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Biblical Sinai Traditions

Israel Knohl

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Foreword

The leading voice in the Hebrew Bible is the familiar voice of the Biblical narrative. According to this narrative in Exodus and Deuteronomy, Mt. Sinai, or “Horeb” is the location of the most important event in the history of Ancient Israel and its beliefs. It is on this mountain that God revealed Himself to all of Israel, and it is there that the nation heard the Ten Commandments given by God. It is on this mountain that Moses received the additional Torah Laws to be transmitted to Israel. And it is in the context of this revelation at Sinai-Horeb that a covenant was created between the nation and its God. The nation then breached the covenant by creating the Golden Calf. In response, Moses shattered the Tablets of the Covenant, the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19-39, Deuteronomy 5: 2-30, 8-21).

However, besides this narrative, the Bible hides another voice that was silenced by the dominant tradition over the course of the years. In this version, those foundational events occurred in a completely different way: the nation heard the Ten Commandments not at Mt. Sinai, but beside a spring; the covenant and its breach also took place beside that same spring; and the Divine revelation next to the spring was egalitarian, without an intermediary: neither Moses, nor any other person. From this perspective, Mt. Sinai was not the place where God gave the Ten Commandments to the nation, but rather the place from which God began His march to the place of revelation.

This conflicting tradition is hidden among the verses of ancient Biblical poetry—poetry that was composed many years before the leading narrative. How, when, and why was the alternative tradition silenced? Who silenced it and what interest did they have in doing so? What are the ideological and spiritual meanings concealed in the silenced tradition? And what did the original narrator of the Sinai narrative seek to innovate by moving the location of the revelation from the spring to the mountain?

The northern narrator's adaptation and reediting of the ancient poetic materials on the Sinaitic tradition and the revelation at the spring is an early and masterful example of creative inner biblical interpretation. In his bold interpretative course, the northern author moved the focal point of the verbal revelation from the peaceful spring to the volcanic and thunderous mountain, Sinai—Horeb. By doing this, the narrator created an essential arena for Moses as the mediator of revelation. Furthermore, this shift opened the door to the scene of an intimate and secret revelation of God to Moses, the contents of which will only be revealed to the people of Israel much later. Over the generations, many authors and scribes entered through this opening, and they expanded the contents of the Sinaitic revelation: the writers of Deuteronomy, the authors of the Book of Jubilees,¹ the Sages, the Kabbalists.

The creative interpretation of the northern narrator turned biblical religion into a religion of prophetic revelation centered on Moses, the father of the prophets.²

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¹ See, Najman (2009).

² Benjamin David Sommer's recently published book, "Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition" (Sommer 2015), is a rich and important study of the various traditions regarding the Revelation at Sinai in the Torah, and the ways they were understood and explained in post-Scripture Judaism. However, the focus of Sommer's work differs from the focus of this work. He focuses on the theological aspects of the character and nature of the Divine Revelation at Sinai, while I discuss the literary-historical aspects of the development of traditions regarding the transmission of the Laws and the Covenant in the desert in light of the cultural and social changes in Israel during the Biblical era.



CHAPTER 2

The Beginning of Writing and the Beginning of Biblical Literature

The question of the prevalence of literacy in ancient Israel must be the point of departure for any investigation of the genesis of the traditions regarding the covenant between Israel and its God, and the giving of the Torah and the Laws in the desert. In other words, we must clarify at what point Israel became “the People of the Book”, and when and how it developed the material and spiritual infrastructure necessary for the writing of Biblical traditions. It is in this way that we will be able to peer through the veil of this early stage to the days preceding the development of literacy in Israel. We will then be able to get to know the character of the ancient compositions composed when only a few people knew how to read and write.

Evidence from the Hebrew Bible alone cannot answer these questions. We must turn to archeological findings and Israel’s neighboring cultures during the Biblical era. These will enrich our sources and establish the discussion on a relatively firm foundation.

The picture that arises from Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures indicate that literacy was the domain of the elite educated class in the temples and royal courts. This is consistent with the characteristics of the languages and scripts of these cultures, Akkadian and Egyptian, which contain thousands of symbols with sometimes more than one meaning or use. Naturally,

literacy was not widespread among commoners in this environment.¹ The development of the alphabet, which occurred either in Egypt or the Sinai Desert around the eighteenth century BC, made things somewhat simpler. Limiting written symbols to a few dozen letters made learning to read and write easier.²

Despite the alphabetic revolution, the spread of literacy was evidently slow.³ This is apparent from archaeological evidence from Israel. Very few Hebrew inscriptions have been found from the period before the eighth century BC. Meaning the use of writing to pass on messages and spread knowledge, whether economic, administrative, or spiritual, was very minimal and was apparently limited to the educated elite classes among the priests and in royal courts.⁴

As mentioned above, it appears that the turning point for the dissemination of literacy began at about 800 BC. The first indications of the expansion of writing were discovered in the Kingdom of Israel. A collection of ostraca, termed the Samaria Ostraca, was discovered in the kingdom's capital and has been dated to the first half of the eighth century BC. The distinct increase of the distribution of epigraphic findings,

¹For more on scribal culture and the frameworks in which scribes wrote, see for instance van der Toorn (2007), 51–108.

²Scholars are divided on question of the place in which the alphabet developed: whether it was Egypt, Sinai, or Canaan. For the various opinions see Goldwasser (2015, 2022), and for another perspective see, Sass (1991); Darnell et al. (2005, 73–91). Though interesting in its own right, this problem is not relevant to the issue being discussed here— the development of literacy and literary creation in Israel during the first millennium BC.

³For a critical evaluation of the alphabetic period and its accessibility: Warner (1980).

⁴The position expressed here is similar to a position that has been coined “socio-archaeological”; that is to say, one that investigates that historical question of the rate of literacy in Israel and Judah during the Biblical period through material finds and uses those finds as well as sociological evidence for analysis. Biblical texts are compared to the picture that arises from material findings from this period. The primary articulation of this approach towards literacy can be found in Jamieson-Drake (1991). This approach has mostly been accepted— with a few changes and some variety. A clear and prominent representation of this in Israeli scholarship can be found in the works of Nadav Na’aman, such as Na’aman (2002, 13ff). See also: Rollston (2010); Rollston (2018); Finkelstein and Sass (2013); Finkelstein (2020). For the recent application of this approach on the development of the Biblical text, see for instance, Finkelstein and Silberman (2001); Finkelstein and Silberman (2006); Knauf (2002); Schniedewind (2004); Schmid (2012). For a critical evaluation of this approach see for instance, van der Toorn, *ibid.*, 3, as well as Emerton (2006); Richelle (2016). An updated survey of research on the subject of literacy was recently presented by Burlingame (2019).

especially material that is not administrative but literary, is noticeable during this period both within the borders of the Kingdom of Israel as well as in areas under its influence.⁵

In Judah, the trend began about fifty years later. From the start of the second half of the eighth century, there are more indications that the use of reading and writing, (such as the Siloam inscription and the administrative “for the king” impressions), was wider spread.

An additional sign of the cultural changes of this period in Israel is reflected in the Biblical collection. The course of the eighth century BC marked the appearance of “the literal prophets”. In contrast to previous prophets and miracle workers such as Elijah and Elisha, that nobody wrote down their prophecies, now we have the written prophecies of four seers who were active during this time period: first, Amos and Hosea ben Beerī, who prophesied in the Kingdom of Israel. Then, Isaiah ben Amoz, and Micah of Morasheth-Gat who were active in Judah during the reign of Hezekiah King of Judah. As already noted in the Talmud notes, these four prophets who prophesized during this same period.⁶ The place and order of appearance of the four prophets is congruent with our knowledge from archaeological findings. The Kingdom of Israel, where Amos was active during the second quarter of the eighth century BC, during the days of Jeroboam II ben Jehoash, is first. After him came Hosea, who prophesized during the years 750–725 BC. Finally, Isaiah and Micah were active toward the end of the eighth century BC, in the Kingdom of Judah.

The expansion of literacy and its growing popularity is also reflected in the content of these prophets’ visions. Isaiah is commanded to write down his prophecies (see, Isaiah 8:1). It’s possible that he himself wrote down all his prophecies, or it is possible that he wrote down some of his prophecies himself and others were transcribed by his students.⁷ In any case, as soon as prophecies were written down they could be distributed to the public and passed on to future generations- even if at the outset they were preserved within the small circle of the prophet’s loyal servants. In addition, as soon as the number of readers in Israel grew, people were able

⁵ Such as, “The Book of Balaam” from Deir Alla, and a piece of poetry from Kuntillet Ajrud. See also, Ahituv, *Inscriptions*, 262–266, 405–427.

⁶ Talmud B. Bava Batra 14.

⁷ It is possible that this is the meaning of, “seal the instructions with My disciples”, Isaiah 8:16.

to read the prophecy and disseminate the prophet's messages to those who could not read.⁸

The sharp cultural turn in Israel and Judah during this time is apparent in the comparison between the first writing prophets and their predecessors, Elijah and Elisha, who were active about a century prior in the Kingdom of Israel. They represent a different cultural experience. It is fair to assume that they also prophesized. Fragments of their prophecies have even survived in the stories about them in the Book of Kings.⁹ And yet, we do not have any books of prophecies authored by them. Almost the only thing left of them are the stories of their wonders. However, these stories themselves attest that they occurred and were handed down verbally and not in writing, nor in an especially educated environment (Kings II 8:4). It is even possible that Elijah and Elisha themselves were illiterate. One way or another, it is doubtful that there was a high rate of literacy in Israel of the ninth century, during which these prophets were active. Clearly, there was no real reason to write down large works, whether to distribute them or to transmit them to future generations, given the non-negligible material cost and the audience.

And so, the eighth century BC is the watershed line. Before then only a few people were literate in Israel. But over the course of the next century, and after it, Israel became "the People of the Book". Messages and ideas were transmitted and preserved in writing. This cultural turning point was not limited to the technical field alone. As mentioned, and as I will discuss in more detail below, up until then literacy had been limited to the ruling classes or the elite circles close to it. When literacy expanded, other classes also wrote down their creations. And with this, some of the voices of the opposition, such as the admonitions of those four prophets to the rulers and social elite, is revealed to us.

At the same time, as hinted previously, this conclusion is not robust enough to negate the possibility that writing existed in a limited scope in

⁸ On the appearance of the "Prophets of the Book" see, most recently: Millard (2010) (he also refers to the passages from the Isaiah, mentioned above, there), as well as Nissinen (2014). For insight into the technical terms for writing in Isaiah 8:1 see Williamson (2011).

⁹ This is especially apparent in the political-military context. Just like the writing prophets (cf. Isaiah 7:3–9, for instance), their predecessors were also involved in the political and military sphere- as prophets of encouragement and support (see, for instance, Kings II 3:16–19, 13:14–19) or as a source of authority and Divine power (Kings II, 8:7–16).

the centers of power and religion before the eighth century. It seems that ritual teachings for priests were written down in the central temples.¹⁰ Our knowledge of Mesopotamia and Egypt indicate that priestly writing was created by experts for experts. From the outset these documents were meant for a small circle of people with knowledge of the cult. They were not meant for a broader audience.¹¹ In terms of content, the priestly code in the Torah is closest to the rituals that were prevalent in Anatolia and northern Syria before the collapse of the Hittite Empire in the twelfth century B.C.¹² In addition, the literary structure of the priestly teachings is most similar to that of Hittite priestly teachings¹³ in that they contain set opening and closing phrases such as “this is the rule of”, “this is the rule”¹⁴ I do not want to get into the complex question of how and when ritual knowledge spread from Anatolia and northern Syria to Canaan.¹⁵ However, in light of the ancient roots of its type of literature, it is certainly possible that it was written down for priests in the central Temples before literacy expanded to the common people.

Early near eastern literature indicates that the royal courts also contained a space for diplomacy and wisdom where advisors and scribes were active. If so, it is possible that certain parts of the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom Literature, may have been written before the eighth century BCE.¹⁶ It is also possible that the remark regarding proverbs being

¹⁰ On the priestly ritual instructions (i.e., *Toroth* תורות) see Begrich (1935).

¹¹ See, Cohen (1969) followed by Haran (1981, 327ff).

¹² See, my article: Knohl (2015); as well as the insights of Yitzhaq Feder, such as Feder (2010, 2011).

¹³ Fishbane (1980).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Lev. 6:2, 7, 18; 7:1, 11, 37; 14:2, 54–57.

¹⁵ Were they a group of early Israelites who reached northern Syria? The Jebusites who ruled Jerusalem before David were Hittite. See, Ezekiel 16, 3. This echoes, for instance, in the names of David’s scribes and ministers which indicate their Hittite-Hori ethnicities (II Samuel 8, 17, 20, 25 [Seraiah, Sheva]) as well as in the names of the non-Israelite population in Jerusalem (II Samuel 24:16–23 [Araunah, Arnon]), and the appearance of Uriah the Hittite among David’s warriors’ [II Samuel 11, 3, 23, 39]); See, Mazar (1947); Weinfeld (1990, 1992, 63). We should also mention Stephanie Daley’s theory regarding worship of the Israelite god in northern Syria in light of personal and place names: Daley (1990); for a response see Zevit (1991). On the possibility that the Biblical text was influenced by Hindu-Aryan languages, see, Rabin (1970).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Hurowitz (2012, vol. I, p. 10ff).

copied by members Hezekiah, King of Judah's, court at the end of eighth century BCE, refers to such early writings (Proverbs 25:1).¹⁷

In addition to wisdom literature, it seems that books of history and chronologies were also composed and transmitted in the courts of the kings of Judah and Israel. There is room to infer that these documents were first created for administrative and economic purposes. Evidence of the existence of these types of works before the eighth century BCE comes from the description of Shishak's journey in I Kings 14:25–28. Apparently, the description is based on a contemporary source, without which the memory of the Egyptian journey (925 BCE) would have been forgotten. The structure and style of the description resembles other chronological accounts from the ancient east and so it appears that the description in I Kings has a source in chronological documentation.¹⁸

In addition to writings of the elite educated circles before the eighth century BCE, we must also mention oral works.¹⁹ We have been left with a number of examples of ancient poetry in the Hebrew Bible. The genesis of these works of poetry was oral and they were transmitted orally through the generations. The unique literary forms of the poetry made them easy to memorize and transmit even without writing. In this way poetry retained ancient traditions that were common among the people before the spread of literacy and the outset of narrative in the eighth century BCE. I want to emphasize that the spread of literacy and the appearance

¹⁷ See the discussion of Schneidewind (2004), as well as the possibility raised by H.L. Ginsberg, that these were a way of transporting proverbs from the Kingdom of Israel (Ginsberg 1982, 37, ft. 35). On its own, the opening in Proverbs 25:1, is another possible proof of the cultural turning point that occurred in Judah at the end of the eighth century, when the literary operation in Hezekiah's court began.

¹⁸ On the chronographic material now embedded in the Book of Kings, see Na'aman (2002, 78–94), and *ibid.*, previous literature. On the importance of the description of Shishak's journey in the Book of Kings as evidence of the accounting of history in Israel in the early years of the kingdom, see Na'aman, *ibid.*, and earlier in his essay: Na'aman (1996). On the awareness of foreign kings in the Book of Kings as a sign of the existence of ancient contemporary sources, see, Halpern (2000). On the connection between the accounting of history and the chronological documentation and omens in the ancient east see for instance, Finkelstein (1963).

¹⁹ Another perspective on the elitist writing in administrative circles and the priesthood arises from the discovery of a substantial number of seal prints, "bullae" in the City of David. The excavators dated them to the ninth century BCE: Reich et al. (2007). See also, the recent discussion in Rollston (2017), who believes that literacy before the eighth century was limited to Jerusalem and its close neighbors; meaning, the centers of power and the elite circles that were active there and around there.