships between communities. From a methodological standpoint, the reading of Genesis offered here incorporates features of the text that have been neglected by colonizing readings. It also avoids the difficulties and internal inconsistencies.

---

3 E.g., *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 135.
encountered by readers from Auerbach to Trible, who ultimately find themselves unable
to do justice to their own observations and/or stated goals. Drawing attention to the text’s
reception and the way in which Eurocentric approaches displace Jews and marginalize
(the West’s) others, this project has considered alternative ways of conceptualizing the
relationship between the Bible and those who call it their own.
Bibliography


Brueggemann, Walter. Editors Foreward to *Texts of Terror* by Phyllis Trible.


Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980.


Said, Edward W. Introduction to Auerbach, Mimesis.


Biography