ALTERNATION OF DIVINE NAMES AS A LITERARY DEVICE IN GENESIS AND EXODUS

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It is a well-kept secret that many scholars who study certain texts do not reserve much time or energy just to read those texts in their entirety, as the occasional reader might do, thus behaving more or less like the well-known figure of the bibliophile who collects a wonderful library, but reads only a small portion of his valued treasures. I am not innocent of this sin myself, and every year I am grateful that there are students waiting to read the classical episodes of the Hebrew Bible, otherwise my experience with those texts would probably go stale within a few years. There is, apart from the immediate gratification derived from it, an enormous bonus connected with such activities, as sometimes interesting insights can be gained from a cursory reading of such texts rather than from trudging along the well-trodden paths of scholarship.

Today we shall see that through a close reading of a number of texts, while deliberately abstaining from our scholarly or doctrinal luggage we can combine pieces of knowledge about the Biblical text which most of us possess, whether through study or through Bible-reading, into the recognition of a formal literary pattern which turns out to be highly relevant to our way of understanding nature and origin of the historical work at the beginning of the Bible, the originally nine books from Genesis through 2 Kings which are now usually designated with David Noel Freedman's term "Primary History".

As we do not have enough time to read through Genesis and the beginning of Exodus in this half-hour, I shall take you by the hand in a simulated reading process, "virtual reading" if you would like to give it a name, but you can repeat it in real time at home if you wish to.

We start at Genesis 1 and read through this wonderfully poetic chapter about the seven days of creation, noting as so many before us have done that the God of Israel is not designated by means of his name Y-H-W-H, traditionally pronounced Yahweh by scholars, though it is very doubtful whether this is the original pronunciation, but with the generic designation Elohim, "God". At the beginning of Genesis 2 there is a transition, rather difficult to assess by itself, to a much shorter account of creation, in fact little more than a story about the creation of mankind, in which God is said to have taken a piece of clay from the earth and imbued it with life through his own breath. This second version, which does use the divine name Yahweh in combination with Elohim, seamlessly continues in the episode of the first man Adam and his wife Eve, who is taken from Adam's body. There are considerable differences between the two accounts of the creation of mankind. In Genesis 1 God creates both man and woman in one sovereign act of creation, in chapter 2 he is intimately engaged in the creation of man alone, in the first episode man is created after all other things, in the second

one he appears to be created first of all. But it is certainly not impossible to reconcile them, and rivers of ink have flown onto paper to support a multitude of positions with regard to this enigmatic juxtaposition at the very beginning of the Bible.

What is important for us as close readers, however, is not the question whether these two versions can with some effort be reconciled or whether there is a considerable amount of friction between them: both are evidently the case. Yes, they can be reconciled and, yes, there is a high degree of friction between them. What is important is that in this vital place, at the very beginning of the Bible, we are presented with two alternatives in such an ambiguous way, that we cannot decide with certainty whether the first, the second, or both are to be chosen. And we are informed by the text that these two alternatives are connected in some way with the use of two designations for the divinity. Somewhat to our surprise, this distinction between the two designations Yahweh and Elohim is not limited to our two chapters. They can and have been used to distinguish two different voices in the text of Genesis, especially because we have a number of cases where a comparable subject is treated twice, or a story appears to be duplicated, with each version having its own designation of God, either Yahweh or Elohim, usually one to the exclusion of the other. The interesting thing about these duplications is, that each one of them fits in its present context very well, while they look so much like each other that one cannot imagine them to be entirely independent. Such cases were and are the starting-points of various critical approaches to the book of Genesis and to the Pentateuch and the Primary History, in which the present situation of the text is ascribed to a redaction of previously independent sources and traditions.

I will remind you of just one example, though you all know of many more. In Genesis 16 and 21 we find two different stories about the Egyptian slave Hagar, given by Sarai to her husband Abram as concubine because Sarai herself for many years does not bear children, going away from Abraham, which look remarkably alike. Again, the stories are characterized through the use of different divine names, Yahweh in 16 and Elohim in 21. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we as readers recognize these voices and realize that at the same time they tell a part of the linear biography of Abram and disagree about the place of the episode of the flight of Hagar within this biography: according to one voice she fled because of the treatment her mistress meted out to her (Genesis 16), while she was pregnant with Ishmael, according to the other one she was chased away together with her son (chapter 21).

Both stories are fully functional on the place where they are now. The only problem is that they look so much like each other. If it had not been for numerous details which they have in common, such as the role of the angel who shows Hagar a well, there would have been nothing remarkable about the presence of these two stories.

As noted above, historical criticism in its many forms would seek the background of this phenomenon in a historical development underlying the text as we have it now, with a redactor putting various versions of one story together on different spots in the story of Abraham. But for us as readers of the present text this duplication has a completely different function. When we read the second version we naturally tend to compare them precisely because of the similarities and see that they employ different divine names and we tend to assign them to different voices: one voice tells us in our left ear that "so-and-so it happened when Hagar was pregnant", the other one whispers in our right ear "no, it did not happen then, but after Ishmael was born". And again we are left puzzled by the text. If both are true, we cannot explain the similarity of the stories, and in most cases of such duplication we cannot leave one of them out because that would tear up the narrative texture of the account of Abraham's life.

This is what we experience when we read this text. What would be against the assumption that this is what was intended by the text or rather by its author from the start? One can think of many reasons for an author to resort to this kind of composition, many of which will start from the evident feeling of uncertainty which is brought about by this procedure, but that is not really what matters. The question is whether we really need to exclude the option of the present text as a unitary literary composition. We do not baulk at the assumption of one single piece of music in which we hear two, three or more voices, why would we need to do that when we are dealing with literature? When we apply Ockham's razor to this issue, in my view this literary approach will win hands down from all historical theories, which are generally recognized as being very complex and which are generally conceded never to give a completely unambiguous and satisfactory explanation of what we see in the text.

We are reminded of our lack of power *vis-à-vis* the narrator when he tells us in Exodus 3 and 6 that the name Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs and was only revealed to Moses, which is in stark contrast with what we have seen in the course of our virtual reading of Genesis. While we are still recovering from this blow, we hear God himself confirming the first account of creation in the text of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:11, "for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it", which in a way draws the carpet from underneath our feet, as the entire early history of mankind via Abraham, Noach and Adam issues from the second account of creation via various genealogies.

We are like wax in the hands of the capable Israelite narrator, who sends his readers on errands and puts them to work by means of the text itself. Every time we see unusual similarities between two texts we are forced to compare them, not rarely coming to the conclusion that we are hearing different voices. In any case, we now start to perceive a fascinating literary pattern behind a seemingly haphazard collocation of various pieces of information.

Once we arrive at this point, there is a natural tendency among those who, like myself, were reared in a scholarly tradition of explaining these phenomena from the history, or rather the prehistory of the text as we now have it, to say something like: "But there are so many other cases of discontinuity, duplication and ambiguity in the narrative portions of the Primary History, which are all explained by a vast majority of scholars from historical developments in the text. Surely we should take the instances of variation in divine names in Genesis and Exodus together with those, instead of engaging in this kind of close reading and assuming the hypothesis of such a highly sophisticated literary strategy of letting two voices sound alternating in harmony and in disagreement? You are not really saying that *all* those cases, are you...?" Yes, that is exactly what I will be saying in the next few minutes. I will only bracket out the repetitions in Deuteronomy of material from Exodus, Numbers and Leviticus and some related phenomena, but otherwise nearly all the famous cases of duplication, contradiction and discontinuity fit in a pattern of two voices sounding throughout the episodes which together form the first eight books of the Primary History, from the Creation until the beginning of the reign of Solomon. Even outright contradiction has its natural place within these eight episodes, so that we finally realize why the chronological placement of Genesis 38, the story of Judah and Tamar, within the life of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 is so problematic, why Moses' grandson Jonathan inexplicably figures at the end of the book of Judges, and why at the end of 2 Samuel the killing of Goliath is ascribed not to David, but to an otherwise unknown Elhanan. For the details, see my forthcoming book *Gods Election and Rejection. The Literary Strategy of the Historical Books at the Beginning of the Bible*.

This may be the right moment to point out again that in this survey we are not choosing one particular literary model to explain the text, not even the basic option of a synchronic approach: we are just describing what happens to us when we read the text, and attempting to see some regularity behind what we see and hear.

It has often been noted that the Primary History, at least its first eight books, the part before the history of the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, is composed of a number of biographies of the main persons. Though their main persons often live on and figure in the next biography also, the beginning of these biographies always marks a major sub-division of the text. On Figure 1 you see these eight biographies: humankind in general, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Saul and David. All the other persons are so to say encapsulated in one of these biographies. The only point of discussion is whether we can let Moses' Life run on until the mention of his grandson and the completion of the Conquest of the land of Canaan at the end of Judges, especially since there is one full-fledged biography in it, namely of Samson in Judges 13-16 (as dr. Ron Pirson of Tilburg University kindly reminded me); but unlike the other persons mentioned here, Samson does not play a substantial role in the history of Israel

as a whole. There are important differences between these biographies, in particular Jack Sasson has written some interesting articles about this variety, but here we shall deal with an important feature connecting them.

What these biographies have in common in the literary field is something which you all know, but which becomes of prime importance only once we see its global extension throughout these cases. In each of them, the first episode in which the main person appears is presented in two alternative forms, which are related through the use of common terminology or structure, and which do not refer to each other except in a highly ambiguous way. The characteristic features of each of these episodes serve to distinguish two voices in the remainder of this person's biography. The first alternative is closely connected with the preceding episode, the second one goes with what follows, but throughout each biography we keep hearing the two voices, sometimes because we see one or two of the distinguishing features in duplicate episodes, sometimes because they continue one of the two alternatives; at times the distinctive traits of earlier biographies continue to be used, as in the case of the divine names from the beginning of Genesis until the middle of Exodus. Thus, to mention only two examples, one of the two voices in the Life of Saul can be recognized because it mentions conflicts with the Philistines in which the Israelites field very small numbers and have to fight hard not to be wiped out entirely, the other voice records the presence of enormous armies for war with and victory over other nations, to the exclusion of the Philistines. The first voice in the Life of Jacob continues his status as a fugitive from his own brother Esau, who wanted to kill him because he cheated him out of his father's blessing, the second one as that of the relative who travelled to his family in Haran in order to marry his niece. In both cases, we see the same ambiguous situation with regard to the two options at the beginning of the biography: it is deliberately worded in such a way that in spite of frictions between them and in spite of the fact that they do not refer to each other, both options are kept open. What is also important, though difficult to explain from our own literary standards, is that one of the two options for the introduction, usually the second alternative, is flatly denied near the end of the biography of the main person.

In other words: the literary pattern which we tentatively identified in Genesis and Exodus turns out to be part of an encompassing literary strategy of the Primary History. Theologically, this strategy may serve to express the inscrutability of God's choice for this or that person to perform a role in the history of the people of Israel: we as readers see that he has been chosen, but we are left to ponder how exactly it happened.

As for the historicity of these books, we now perceive that on the literary level they are not meant to be history-writing in the strict sense, but are to be read as relatively free compositions about the great ancestors, as indicated by the systematic occurrence of frictions and contradictions in them. One of the brilliant features of this historical work, however, is that it can be read on several levels.

In spite of its nature as a complex and intricate literary composition, at the same time it can also be read as linear history in the strict sense, that is if one is willing to reconcile or explain away these embarassing problems: the solution of orthodox Jews and Christians ever since antiquity. Alternatively, if one chooses to accentuate the discontinuities, frictions and contradictions, one can break it up along the border of the voices represented in it, which is the critical solution adhered to in some form by most scholars.

The practical purpose of this literary strategy would seem to be threefold. Firstly, its general application stresses the unity of the work, thus balancing the apparently intentional discontinuities in the work, more or less in the same way as is achieved by its emulation of the *Histories* of Herodotus as I explained in my 2002 book on the subject (there is also an interesting literary connection between the positions of Herodotus' biographies and those in the Primary History, which is discussed at length in my forthcoming book, see for the time being Figure 2). Secondly, on a lower level it increases the discontinuity of the work, reinforcing its character as what we could call a *linear composed dossier*, a collection of supposedly independent documents which together form a coherent, unitary and linear history, thirdly and finally the two voice-character helps to make the Primary History into one of the most intriguing, enigmatic and beautiful works known to mankind.

Literature

I did not add any notes to my paper, which was presented (with some omissions for reasons of time) in almost the same form in which it is found above, but in this list I give some references to my own and others' works which provide detailed information about some issues which are treated briefly and sometimes on a rather light note in this paper.

C. Houtman, *Der Pentateuch: Die Geschichte seiner Erforschung neben einer Auswertung* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994).

Aulikki Nahkola, *Double Narratives in the Old Testament: The Foundations of Method in Biblical Criticism* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001).

Jack M. Sasson, "The Biographic Mode in Hebrew Historiography", in: W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer (eds.), *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G.W. Ahlström* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 31; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 305-312.

Jan-Wim Wesselius, "Towards a New History of Israel", *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* [www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS or www.purl.org/jhs] 3 (2000-2001), article 2; PDF version p. 1-21.

Id., "Collapsing the Narrative Bridge", in: J. W. Dyk *et al.* (eds.), *Unless Some One Guide Me. Festschrift for Karel A. Deurloo* (Maastricht: Shaker, 2001) 247-255.

Id., *The Origin of the History of Israel: Herodotus' Histories as Blueprint for the First Books of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

Id., *Gods Election and Rejection. The Literary Strategy of the Historical Books at the Beginning of the Bible* [to appear].
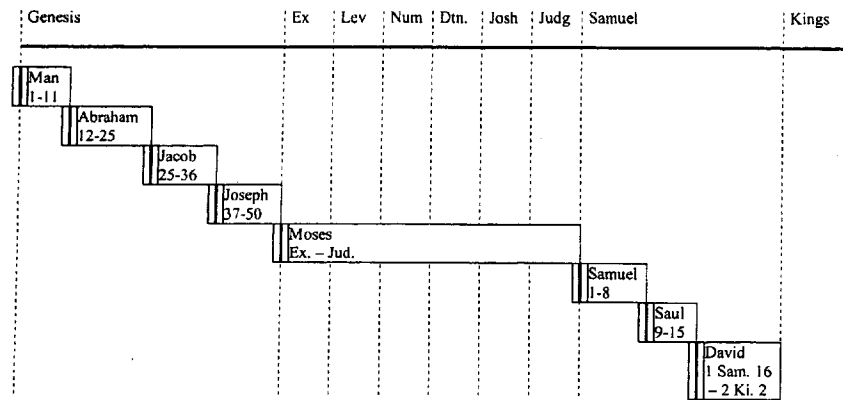
Figure 1. The biographies which together form the first eight books of the Primary History. The triple vertical lines indicate the presence of two alternative versions of the introduction of the main persons. Note that narrative lines from earlier biographies not rarely run on into the newer ones. See the text for the reason to let Moses' biography run on to the end of Judges.
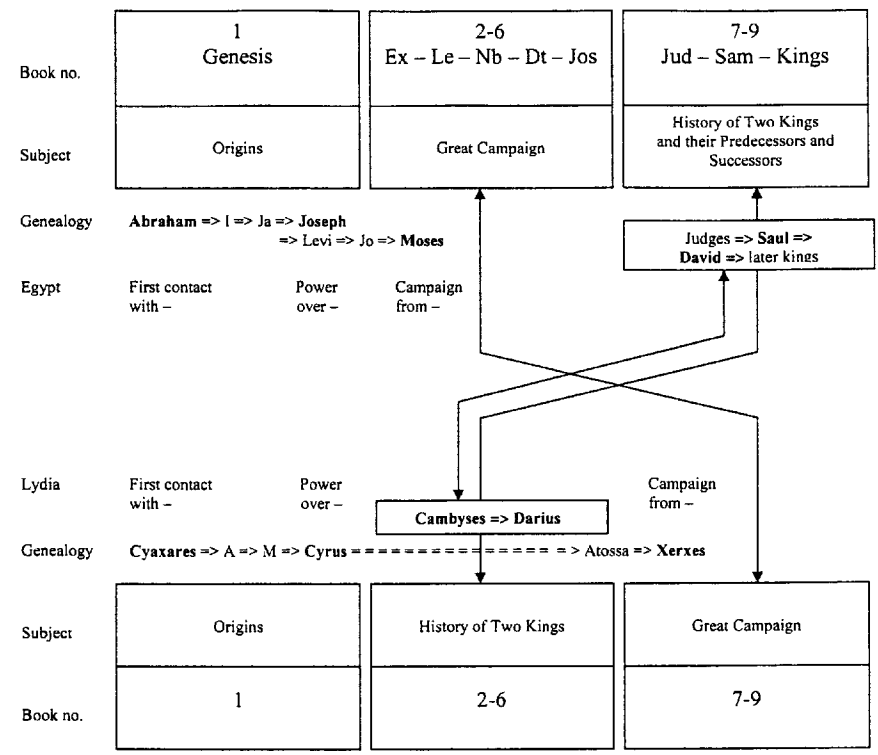
Abbreviated names: I = Isaac; Ja = Jacob; Jo = Jochebed; A = Astyages; M = Mandane.

Figure 2. Relation between genealogy, contact with the starting point of the Great Campaign, the parts of the *Histories* and the Primary History and their subjects. **Bold**: corresponding biographies in the two works, with numerous allusions. Names in box: two pairs of kings (Saul and David vs. Cambyses and Darius) who are outside of the main genealogy (though closely related in the *Histories*), and the descriptions of whose lives also exhibit several striking allusions. In these boxes, unlike the other places, the arrows indicate succession rather than a family relation. Note that of the eight biographies in books 1-8 of the Primary History, five are literary reflections of biographies of Persian kings in the *Histories* (Abraham, Joseph, Saul, David and Moses versus Cyaxares, Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius and Xerxes, respectively).

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