BIBLICAL LITERATURE AS POLITICS: THE CASE OF GENESIS *

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The noted Israeli author, Avigdor Dagan, begins his novel The Court Jesters as follows: “Believe me, I really don’t want to talk about myself. But how can you follow my story if you don’t know anything about the narrator?”

And so it is with the author of the book of Genesis. One cannot follow his story without knowing something about him either. One of the goals of this essay, then, though not the sole goal, is to reveal the identity of the author of the book of Genesis. No, I do not want to appear as a latter-day Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, but, like a good detective, if we work our way through the clues, we can zero in on the person who has left us the most remarkable book of Genesis. And in the process, moreover, we shall see the phenomenon of literature as politics at work.

* The text that follows is essentially the oral presentation delivered at the conference “Literature as Politics in the Bible and the Ancient Near East,” held at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., on September 20, 1992. Very little of the oral version has been changed, and I recognize that much of the text retains its oral quality. Footnotes have been added, but references have been kept to a minimum. I take this opportunity to thank the co-sponsors of the conference, all four of which are arms of Cornell University: the Program of Jewish Studies (directed by David I. Owen), the Department of Near Eastern Studies (then chaired by Ross Brann), the Religious Studies Program (then directed by Barry Adams), and the Society for the Humanities (then directed by Jonathan Culler).

What do I mean that I am going to reveal the identity of the author of the book of Genesis? Am I going to present his name? No. Am I going to describe what he looked like? No again. For as Meir Sternberg has stressed, the author of Genesis, like all the biblical authors (with the exception of the prophets), is nameless and faceless.\(^2\) That, of course, is part of the mystery. Nonetheless, we will have much to say about our individual, revealing much about him, except for his name and face.\(^3\)

I begin with a few ground rules. First, ever conscious of the problem of the gender of our author, I apologize for assuming this person to be a man. Already I have used the words "he," "him," and "his" to refer to the author. I have no real reason to assume our storyteller is a man, but I simply refuse to clutter this essay with the cumbersome terms "he/she," "him/her," and "his/her." Furthermore, although the biblical authors generally are nameless, and thus gender-less as well, the point remains that the ancient authors generally are men. This holds for the biblical prophets whom we know by name, the New Testament writers, the Greek poets, and the occasional Babylonian and Egyptian authors whom we know by name.\(^4\) So, with due apologies to anyone who may be offended by my assumption (and to devotees of Harold Bloom\(^5\)), I proceed with the masculine pronouns when referring to the genius who created the book of Genesis.

The next point which needs to be touched upon is my assumption that we are dealing with an author, that is, one author, as opposed to, let us say, two or three or even more authors. Anyone even faintly familiar with the history of biblical scholarship knows that since the 19th Century, it has been common to speak of several authors of the Pentateuch generally or of the book of Genesis specifically. Usually they are classified as J (short for

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4. I hasten to add, however, that the first Mesopotamian author whom we know by name is indeed a female: Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon and high priestess of the moon-god Nanna at Ur. On this remarkable woman, see W. W. Hallo and J. J. A. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1-11.

the Yahwist), E (short for the Elohist), and P (short for the Priest).

Gratefully, biblical scholarship today is moving away from this approach. Simply stated, there is not one iota of proof that these individuals ever existed. Their documents are purely hypothetical. I have nothing against hypotheses, but they should be grounded in empirical facts. When Darwin created his theory of evolution, he had real facts in front of him, Galapagos turtles and other such wonders. Theories about dinosaurs similarly are based on real proof, namely fossils. And theories about the creation of the universe are based on actual phenomena which still can be witnessed today in the universe.

The problem with the Documentary Hypothesis of the Pentateuch is that there is no proof. There are no Galapagos turtles to observe, no dinosaur fossils to study, and no black holes to view. The theory of J, E, and P, and the fourth source, D (the Deuteronomist), was conceived in the minds of German university professors in the 19th century with no empirical evidence at hand. I could devote pages to this subject alone, but I will desist. Rather, I ask for acceptance that the JEDP Theory is ill-conceived, and in fact today more and more biblical scholars are prepared to state this.

The simple fact is: all we possess is the final canonical version of the book of Genesis. We have no earlier versions thereof. We have no independent sources thereof. Now, immediately one could counter: "But aren't there two different creation accounts? And aren't there lots of discrepancies, such as how many animals Noah took into the ark, and who Esau's wives were, and who transported Joseph to Egypt to become a slave there?" Obviously, this is all true. But, the simple fact remains: all this material appears side-by-side in the same book.

We, as modern, rational, logical-thinking men and women, influenced by Aristotelianism, may be bothered by these internal contradictions. But if we take the Bible on its own terms, it would appear that the ancient Israelites, writers and readers alike, were not bothered by such things. How else could one explain how in Genesis 15, in verse 5 we read that God took Abraham outside to count the stars, and then later in verse 12 we read that the sun set? To us, the chronology is all wrong. But all these irrational, illogical, and contradictory wordings apparently did not bother the ancient Hebrews, and thus they should not bother us either. 6

6. One solution to the Genesis 15 problem (based not only on the setting sun,
So, what can we conclude from all this? Instead of dissecting Genesis into its microscopic parts, we should pull back the lens and view Genesis macroscopically. If we do this, we can speak of one author. I have adduced considerable evidence for this conclusion in my book *The Redaction of Genesis* in which I lay out the literary unity of the first book of the Bible. Now, one might ask, was not our individual more an editor or a compiler or a redactor than he was an author? Perhaps so, but my suspicion is that this individual comes much closer to our understanding of an author than he does to our understanding of an editor or redactor, the title of my book notwithstanding. I am sure that he did not write the long list of Edomite chieftains and clans in Genesis 36 in the same way that he wrote the story of Joseph that immediately follows. But if my analysis in *The Redaction of Genesis* is correct, then it is appropriate to speak of one author for the book of Genesis.

With all the foregoing as necessary ground rules, I turn now to the main question at hand: who was the author of Genesis, when did he live, and for what purposes and for what audience did he compose the book? I anticipate my conclusion before presenting the evidence. The author of Genesis was a royal scribe in Jerusalem, who lived during the reigns of David and Solomon in the 10th century B.C.E., and whose ultimate goal was to justify the monarchy in general, and Davidic-Solomon kingship in particular. Interpreted in this way, the book of Genesis thus appears as a piece of political propaganda.

but on other criteria as well) is to distinguish two sources within this chapter; see the survey of scholarship in J. Ha, *Genesis 15* (BZAW 181; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 30-33 (and the pullout chart between 30-31). But such microsurgery on the biblical text simply is unwarranted. Ha himself (51) rightly saw no difficulty in the chronology of the setting sun.


8. With this statement I go a bit beyond the conclusion of the aforementioned book; see Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis*, 106.

The picture, of course, is not that simple. In truth, it is much more complex. Actually, I see three layers at work in the book of Genesis: (1) literature, (2) theology, and (3) politics. I want to concentrate on the political angle most of all, but first I must say a few words about the literary and theological aspects.

On the surface the book of Genesis is a piece of literature. In fact, as Sternberg, Jan Fokkelman, Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, and others have shown in their perceptive studies, Genesis is exquisite literature. The author of Genesis far outpaces any other ancient author in literary brilliance, employing all of the techniques and rhetorical devices we normally associate with much more recent literature. And through the literary genius the readership of Genesis surely would have been entertained. By "entertainment," I do not mean frivolous entertainment, but entertainment in the best sense. We know of various cultures in more recent times and in our own day that value their literatures as national treasures. In countries such as Ireland, Russia, and Iran, literature functions in a way that, say, movies or television functions in our society today. The average Irish, Russian, or Persian individual, including the average peasant farmer, not only can quote the classics of his national literature but can analyze them and fully understand all of their intricacies. I believe that this kind of literary appreciation was found in ancient Israel as well, and thus I repeat my claim that the book of Genesis would have functioned as a form of entertainment across the culture.

Who would not be entertained by the suspense built into the stories in Genesis? Will Abraham actually sacrifice his son Isaac? Will Isaac understand the ruse being played upon him by his wife Rebekah and his son Jacob? When Laban in turn tricks Jacob, and then Jacob asks how could he have substituted one daughter for the other, Laban responds "it is not the custom in our place to put the younger before the firstborn." What reader or listener to this episode would not have smiled at this happy and playful punishment against Jacob? And who would not be entertained when reading how a man sleeps with a prostitute who in reality is his daughter-

10. History is still another component, but I refrain from entering into a discussion of the historicity of the material in Genesis. Below, however, I will make a brief comment on the subject.
in-law disguised as a whore? I do not intend these words to be blasphemous, but rather I simply want to demonstrate how entertaining biblical stories really are.

The second aspect of the book of Genesis is the theological one. The basic principles of ancient Jewish belief are presented from the start. There is only one God. He created the world in a perfect manner. Man has free will, but he also is expected to live up to certain standards. God has a covenant with all mankind, as symbolized by His relationship with Noah. But He also has a special concern for the people Israel, as symbolized by His covenant with Abraham. God punishes iniquity, and He rewards righteousness.

These theological concepts are all there in Genesis, as an overlay to the literary aspects. This is the beauty of the book of Genesis. Literature and theology are intertwined in a wonderful way. As I just noted, Jacob commits a great sin by deceiving his father Isaac to obtain the blessing which was rightfully Esau’s. From a literary angle, we read on and on to see how Jacob will be punished for his sin. And we learn how as the story unfolds. First there is the story of Laban placing Leah in Rachel’s position, as I mentioned above. Then we read how Jacob’s own sons deceived him by telling him that Joseph had been killed, and we take note that a goat and a garment were the tools of the deception, just as Jacob had used these items in tricking Isaac. And finally we read, almost in passing, that at the end of his life Jacob became blind, just as his father Isaac had been blind.

Now in no place does the author state that these are punishments meted out to Jacob for his sin. And nowhere does God strike him with a plague or with pestilence as punishment. In the main, the punishments are exacted by characters in the story, people like Laban or Jacob’s own sons.

11. This is not to say that Genesis is based on a monotheistic view. Instead, the religious attitude underlying Genesis is a monolatry. That is, the existence of other gods is recognized (see 3:5, 3:22, 6:1-4, etc.), though of course one only God, YHWH, is to be worshipped by Israel. Pure monotheism did not develop until much later in Israelite history, specifically, in the 6th century B.C.E., during which time it is given exquisite expression by the prophet Second Isaiah.

12. And the pattern continues in the next generation, because Judah (the leader of the plot to sell Joseph as a slave) is in turn tricked by Tamar, and again a goat and a garment are involved in the deception.
But theologically the message is also clear. God is in full control of human affairs, and He will see to it that justice is done. If you commit a sin, you will be punished.

Now to this combination of literature and theology we add our third component: politics. The use of literature for political purposes in the ancient Near East is now well documented,13 Thus we are completely justified in introducing this feature into any discussion of biblical literature in general or of Genesis in particular.

In the 10th century there was a new political system at work in Israel. The nation had moved from a confederation of tribes loosely governed by chieftains (the so-called “judges”) to a centralized monarchy with a king at the head. As is well known, there was considerable opposition to the very idea of a king. This is expressed most clearly in 1 Samuel 8, but in other places as well. A king was seen as a compromise to Israelite theology. God was king, and no man could act in this role. What other nations’ kings did for them, God did for Israel. Thus, in Babylon Hammurapi was the law-giver; but in Israel God gave the law. Elsewhere, kings led battles; in Israel it was God who fought the battles; thus He is called “Lord of hosts/armies” and “a man of war” (Exodus 15:3).

With a traditional opposition to kingship, it was necessary to insert pro-monarchy statements into the record. So, in Genesis 17:6 we read that God tells Abraham that “kings will issue from you,” and in Genesis 17:16 this is reiterated with the statement that “kings of nations” will issue from Sarah. In this way Abraham and Sarah are made out to be the progenitors of a royal line. Now, I contend that the only time that this would be necessary would be in the time of David and Solomon. Before this time, there were no kings (except for Saul, whose kingship is transitional14); after this time, kingship was a fait accompli. Kingship needs to be justified only when it is the new creation of ancient Israelite political theorists.


14. That is, Saul still farms, he builds no palace, he has no capital city, there is no bureaucracy, there appears to be no standing army, etc.
Though at first it appears that Samuel wished to establish a weak monarchy, by David’s time it is clear that the king would be a powerful force. His many conquests and rule over an international empire stretching from the Egyptian border in the southwest to the Euphrates River in the northeast attest to considerable power. Solomon then inherited this empire. This will explain the passage in Genesis 15:18 that God gave to Abraham and his descendants “this land, from the river of Egypt to the great River, the Euphrates.” In pre-Davidic-Solomonic times, an author would have been ridiculed for imagining this to be the land that God gave to Israel. In post-Davidic-Solomonic times, Israel once more became a small state in the ancient Near East, and these boundaries were an impossibility. Accordingly, this passage fits only to the period of David and Solomon.

The nations closest to Israel were governed the most firmly, and this is reflected in Genesis. Thus, Moab, Ammon, and Edom, the three trans-Jordanian states ruled by David and Solomon, all appear in Genesis: the first two as the sons of Lot (and thus the grand-nephews of Abraham) and the last as the brother of Jacob. In other words, the Genesis author portrays the ancestors of these three countries as related to the patriarchs, to justify Israelite rule over them.

We can be even more explicit. From an analysis of the germane passages in 2 Samuel, scholars have concluded that in Moab and Ammon the native kings were permitted to rule as tributary vassals, but in Edom the king was deposed and David and Solomon exercised direct rule over their southeastern neighbor. This explains why Edom, in the character of Esau, is seen as a twin brother of Israel, in the character of Jacob; that is, there is a close relationship. Moab and Ammon, on the other hand, as portrayed in Genesis by Lot’s two sons, are more distantly related.

The author of Genesis even throws in a delightful play on words.15 Jacob is described as smooth-skinned and Esau is described as hairy. The Hebrew word for “smooth” is ḥalāq, and the Hebrew word for “hairy” is šā‘īr. Now these two words also correspond to the names of the two moun-

tains which mark the boundary between Israel and Edom. According to Joshua 11:17, 12:7, Mt. Halak is the southernmost terminus of the territory of Israel, and Mt. Seir, of course, is identified with Edom in numerous biblical passages.

Next I would like to address another series of passages in Genesis, but first I need to digress and present some additional background information on David and Solomon. One of the most notable accomplishments of these two kings was the establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Until David’s time, the city had remained a Canaanite enclave in the midst of Israelite territory. David conquered Jerusalem and made it the central city in Israelite life. He built his palace, established the governmental center there, and by bringing the ark into the city he also made it the religious center of Israel. Solomon greatly expanded the city, added extra fortifications, and most notably built the Temple as the central shrine to YHWH.

Still more needs to be said. Jerusalem was conquered through stealth, by troops who entered the city through its underground water channels. Accordingly, the city was not destroyed and the population was not killed. What happened to the Canaanite population of Jerusalem? The Bible is silent on this issue, but it seems clear enough that they simply were assimilated into the nation of Israel. The prophet Ezekiel has an echo of this when he says, in his address to Jerusalem, “Your origin and your birthplace is the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother was a Hittite” (Ezekiel 16:3). In other words, the pagan population of Jerusalem, defined by Ezekiel as Canaanites, Amorites, and Hittites, lies at the base of Jerusalem’s selection as Israel’s holy city.

Furthermore, many scholars agree that David even permitted the Canaanite high priest of Jerusalem to continue functioning in that position. This high priest probably was also king of Jerusalem before David’s conquest. We have no direct evidence for this, but it can be stated with confidence that among the Phoenicians and the Hittites (as well as with others), the high priest and king were the same individual. Thus, I

16. The statement in Judges 1:8, that Judah captured Jerusalem and set fire to it needs to be explained otherwise. See R. de Vaux, Early History of Israel (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 541.

propose the following scenario. David conquered Jerusalem, he became king over it, and in fact made it his capital, but he permitted the former king to continue in his second role as high priest.

The name of this individual is Zadok. Previous scholars have noted that in the lists of David’s officials, there are two priests mentioned, Abia-thar and Zadok. The former one, Abiathar, is mentioned in early stories concerning David, as early as 1 Samuel 22:20, long before he was king. But the latter, Zadok, is nowhere mentioned until after David captures Jerusalem. Who is this Zadok? Where did he come from? The answer is simple: he was the king and high priest of Jerusalem when David conquered the city, who was made to surrender his title as monarch but who was permitted to retain his sacerdotal role. There is evidence to support this view. Two other kings of Jerusalem have the same three consonants as Zadok in their names. They are Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem in Joshua 10:1, and Melchizedek, king of (Jeru)salem in Genesis 14:18. Accordingly, it appears that the word Zadok or Zedek, the Canaanite or Hebrew word for “righteous(ness)” was an element in the names of Jerusalem kings over several centuries.

The next piece of our puzzle comes from late in David’s career. In 2 Samuel 24:18-25 we read how David purchased the threshing floor from a certain individual called Araunah, to be used for the building of an altar. Actually, the word Araunah is not a personal name, rather it is a title meaning “the lord,” originally a Hurrian word, but used in other Near Eastern languages as well, including Hittite and Ugaritic. In one place, 2 Samuel 24:23, he is actually called “Araunah the king.” Most scholars, puzzled by this phrase, emend the Masoretic Text, but such approaches


to the Bible lead us nowhere. Confirmation for this comes from the fact that threshing floors are identified with rulers in various ancient sources as the place where kings administered justice. Accordingly, I conclude that Zadok and Araunah are the same person. Zadok is his personal name, a very fitting one for a priest, since it means “righteous,” and Araunah is one of his titles meaning “the lord” or “the king.”

We also know that threshing floors had a second usage in antiquity, they were places of worship where theophanies were experienced, divine messages were received, and divination was practiced. Accordingly, I conclude that the threshing floor of Araunah/Zadok was the property of the pre-Davidic king/priest of Jerusalem, a place where he carried out both his civil-judicial and religious-priestly duties. It is a well-known phenomenon in the history of religion that when one people displaces another, it does not establish new holy sites, rather it merely inherits them from the earlier population. Many churches of late antique Greece were built on the foundations of ancient pagan Greek temples. Often the foundation stones still bear inscriptions to Apollo or Zeus or other Greek deities. Similarly, it is no coincidence that when the Muslims arrived in Jerusalem in the 7th century C.E., they built their shrines, the al-Aksa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, on the site of the ancient Jewish temple. In keeping with this phenomenon, when David needed to construct an altar in Jerusalem, he did not choose a new site. Instead, he purchased the threshing floor, site of kingly justice and religious rituals, from the Jerusalem king/priest, and he built his altar there. Later this site becomes the setting for Solomon’s temple as well, a point made explicit in the admittedly late book of Chronicles (specifically 2 Chronicles 3:1).

In building the Temple, Solomon established Jerusalem as the only site where sacrifices to God could occur. This practice is known as the centralization of worship. Many scholars doubt that this was a consequence of Solomon’s building the Temple; they believe that the centraliza-

20. See the sources cited by Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 381.
22. See the sources collected by McCarter, *II Samuel*, 511-12.
tion of worship occurred later, during the reign of Hezekiah in the 8th Century or during the reign of Josiah in the 7th century. But if we look at a passage such as 1 Kings 3:2 “the people sacrificed in the high places because the Temple was not yet built,” the seeds of cult centralization already are visible at the time of Solomon’s construction of the Temple (though on a popular level clearly such was not the case).

What kind of reaction did these actions by David and Solomon elicit from the populous? The Bible does not give us much in the way of clues, but we may be permitted some speculation. It is probable that traditionalists opposed the choice of Jerusalem as the holy city in Israel; cities with a historical link to Israel would have been better candidates. Even more troublesome would have been the decision to retain a local Canaanite priest and turn him into the high priest to YHWH. And the centralization of worship is fine if one lives near Jerusalem, but if one lives far from the Temple this places a burden upon the individual. So we can imagine how David’s and Solomon’s action would have caused problems for them. No doubt some of these problems led to the majority of Israel rebelling from the Davidic-Solomonic line when Rehoboam succeeded his father Solomon on the throne in 930 B.C.E.

In light of all this information, we turn now to Genesis. Here we can see attempts to justify David’s and Solomon’s religious policies, presumably to answer any critics they may have had. There are two important passages. The first concerns Melchizedek, referred to earlier. In Genesis 14:18-20, after Abraham successfully returns from battle, we read how Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest to the god El-Elyon, commonly translated as “God Most High,” greets Abraham with bread and wine and then blesses him. Abraham’s response is to give Melchizedek a tenth of all he had, the priestly tithe in other words, and later on (v. 22) he specifically identifies the god El-Elyon with his god YHWH.

Virtually all scholars agree that Salem is short for Jerusalem here; on this point there is little debate. But what is the purpose of these verses? I claim that these lines were included by a royal scribe in David’s court justifying the continuation of Zadok as priest in Jerusalem. It is as if to say, I,

David, am doing nothing differently than our glorious ancestor Abraham did. He tithed to a Canaanite priest in Jerusalem, and I am doing likewise.

I need to add here a few words about the identification of the gods. The Canaanite pantheon included several dozen deities, most of them associated with various aspects of nature. Thus there is a storm god Baal, a sea god Yam, a sun goddess Shamash, and so on. But above them stands the supreme deity El, who in several extra-biblical sources is paired with the god Elyon. In the Bible the names are fused to form the name of one god El-Elyon. The biblical author certainly would not have countenanced identifying YHWH with any of the Canaanite nature deities, but he apparently saw nothing wrong in the equation of YHWH and El-Elyon. Presumably, the local cult in Jerusalem was not to Baal or to Yam or to Shamash or to any of the deities associated directly with aspects of nature, but rather to El-Elyon. Thus Zadok was a priest to El in David’s day, and a trade of the El cult for the YHWH cult could not have been a large step. To reiterate the main point, then, the passage in Genesis 14:18-20 about Melchizedek is specifically included in the book of Genesis to validate the practice of David. “Abraham who recognizes the priesthood of Melchizedek corresponds to David who recognizes the priestly office of Zadok.” If the patriarch could utilize a Canaanite priest for religious worship, then so can the king of Israel.

The second Genesis story which bears on this approach is Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, or the Aqedah, as it is known in Hebrew. A simple reading of the story suggests that its main goal is to explain how in Israel child sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice. But this cannot be its main

24. See the convenient summary by Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, 381.

25. The fusion of names is common in the ancient Near East. Amon and Ra are separate Egyptian deities, but often they coalesce to form Amon-Ra.


27. We might even wonder if the relationship of the names Melchizedek and Zadok is that of the king/priest stripped of its royalty (the root mlk) but retaining its sacerdotal function (the root ṣdq).
function, as Nahum Sarna has shown. Instead, it is a story about faith and about the relationship between man and God.

However, there is also a political overlay once more. The setting of the story is “the land of Moriah” (v. 3). This word occurs in the Bible in only one other place: 2 Chronicles 3:1. It is worth citing the verse in full: “Solomon began to build the Temple of YHWH in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, which appeared to David his father, and which David had prepared as the place, at the threshing floor of Ornan [variant of Araunah] the Jebusite.” This verse makes it clear that Moriah is the same as the threshing floor which David purchased from Araunah and on which Solomon then built the Temple.

The next key in the story is the expression “the mount of the Lord” in v. 14. Whenever this phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible, it always refers to Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3, 30:29, Micah 4:2, Zechariah 8:3, Psalms 24:3). All of these texts are later than the period of David and Solomon, but it is possible that already in their day the expression had come into use.

Moreover, there is a concentration of key words in the story that begin with the consonants yod and resh, the same letters which begin the word Jerusalem. Most prominent are the phrases ʾēlōhîm yirʾeh “God will see” (v. 8), YHWH yirʾeh “Adonai-yireh” (v. 14), and bēhar YHWH yērāʾeh “on the mount of the Lord there is vision” (v. 14). All of these words evoke the name Jerusalem.


29. The phrase is difficult, but this appears to be the basic sense. The word maqôm here means specifically “sacred place,” as elsewhere in the Bible.

30. There may be good reason to doubt the veracity of this tradition; see Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, 391-92. Probably, in the earliest version of the Aqedah, the term Moriah was understood to refer to some other geographical locale. But by David’s and Solomon’s time I assume it had come to mean Jerusalem, even if 2 Chronicles 3:1 is our earliest record of the identification. For complete discussion see I. Kalimi, “The Land of Moriah, Mount Moriah, and the Site of Solomon’s Temple in Biblical Historiography,” Harvard Theological Review 83 (1990), 345-62.

31. Hermann Gunkel, Genesis (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1902), 169-71, was on the right track when he observed that the concentration of words with yod and resh in this pericope alludes to a geographical locale. He erred only in suggesting that they referred to the toponym Jeruel (2 Chronicles 20:16).
Finally, there is evidence which points to the centralization of worship in Jerusalem in the book of Genesis. Although Abraham built altars elsewhere in the land of Canaan, for example, at Shechem (Genesis 12:7) and between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 12:8), only in the story of the Aqedah does he actually sacrifice, specifically the ram which he found caught in the thicket. Could anyone in Solomon's time not get the message? Yes, we know there are altars throughout the countryside, and some are even as old as father Abraham himself. But the only place where the patriarch actually sacrificed is Moriah, the mount of the Lord, Adonai-yireh, that is to say, Jerusalem, and thus only the Temple in Jerusalem built by Solomon is approved for sacrifices to YHWH.32

Jerusalem is alluded to in one other spot in the book of Genesis. Of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10-14), there is no difficulty in identifying the two well-known names Tigris and Euphrates. But the remaining two, Gihon and Pishon, remain problematic. No amount of geographical gymnastics will solve all the problems inherent in these two names. At the same time, however, it is difficult to imagine an ancient Israelite reading this passage without having his attention called to a Gihon very close to home. I refer, of course, to the powerful spring and water source of Jerusalem called the Gihon (1 Kings 1:33, etc.). No doubt we are dealing here with the transfiguration of a myth, but regardless of that phenomenon (which we are able to trace only barely), the author of the Eden story is evoking Jerusalem as the place whence civilization started. In short, we have here a very subtle reference to the centrality of Jerusalem.33

I would like to move now from these issues of the cult and Jerusalem to personal issues concerning the royal family. Solomon himself is reflected in the book of Genesis in a most interesting manner. A theme which dominates Genesis, as many scholars have noticed, is the motif of the younger son.34 Abraham has two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, in that order, and yet Isaac, the younger, supersedes Ishmael, the older. In the next generation, Isaac has two sons, the twins Esau and Jacob. The manner

32. Note that in Genesis 15:9-11, Abraham is involved with sacrificial animals in a religious ritual, but he does not sacrifice them.


in which the younger twin Jacob supersedes his older brother Esau actually dominates the narrative, first with the tale about the selling of the birthright and then with the episode of the deceitful procurement of the paternal blessing. Jacob, in turn, has twelve sons. In this case the older sons are written out of the picture and younger sons dominate. Judah, the fourth son, but the youngest of Leah's original set, becomes dominant; and of course Joseph, number eleven in line, is Jacob's favorite.

Moving to the last generation in Genesis, the sons of Judah and Joseph also witness the younger surpassing the older. Judah has two sons, Zerah and Perez, and yet it is the younger, Perez, who will play the dominant role as the ancestor of such luminaries as Nahshon, Boaz, Jesse, and David. Joseph's two sons, meanwhile, appear in a brief episode in Genesis, in which grandfather Jacob switches his hands and thereby places Ephraim, the younger, ahead of Manasseh, the older. This pattern is also anticipated in the first two sons born to mankind. Cain is the firstborn of Adam and Eve, and yet God favors Abel, the younger. It may also appear in the following book of Exodus where Moses is specifically described as three years younger than Aaron.

What is the fascination with this motif in Genesis? Why emphasize time and again that younger or youngest sons supersedes their older brother or brothers? Several answers, not mutually exclusive, are forthcoming. Again let me briefly state the literary and theological reasons, and then I will come to the political angle. Literarily, this motif works to keep the reader's interest. A story such as Abraham and Sarah were parents to Isaac, and Isaac and Rebekah were parents to Jacob, and Jacob and Rachel were parents to Joseph, and on it went, will arouse no interest from readers. We have such "stories" in the Bible in the many "begats" that occur in the narrative. No one reads them; we simply skip over them. The line of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob-Joseph may have met a similar fate, albeit with a few stories about the covenant established by God, were it not for the exceptional character of this family line. It is specifically because the unexpected happens, the out-of-the-ordinary occurs, that we read on with enthusiasm. In a world where primogeniture was so important, we are amazed to read how this norm was violated time after time. My teacher Cyrus H. Gordon referred to this and similar episodes as "worthy of saga." The doldrums of life do not make for storytelling. But throw in some sibling
rivalry, a few death threats, a rape, a kidnapping, some lies, and some
deception, and now we have a story. The younger son’s superseding the
older son is the extraordinary, and this makes for epic storytelling.35

On the theological level, I would say the following very briefly.
Among the nations of the world Israel was a last-born. The mighty
empires of the day, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the
Hittites, etc., were the firstborn nations of the world. But God chose not to
make His covenant with any of them, rather He chose lowly Israel, a last-
born nation with no expectations of firstborn wealth, power, and prestige,
and He made it His firstborn. In fact, in Exodus 4:22, God says, “Israel is
My firstborn son.” In this sense, the motif of the younger son in Genesis is
representative of Israel among the nations of the world, favored by God.

But there is more. There is also a political message here. Not only does
the motif of the younger son have literary and theological purposes, it also
operates politically. David was the youngest of Jesse’s seven sons,36 and
Solomon was among the youngest if not the youngest of David’s many
sons. It is true that the book of Samuel gives us no indication of any oppo-
sition to a youngest son (namely David) gaining the throne, but the narra-
tive does emphasize the point nonetheless.

In the case of Solomon, of course, quite a bit is made of his accession
to the throne. The most dominant question in the chapters from 2 Samuel
13 through 1 Kings 2 is who is to succeed David, so much so that many
scholars call this section of the Bible the Succession Narrative. There were
many sons of David in contention. Amnon was the firstborn, but he was
killed by his brother Absalom. Absalom rebelled and he was killed by
David’s general Joab. The two remaining candidates were Adonijah and

35. Note that in the Ugaritic Epic of Kret, the same motif occurs, enhanced by
an additional factor. Here we read how the eighth child, a daughter named
Octavia, supersedes her seven older brothers.

36. Actually, it is not clear if there were seven or eight sons altogether. From 1
Samuel 16:7-13, it appears there were eight sons, and this is made explicit in 1
Samuel 17:12. In 1 Chronicles 2:13-15, however, only seven sons of Jesse are listed
with David as the seventh. C. H. Gordon ("Review of U. Cassuto, The Goddess
Anath," Journal of the American Oriental Society 72 (1952), 181) probably is correct
that the apparent conflict arose from a lost poetic epic about David in which seven
and eight appeared in climactic parallelism. See also P. K. McCarter, I Samuel (AB
8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 276.
Solomon, and although Adonijah was older and in fact claimed the throne at one point when David was old and feeble (1 Kings 1), in the end it was Solomon who won out. He had superseded all his older brothers. Let me also point out that, if we take the biblical chronology at face value, Solomon was much, much younger than all these rivals. The Bible states that all three of these sons, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah, and three others as well, were born to David in Hebron (2 Samuel 3:2-5), that is, before he became king over all Israel and before he conquered Jerusalem. Solomon, on the other hand, was born after the adultery with and subsequent marriage to Bathsheba. In other words, not only is Solomon younger than his many brothers (actually half-brothers), he is much, much younger.37

How can Solomonic rule be justified in that case, especially since we know that firstborn royal succession was the norm in the ancient Near East? The answer lies before us: imbed the notion of ultimogeniture into the national epic which comes down to us as the book of Genesis. God has favored later-born sons since Abel, and He has blessed the younger sons of Israel since the inception of the covenant itself: Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Perez, Ephraim, and Moses. In such company, who would criticize David’s selection of Solomon to succeed him as king over all Israel.

I have just referred to the fraternal conflict regarding the question: who would succeed David on the throne? This, too, is a theme which appears in Genesis, in fact in all three of the patriarchal generations. It is mild in the case of Ishmael and Isaac, where actually it is a case more of Sarah at odds with Hagar. Fraternal strife increases in the case of Jacob and Esau, and eventually it becomes a major motif in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Once more, I believe we have evidence of a Davidic-Solomonic author retrojecting the events of his own day onto the days of the patriarchs. This is especially evident in the case of Joseph and his brothers. The hatred and fighting among the brothers appears over an

37. If we assume that 1 Chronicles 3:5 (see also 1 Chronicles 14:4) lists the sons of Bathsheba (Bathshua) in age order, then Solomon is apparently the youngest of David’s and Bathsheba’s sons. We also have to assume that Shimea/Shammua, Shobab, and Nathan are omitted from 2 Samuel 12:24 as unimportant, for otherwise it would appear that Solomon was the first son born to David and Bathsheba (the unnamed child who dies as an infant excluded).
extended narrative, as is also the case in the Succession Narrative in 2
Samuel, and in both cases the father is portrayed as helpless and unable to
prevent the strife from continuing. Jacob can do nothing to stop the boys,
and he probably makes matters worse by showing favoritism to Joseph
and perhaps to Benjamin. Similarly, David does nothing to stop his sons,
and he too probably makes matters worse by showing favoritism, first to
Absalom and in the end to Solomon.

Moreover, if we go back to the first pair of brothers once more, to Cain
and Abel, we have the first case of fratricide. The only other place in the
Bible where one brother actually kills another brother is the case of
Absalom’s slaying of Amnon. Is there a connection? Probably the wording
of the two episodes points in that direction. In both cases, the murder
takes place basâdeh “in the field.”

In this case the political angle is a bit different from before. Here I
would suggest we have something of an apologia for the royal family. If
you are shocked to see that the paterfamilias David is unable to control the
affairs of the family in a civil manner, then all you need to do is recall that
hatred among brothers is built into the lives of the ancestors of Israel and
for that matter into the lives of the world’s first brothers.

Such apologetics appear in other ways in Genesis. Several years ago I
wrote a short article entitled “David and His Circle in Genesis XXXVIII.”
In it I noted that the characters of the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis
38 match up with the characters in the family of David. Judah is an image
of David. Both are the heads of the family. Both are shepherds who in their

The Chronicles lists (1 Chronicles 3:6-8, 14:5-7) mention other sons born to David
in Jerusalem, but it cannot be determined if they are older or younger than
Solomon. I like to think of Bathsheba as David’s “last fling,” and thus Solomon is
most likely the youngest of all his children.

38. I exclude the case of Solomon and Adonijah, because the former only
ordered the killing of the latter, and he did not actually physically slay him. This
is probably also the case with Absalom and Amnon (see 2 Samuel 13:28-29), but the
parable of the woman of Tekoa portrays the fratricide as direct (2 Samuel 14:6).

39. Actually, this word is used only in the parable of the woman of Tekoa in 2
Samuel 14:6. On the parallel see J. Blenkinsopp, “Theme and Motif in the
Succession History (2 Sam. xi 2ff.) and the Yahwist Corpus,” Volume du Congrès:

40. G. A. Rendsburg, “David and His Circle in Genesis XXXVIII,” Vetus
youth actually tended flocks. Judah separates from his brothers to live in Adullum, just as David flees the Israelites early in his career to live among the outlaws in Adullam. Judah has a Canaanite friend named Hirah, and David forms an alliance with the Canaanite king of Tyre named Hiram. Most significantly, Judah is married to a nameless woman who is *bat-šūaʿ* "the daughter of Shua," and David's most prominent wife is Bathsheba, who in Chronicles is called by the variant name *bat-šūaʿ* "Bathsua."

Beyond all these surface similarities lies the major point of the story of Judah in Genesis 38. He committed a great sin with a woman, i.e., he slept with his daughter-in-law disguised as a prostitute, and then he was tricked into admitting his guilt. The same is true of David. The story of his great sin with Bathsheba forms the focal point of the narrative about his life in 2 Samuel, and he too is tricked into admitting his guilt.

In the aforementioned article I noted two possibilities. The author of Genesis may have been poking fun at the royal family, a case of mocking the king and his court. Or, he might have been writing an apologia for the royal family, stating in a sense that the clan has always suffered from familial problems. In either case, it is clear that Genesis 38 is a reflection of the family of King David and has political overtones.

One final example and then I shall conclude. There is a motif which appears three times in the book of Genesis which we call the wife-sister motif. Abraham tries to pass Sarah off as his sister while visiting the palace of the Pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20), then he does so again while visiting the palace of Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 20), and finally Isaac does the same with Rebekah, once more in the palace of Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 26:6-11). In the case of Abraham and Sarah, we learn that in reality they were brother and sister, at least half-brother and half-sister, for they shared the same father but were of different mothers (Genesis 20:12).

What is the point of these episodes? The answer lies once more in the life of the family of King David. Here we have one sure instance of "wife-sister" and one probable instance thereof. The sure case is the story of Amnon and Tamar. Amnon, David's firstborn, found his half-sister Tamar irresistible, and so he forced himself upon her. In the course of the action, Tamar tells Amnon, "Please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you" (2 Samuel 13:13). In other words, she is willing to marry her half-brother Amnon, but she wants things to be done properly and not in
a debased manner. In the end, Amnon winds up hating her more than he loves her—that is what the Bible says (2 Samuel 13:15)—and the marriage never occurs. But the point is that Amnon and Tamar could have had the same relationship as Abraham and Sarah. They were half-brother and half-sister, born of the same father but of different mothers, and they could have become husband and wife.

The second instance of a wife-sister relationship in the life of David’s family can only be hypothesized. It concerns David himself. The Bible gives us only a few clues, but we can piece the rest of the puzzle together nonetheless. According to several biblical passages (2 Samuel 17:25 [implied by the statement that Abigail (=Abigail) is the sister of Zeruiah]; 1 Chronicles 2:13-16), David had a sister named Abigail and we also know that he had a wife named Abigail. Here I quote J. D. Levenson and B. Halpern: “These are the only two Abigails in the entire Hebrew Bible.... What is the probability that the only two people of this name would be not only contemporaries but sisters-in-law?” We can only speculate, but there are hints in the story that Abigail the wife of David was indeed Abigail the sister of David. When David and Abigail first meet, and this is before he became king, she displays unusual generosity (1 Samuel 25:18) and addresses him in the most revering terms (1 Samuel 25:24). It is true that already he is a hero in Israel, but no other biblical character accepts David in this manner at this stage. Other factors, which Levenson and Halpern discuss, point to the correctness of the theory that we are dealing with only one Abigail. So, while this hypothesis cannot be proved, if we accept it, we have a ready explanation for the prominence of the wife-sister motif in Genesis. The Israelite community in David’s time may have


43. The linguistic data should be incorporated into the picture as well. Note that both Abigails have the variant form ‘abigail (1 Samuel 25:32, 2 Samuel 3:3, 2 Samuel 17:25). To rework Levenson’s and Halpern’s question: what is the probability that the only two people of the same name and with the same variant would be not only contemporaries but sisters-in-law?
been upset by his marriage to Abigail, especially since it violates the law in Leviticus 18:9 against marrying a sister, even a half-sister. Once more, to make the king’s action more acceptable, the author of Genesis builds this atypical marriage arrangement into the patriarchal narratives. The message would be: do not complain about David’s marriage to Abigail; it is no different than Abraham’s marriage to Sarah.44

We arrive now at a summary and a final word. We have seen that the book of Genesis in many ways reflects the life and politics of David and Solomon. The era of these two kings was one of rapid change for the nation of Israel. First, there was the new political entity of a united country ruled by kings. Moreover, these kings were powerful. They ruled far and wide, from the Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt. Jerusalem, a city with no ties to traditional Israel, is not only the capital city now, but it has become the religious center of the country as well. Sacrifice, which had been permitted throughout the country, is now limited (at least officially, according to the Jerusalem authorities) to the newly-built Temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the old king-priest of Jerusalem, a man named Zadok, with the foreign title Araunah, had been permitted to retain his religious functions and had been planted as the high priest of Israel. Finally, when David is old and a successor needs to be named, it is the youngest son Solomon who will rule, quite unexpectedly and quite against the norm in the ancient world.

How does one get the people to support such changes? The solution is to write a great epic about the nation’s founding fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The book of Genesis does not invent the material about the lives of these men, for I do believe in their basic historicity, but it casts the traditions in a new light. Everything now is to be seen through the filter of Davidic-Solomonic rule. The people of Israel should not be concerned about these new developments. They all are anticipated in hoary antiquity and all are sanctioned by God. Kingship, power, centrality of Jerusalem, acceptance of a Jerusalemite priest, supremacy of the youngest son: God has approved of all of these.

44. For additional political factors which may lurk beneath the wife-sister stories, see J. K. Hoffmeier, “The Wives’ Tales of Genesis 12, 20 & 26 and the Covenants at Beer-sheba,” Tyndale Bulletin 43 (1992), 81-99.
On the other side, where there are negative traits in the royal family, do not be overly concerned. The hatred among brothers is something which our patriarchs experienced also, but in the end all's well that ends well. As Joseph tells his brothers at the end of the story, "You had conceived of evil against me, but God has turned it into good" (Genesis 50:20). Of course David is guilty of a great sin, adultery with Bathsheba, but his ancestor Judah also committed a great sexual offense. This act by Judah did not prevent God from blessing his descendants with kingship, and so David too is forgiven by God. And if David has violated divine law in marrying his half-sister Abigail, this too is acceptable, since Abraham and Sarah had a similar arrangement. Apologia after apologia is included in Genesis to downplay the more negative sides of David.

The author of Genesis pulled it off brilliantly. On the face of it the narrative is about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, about their lives, about early Israelite history. But it reflects through and through the contemporary world of the author, the period in which he was living, the time of David and Solomon, and the characters who dominated the news in his day. If I am correct in my analysis, then I believe we have identified the author of Genesis. He was a man at home in the Davidic-Solomonic court who masterfully created a national epic, combining literature, theology, and politics.

The best analogy I can posit for modern readers is Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. This is an outstanding play and a great piece of literature. But as everyone who sees the play is keenly aware, there is a political statement being made. Miller tells the story of 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts, and he does not create the story *ex nihilo*. The witch trials in that city actually occurred. But the story is told through the filter of the McCarthyism

45. The evidence presented herein also can serve as a response to recent attempts by some scholars (e.g., J. Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992]) to date the so-called "Yahwist" source to the exilic or post-exilic period. Most of the material discussed in the present essay is assigned to the "J" source by those who subscribe to the JEDP division of the Pentateuch.

of the 1950's of which Miller himself was a target. Similarly, the motion
picture and television series M*A*S*H is set in Korea, but the true message
is that of another land war in Asia, namely, Vietnam.

Literature as politics is a powerful weapon. It worked for the Davidic-
Solomon writer of the book of Genesis three thousand years ago. It worked
for other authors in antiquity and throughout history, and it continues to
work today.

And, oh yes, Avigdor Dagan is correct: one cannot follow the story if
one knows nothing about the narrator.

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