

On the Differences Between the Culture of Israel and the Major Cultures of the Ancient Near East

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Among the many facets of Professor Gaster's work, one of the most brilliant has been his exposition of ancient Near Eastern literary and religious material cognate to that in the Old Testament. Accordingly, it seems appropriate here to comment on the general problem raised by such exposition—that of determining the relation between the culture of the Israelites and those of the other peoples of the Near East.

Apart from homiletic generalization, the easiest, and perhaps most common, approach to this problem has been the demonstration of particular similarities between details of the Old Testament and of other ancient near eastern works. This presents no difficulty: only one instance on either side is needed to prove a positive statement. Consequently a great many such similarities have been pointed out, and it is high time that someone made a full collection of them either in the form of a commentary on the Old Testament like Gaster's *Myth, Legend, and Custom*, or in that of a systematic work like de Vaux's *Ancient Israel* with an additional section on literature.

However, when it comes to the question of the differences between Israelite culture and that of the other countries of the eastern Mediterranean, the problem is much more difficult. It is immediately obvious that there are great and important differences between the works in the Old Testament and those of other Near Eastern literatures, but it is not clear how far these literary differences represent differences of the underlying cultures. In the first place, we encounter a logical embarrassment. To demonstrate differences usually requires the proof of negative propositions, and proof of a negative calls for a knowledge of the entire literature in which the occurrence of a given trait is to be denied. Such knowledge, however, is practically unobtainable so far as ancient civilizations are concerned, since the material preserved, from even the best known, is only a tiny part of what must once have existed.

Consequently, the usual procedure in trying to demonstrate differences between Israelite and other Near Eastern cultures has been to hedge statements about traits not found, by expressions such as "in the preserved material," or "it must have been, if it did occur, extremely rare." This procedure is by no means unjustified since the difference between

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frequent and infrequent traits is often more important than are traits which occur only in one culture and not at all in another.

However, the question of frequency leads to another and much more serious problem: neither the literature in the Old Testament nor the other Near Eastern literature that has come down to us can confidently be supposed an average sample or cross-section of the culture it came from. The Old Testament, as I have argued at length in *Palestinian Parties and Politics*, contains a body of material carefully selected and preserved by the continuous manuscript tradition (and revision) of a series of partisan groups for their peculiar (and often unpopular) purposes. For the other Near Eastern countries we are at the mercy of archaeological finds which, especially in Egypt, give us mostly the documents of the royal temples, the royal monuments, and the tombs of the rich. How far, then, is the apparent difference between Old Testament material and that of the other Near Eastern countries due to the difference of the ways in which the material has been preserved and, consequently, to the difference of the social classes represented?

The purpose of this paper is to suggest, as a means of attacking this problem, the use of the "hypothetico-deductive" method (so called by H. A. Wolfson, who developed it), and to sketch some of the hypotheses this method would propose for investigation.

The method can be described briefly and simply: to determine the situation as precisely as possible, ask what could have happened, and take the various possibilities as hypotheses to be confirmed or refuted by research.

In the attempt to determine the relation between Israelite culture and the other cultures of the Near East, this method dictates that we first determine the differences between the specific situations, geographical and historical, of the Israelites and their neighbors, and then inquire into the cultural differences which might be expected to follow as consequences of the historical and geographical distinctions. For purposes of clarity, let us confine ourselves to the major and most clearly characterized of ancient Near Eastern cultures, those of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Aside from the patriarchs,¹ we know the Israelites as a people or group of peoples who, in the late thirteenth century and thereafter, were found in the hill country on both sides of the Jordan valley, but mainly on the western side. From their traditions it would seem

1. The patriarchs belong to the field of mythology rather than to that of history, as do Gilgamesh, Hercules, Theseus, Helen of Troy, and their likes. This is not to say that no such persons ever existed, but it is to say that the stories about them have been so deformed by centuries of oral tradition that they belong to the class the Greeks called *mythoi*. When history developed in Greece (where, as Pausanias shows, oral tradition was long lively) authors found themselves confronted by many such stories. They soon and sensibly came to distinguish between those parts of the past which could be ascertained by *historia* (which means, 'investigation') and those they knew about only from *mythoi*. The latter is the proper domain of *mythology*. We should do well to continue using these words in their original and proper senses. The notion often expressed by writers on the ancient Near East, that "myths" have only to do with gods, is neither justified by the history of the word, nor defensible in discussion of a literature where gods and men live together. Gilgamesh was two-thirds god and one-third human; is his story two-thirds of a myth? The Dioscuri were mortal and immortal on alternate days; is the story of Castor a myth on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, but a legend on Tuesday, Thursday and, at the pleasure of the hero, Saturday?

that they came into this country as invaders from the south and east. Once in it, they lived in small cities, in villages, in tents and caves in the countryside, and supported themselves mainly by farming and herding. They did a good deal of fighting, not only with each other, but also with their neighbors—at first with the other inhabitants of the hill country and the great valley of Galilee, later with the Philistines of the coastal plain and with the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Syrians who held the plains of Transjordan to the south, east, and north. The northern Israelite tribes were conquered by the Assyrians in 722, the southern retained nominal independence until the Babylonian take-over in 587. Given this historical and geographical situation, what characteristics should distinguish the culture of this people from that of the major states of Mesopotamia and Egypt?

Let us begin with food, since it is the primary concern of man. To get food, a predominantly agricultural people must have land, water, air, sunlight, and the normal climate. Air, sunlight, and so on can be taken for granted, and therefore generally are. Adults in religion are much like children in the family: they concern themselves mainly about contingent benefits. Those necessary conditions of life that are regularly supplied by the parents or the gods are usually taken for granted. It is only in places like southern Mesopotamia, where combinations of flood, typhoon, and sandstorm can sink the whole landscape under water, blot out the sky, and seem to threaten the whole structure of the world, that rituals to reestablish or preserve the cosmic order should be expected to arise. Even if we did not know where the Biblical flood story came from we could have supposed with confidence that it did not originate in the hill country of Palestine. Floods in hill countries never threaten to cover the world.

Land, too, might seem a thing to be taken for granted, but within Israelite memory it had not been so, and not only prophetic, but also political foresight could anticipate that it might cease to be so. The anticipation probably became acute after the revival of Assyria under Tiglath Pileser III and the attendant development of the Assyrian policy of deportation. Since the gods of ancient peoples normally helped them in their wars of aggression and conquest (a pacifist god in the ancient Near East would be no less anomalous than a bellicose clergyman in Greenwich Village), we should expect that the Israelites would regularly refer to their land as that which their god had given them—that is, enabled them to conquer—and would celebrate their god as the giver, rather than the creator, of the land. Whether or not they thought he had created it, the creation was comparatively immaterial to them; the important thing was the giving, the conquest. So we should expect myths of creation to be less important in their literature than legends of the conquest.

Conquest usually carries with it a certain uneasiness in possession. Others can conquer, too. Therefore it would not be surprising if the notion early arose that, should their god be angered, he might revoke his gift. But the notion that divine anger immediately threatens to lead to the punishment of exile is not likely to have arisen until there was a real and present danger of such a punishment—that is, after 745. And it seems likely that neither of these themes would have played a large part in the literatures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, where the bulk of the population neither looked back to a conquest nor forward to an exile, being too long established for the one and too large for the other.

Given the land, the remaining necessity for food is water. In Palestine this is, of course, the most uncertain. Even the Deuteronomic authors recognized the difference from Egypt—but they tried to make a virtue of it:

The land you are going to inherit is not like the land of Egypt from which you went out, where you sowed your seed and had to water it by your own labor, like a vegetable garden; but the land which you are going to inherit is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks water from the rain of the heavens, a land of which Yahweh your God is mindful; the eyes of Yahweh your God are on it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year (Deut. 11:10f.).

Amos was more faithful to the actual situation and attributed it to divine anger: "I denied you rain . . . and I made it rain on one city, and on another city I did not send rain . . . and two or three cities migrated to one city to drink water and did not find enough" (4:7f.). In brief, Egypt lived from floods, Mesopotamia was threatened by them, while Palestine was threatened by drought. In Palestine, therefore, we should expect a major function of the deity to be the sending of rain, the rain itself to be a major form of divine reward, and the denial of it, of divine punishment. None of these characteristics of Palestinian culture should be prominent in either Mesopotamia or Egypt.

The rain in Palestine falls on hills that are largely limestone and similar materials; consequently, another characteristic of the country and the culture is the frequency and importance of springs and of caves. The many place names containing the words 'spring' or 'well' testify to the importance of such permanent centers of water supply as political and cultic centers. The caves, on the other hand, not only housed the poorest class of the population and were convenient for shepherds and their flocks, but also offered places of refuge from foreign conquerors or from domestic tyrants. David fled to one from Saul, Elijah to another from Jezebel. Although we have reports only of a few cases, it does not seem unlikely that the unusual spirit of independence vis-a-vis the country's established authorities, the constant criticism of the kings and the priests, that runs through Israelite literature owes a good deal to the facilities afforded malcontents by a hilly and cavernous country.

The hills were, in general, the limit of Israelite territory. Indeed, on one occasion, when a Syrian invasion had been defeated, "the ministers of the King of Syria said to him, 'The Israelites' gods are gods of the mountains, therefore the Israelites defeated us; so now let us fight them in the plain, we shall certainly defeat them' " (1 Kgs. 20:23f.). The Israelite author who reports this opinion reports also that Yahweh proved it false by defeating the Syrians in the plains, too. Be that as it may, the story points to a conspicuous characteristic of Israelite culture and cult. Given the general human notion that up is good and down is bad (perhaps derived from the fact that in infancy the Great Powers—our parents—were usually above us), and given a mountainous country, we might expect to find that the gods are thought to live on certain mountains, that these and other mountains are the favored sites of revelations and of miracles, that holy men are said to have gone up mountains to die, that the popular worship was commonly conducted on hill tops and other high places, and, in cities, on roof tops, and that the chief official sanctuary, though on a very modest hill near the capital, claimed to be on a mountain and, eventually, on the highest mountain of them all. None of these traits should be characteristic of the culture of Egypt or Mesopotamia—or at least of lower Mesopotamia (here Assyria might well diverge). When in lower Mesopotamia one finds an equation of the temple with a mountain, attempts to build artificial mountains, and the like, it would seem plausible to suppose that these traits were not native to the culture, and to look for some outside source, as one does for the traits imported from the desert into Palestinian culture by the Israelites.

The mountainous character of the country should be reflected in many characteristics of the culture and the literature. To begin with a comparative triviality: olives and vines thrive better in the hills than in the plains of Mesopotamia and Egypt, accordingly their products and the imagery based on them, especially on wine, should be more important in the Palestinian tradition. How trivial such matters actually are is hard to decide when one thinks of the enormous range of the consequences of imagery: would the eucharist have had the same evocative power if the fluid in the cup had been beer (the common drink of Egypt and Mesopotamia)?

More important is the simple fact that the mountains break up the country—and the deep Jordan valley breaks it even more sharply—into tiny and comparatively isolated segments. Each little valley had to be conquered by itself, therefore had a history of its own, therefore might have a population of its own. Israelite tradition represents the land as inhabited, before the conquest, by six or seven or even ten different peoples. And the Biblical authors lament that this condition was not fundamentally changed by the conquest. The Israelites were added as one people more and eventually became the majority of the ruling class throughout the hill districts, but the other peoples are said to have lived on as distinct groups down to the time of Solomon, at least. Moreover, even if the Israelites invaded as a single force (which seems unlikely) the divisions of the land soon broke them up into small and semi-independent groups. The history is therefore predominantly one of small political units. For the Israelites these units are the tribes. Tribal feeling and affiliation is marked. Hostility between the tribe of Judah and the northern tribes almost split the kingdom of David and did split the kingdom of Solomon after his death. This tribal feeling will later express itself in genealogies—filled out, of course, by later invention, but at least reflecting a sense of the earlier political reality. Reliable history, too, will be approached first by the stories of tribal heroes, not leaders of “all Israel.”

By contrast to the Israelite tribes, the unit for the native population was the little city, from which most of the Old Testament's *legal*, as opposed to *narrative*, material seems to have come. The legal material, as is well known, reflects in many points the continuing tradition of Mesopotamian culture; the narrative material is specifically Israelite. It is remarkable that none of our early historical traditions come from the little cities that were later absorbed into the Davidic kingdom. That is to say, we have no stories of heroes of Jerusalem or Beth Shan to compare with those of the heroes of Manasseh and Gilead. When kingship emerges in Israel it is not the old city kingship, but is tribal. The king is surrounded by a circle of his “mighty men” whose deeds of daring seem to have been the themes of a popular literature of which we have glimpses in the stories told of Saul and Jonathan, of David's men and of David himself. Neither the court of the great king who dominates Egyptian thought from the beginning of literacy on, nor the municipal tradition of early Mesopotamia is likely to have produced either tribal or typically “heroic” materials, nor, consequently, such a history as that of David and his court, which is clearly a development of the heroic tradition.

The distance between the tribal and the municipal traditions can be seen by a comparison of the stories of the judges (not to mention David) with the story of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is clearly a cultic and mythological figure—he makes a bosom friend of the wild man from the waste, goes to one end of the world to fight the giant in the cedar mountain, rejects the love of Ishtar and kills the bull she sends to avenge the insult, then goes to the other end of the world to get the plant of immortal life from the survivor of the flood; he is celebrated

first of all as the builder of a city and a holy place, the Eanna temple in Uruk. His closest analogue (and perhaps his remote literary descendant) is Odysseus. The Old Testament parallels to his story are the myths of foundation heroes (the patriarchs), not the legends of tribal heroes like Gideon and Jephthah.

Because of the geographical and political fragmentation of the country, the established authorities in Israel were always relatively weak. Consequently we should expect Israelite literature to show less influence from these authorities and their agents, and more influence from independent and even anti-establishment figures, than appears in the literatures of the great centralized political powers of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Conspicuous among the agents of the establishment are, of course, the temples and the court officials, especially the scribes. In Israel, while some priests are important authors, the priesthood as such—the temples and their interests—are conspicuously absent from most of the pre-exilic *narrative* material. (Is there any pre-exilic reference to domain lands owned by the Jerusalem temple?) A further question is how far the political power was able to control the cult. The reports of “high places” which were allowed to continue from reign to reign may conceal a stubborn resistance by the local cult centers to submit to domination from Jerusalem. The historical books, certainly by deliberate selection, show us a series of prophets who, from Samuel on, reject and defy the political rulers. The books of the pre-exilic prophets themselves (also selected) begin with Amos’ expulsion from Bethel and end with Jeremiah’s imprisonment and his subsequent denunciation of the Jewish popular leaders in Egypt.

Finally, the scribes are conspicuously absent in most of the literary tradition. Here two factors are to be reckoned with. First, the petty courts could hardly support much in the way of a secretariat, just as they could not afford very large priestly bodies. Second, and more important, writing was alphabetic and therefore required little special training. Consequently, while of course we find a “secretary” and a “recorder” or two mentioned as high officials in the courts from David’s time on, we have no reason to suppose that they were members of a special “scribal class” or that they had any peculiar training not possessed by the other equally literate members of the court. It is a priori likely that as books increased there came to be trained calligraphers who made a living by copying them, and who may have eked out their income by teaching writing and perhaps reading and occasionally something about the content of some of the books they copied. But there is no reason to suppose that such petty craftsmen and elementary teachers should be equated with the high officials of the court. At most some of them may have been employed about the court as copyists to keep well written records and produce well written documents—a sort of stenographic staff. This is quite a different thing from the scribal classes of Mesopotamia and Egypt—definite groups of highly trained individuals who had mastered the complicated arts of writing in demotic, hieratic, hieroglyphic, and cuneiform, and who consequently monopolized the positions requiring literacy in the great courts (except insofar as Aramaic was used in Mesopotamia). In Israel we should suppose that, although some teachers of reading and writing did put together collections of commonplace sayings as practice books for their students (the sort of thing represented in this country by *McGuffey’s Fifth Reader*) there was never any important “scribal class.” The evidence of the wide influence supposed to have been exercised by “the scribes” will probably turn out to be evidence of nothing more than the fact that commonplaces are common.

To this set of hypotheses derivable from the basic historical situation of the ancient

Israelites, three observations may be added: 1. These are hypotheses, indications of problems that deserve investigation, and of a general method by which further problems may be anticipated; they are not theses to be taken as fixed statements of a position. 2. It is clear that many important characteristics of Israelite literature and religion, characteristics that distinguish the Israelite tradition sharply from those of Egypt and Mesopotamia (for instance, the jealousy of the deity, the hostility to images, the peculiar development of prophecy) are not included in the preceding list. They are not there because they do not seem to follow as consequences from basic historical facts. Nor does the given list pretend to be complete; it contains only some of the important peculiarities which are probably explicable from the geography and history of Israel. There is a likelihood that these explicable peculiarities were characteristic of Israelite literature as a whole, or with only minor exceptions, since they resulted from causes operating on the whole of it. Peculiarities not traceable to such general causes (those due, for instance, to particular individuals or parties) are more likely to owe their prominence in the preserved literature to selection, and to have been comparatively insignificant in the bulk of the literature now lost. However, this likelihood cannot always be relied on. Many peculiarities of many religions—for instance, most purity laws—have no perspicuous historical explanation. 3. It should be noted that many of the peculiarities pointed out have parallels in ancient Ugaritic and Greek religion and literature. No doubt this is due to the fact that both geographically and politically Iron Age Palestine was in many ways much more like Iron Age Phoenicia, Syria, and Greece, than it was like Mesopotamia and Egypt. Similar circumstances produced similar results—though communication is not to be denied and direct influence may occasionally have occurred. Whatever their causes, the similarities suggest that the three traditions should be studied simultaneously. This hypothesis has been strongly supported by the example of Professor Gaster, who has been outstanding among Old Testament scholars by reason of his wide knowledge of classical, as well as Ugaritic, material, and whose work has repeatedly demonstrated the value of each of these traditions for the illustration of the others.