Patronage, Sectarianism, and Cultural Hegemony: Historical Speculations on the Socio-Cultural Background of the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: Patronage relationships have been ethnographically found at many locations in the Middle East during the second half of the twentieth century but also detected in ancient Near Eastern sources in more recent times, in every case mostly in connection with political situations. Patronage, however, also operates at the level of mentalities and its expression is equally discovered in worldviews of different cultures. This condition may therefore be observed as well in textualized mental expressions like the Hebrew Bible. In cases exposing sectarianism in the biblical stories, we may assert that patron-client bonds are taken by ancient scribes as the key mode for illustrating domination, subordination and in general an ontological order, transcending socio-politics and impacting also on what we would analytically deem a socio-religious imagination and its ulterior conceptual derivations. This paper seeks to relate clues and examples of patronage and sectarianism in the Hebrew Bible while focussing on their socio-cultural background. These expressions, in the history of the production of the biblical texts, would end up manifesting a particular cultural hegemony of a biblical ontology articulated by patronage dynamics in the southern Levant since the Persian period, but especially in connection with the Hasmonean rise to power, centred in Jerusalem.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible; patron-client relationships; sectarianism; cultural hegemony

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**Introduction: As an Anthropologist Would**

The themes and issues treated in this contribution are, properly speaking, historical in nature. However, the analytical emphasis is placed on approaching these themes and issues with an anthropological or even ethnographic epistemological perspective, i.e., questioning social or cultural perspectives given as obvious or natural, but also relating historical processes with their own cultural and symbolic contexts.²

When reading the Hebrew Bible from a socio-anthropological perspective, and precisely without losing sight of the historical processes involved in the production of its texts, two themes may be identified. In a first place, the understanding of reality through an essential and exclusionary opposition between the “People of God”—or also the “Children of Israel”—who are expected to obey YHWH’s commands, and the pagan peoples, who worship deities other than YHWH; and, in a second place, the presence of basic units of patronage bonds between a major party and a minor one configuring the socio-political background. Both these aspects present in biblical literature—namely, sectarianism and patronage—were initially studied in different yet interrelated ways by Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas L. Thompson, the founding members of the so-called “Copenhagen school” in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies, in contributions from the 1990s and early 2000s.

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It was Lemche who first advanced in recent times the hypothesis that most if not all of the literature of the Hebrew Bible was composed or “edited” under special social circumstances, tracing the origins of these circumstances to the Mesopotamian Exile and the Return to the Promised Land between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. And both events appear to be more relevant in their “mythical” significance, in an anthropological sense, than properly historical, as narrated in the Hebrew Bible, even if we can assume and demonstrate to a certain extent a return of some Yahwistic worshippers. Lemche, however, focuses his attention especially on the social and religious conditions in Southwestern Asia during the Hellenistic period. In effect, particular conditions during this period would have fostered a religiously sectarian understanding of past, present and future reality for biblical tradents. Likewise, it is also Lemche’s merit to have developed an historical analysis based on the concept of patronage when discussing the Syro-Palestinian or rather Levantine social, political and cultural background of Israelite society as depicted in the Hebrew Bible.

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In the following pages, I shall attempt to relate the two intervening factors, patronage and sectarianism, in order to envision a possible social and cultural background for understanding the political and religious world of the biblical writers and the final shape of the Hebrew Bible. Incidentally, a third factor related to questions of cultural hegemony appears as relevant in this connection: it should be noted that the referred word “writer” when applied to ancient scribes might be somewhat misleading. With this term, it is essentially intended to mean a person creating an interpretation of a particular tradition, as it is being written down—the interpretation re-creates meaning, and in this specific manner, the ancient writer evokes a reality socially meaningful for the intended audience. In quite a few ways, we can understand ancient writers as proper intellectuals (cf. below).

Lastly, my main purpose in this essay is not to offer final answers to these questions nor to present a discussion of the complex internal textual processes of the composition of the biblical text and its narratives, which has already been addressed many times by historical-critical scholars. Instead, I wish to foster socio-scientific perspectives—speculative as they may be, and rather alternative to the common historical-critical analyses in Old Testament scholarship—on the socio-cultural background of the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism(s), relying on biblical depictions as a primary source of

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intellectual rather than factual historical information.⁸ The following discussion then focuses on patronage and sectarianism as factors of importance in the shaping of Second Temple Judaisms and its textual productions.

Conceptual Departures

Patronage in Contemporary Social Anthropology

The socio-political nature of patronage in traditional societies has been thoroughly studied during the past sixty years, especially through the methodology produced by accumulative ethnographic fieldwork in the Mediterranean basin and also in the Middle East region between the 1950s and the 1980s—what has generally been termed “the anthropology of Mediterranean societies” or simply “Mediterranean anthropology.”⁹ The basic structure of patron-client relationships entails, in short, a dyadic and notably asymmetrical bond between an individual with power, authority and/or prestige and resources of any kind (the patron) and another individual without power or resources (the client), who consents to being in the relationship and therefore obtains something in exchange. There is always a direct reciprocity between the parts, but the ever-asymmetrical condition of the bond implies that the patron sets the

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norms through which a particular exchange of protection for loyalty and assistance, or also material resources for debt, will be materialized. The direct, personalized, and reciprocal nature of patronage makes it exclusivist by definition: there can be only one patron; a client cannot have two simultaneous patrons (at least for a substantial period of time). The patron’s clientele constitutes one group of loyalty-bound individuals, forming a vertical pyramidal hierarchy (big or important clients can at the same time perform as mid-rank patrons of other lesser clients) of protection from the top down and obedience and loyalty from the bottom up.

**Sectarianism in Contemporary Societies**

Considering modern and contemporary examples of sectarianism from the Islamic Middle East, we may be able to grasp some interpretive patterns for interpreting ancient forms of sectarianism comparatively.\(^{10}\) We must, however, always bear in mind that ancient sectarianism differs from modern cases, even if we can attest similar patterns of social behaviour and the presence of an integrated understanding of reality: historical and cultural processes and changes appear in the presentation of the modern phenomenon and this fact must be taken into account when applying analogies in a transhistorical analysis. By “integrated” I refer to a conceptualisation of reality that does not draw any fundamental difference or delimitation between concrete analytical spheres such as politics, economics and religion, or private and public life, or the divine and the earthly worlds. Every aspect of human life is accordingly understood

under a leading (integrated) pattern of behaviour. For instance, among conservative Islamic communities this pattern is dictated by the *shari'ah* norms; among conservative, or better, ultra-orthodox Jewish communities the pattern is based on living exclusively according to the *torah* teachings and *halachic* precepts. As such, “us and them” becomes the main performative factor of a sectarian worldview, even for situations presenting factionalisms within a same religious tradition, and it therefore exposes the key mode of social articulation. Needless to say, such a sectarian worldview coincides in many aspects with the direct and personalized relationship found in patronage bonds, not least in the contemporary Middle East (although the latter are ethnographically proven to be much more flexible than the socio-religious sectarian bonds).

Back to the comparison between ancient and modern sects, David Chalcraft reminds the following for us:

[S]ociology is built on the assumption that sectarian phenomena in the present should be very different from sectarian phenomena in the past precisely because of the fact that the phenomena will be occurring in different types of society with a range of social, political and cultural institutions and arrangements. Hence comparing a sect in modernity with a sect in the past is not to conflate one with the other but actually

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11 Interestingly, this is illustrated—and besides the common Orientalist tropes in this lengthy treatment—in G.E. Post’s Victorian description of the many characteristics of the “nations and sects” in Syria-Palestine, for instance: “(1) Religion is universal. The whole population is enrolled by the Government according to religious divisions. The first question asked of a man in court is ‘What is your religion?’ To say that a man has no religion is equivalent in public opinion and law to cursing his religion, and declaring it to be of no account, as it is held to be impossible for anyone to be without religion. (2) Religion enters into all the Relationships of Life […] Religion regulates the social relationships and affinities.” And quite relevant for the present contribution: “[…] Sectarian schools are the rule, non-sectarian schools have not proven a success,” which is telling of the common factionalism in social (i.e., collective) identities’ expressions in the Ottoman Levant (“Essays on the Sects and Nationalities of Syria and Palestine,” *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* 23/2 [1891]: 99–147, here pp. 145–146; the emphases are original).

to discover what is similar and different between them and to account for those differences by reference to social variations.\(^\text{13}\)

Accordingly, every phenomenon of contemporary sectarianism must first be properly historicized; their socio-historical causes must be brought to the fore so we may grasp its particularities, since from a historical point of view there is no transcendental or essential form of sectarianism. If we take, for instance, the ethno-historical cases of sectarianism in Lebanon during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into account, we must attend to the historical context of a political and economically decadent Ottoman empire and the question of the modernisation of the Middle East by the interaction between European actors and local elites, not only regarding technology and infrastructure but also through the confrontation of ideas, worldviews and even ontologies, notably in relation to the spread of external factors like (Western) nationalism and secularism, the local reactions to both of them and their eventual reformulations by local populations.\(^\text{14}\)

What we may learn from studying modern and contemporary examples of sectarianism is how socio-historical conditions generate or influence worldviews, and how such worldviews impact on the wider society—which gives us a lot to think about regarding the key polarisation in the Hebrew Bible between those who follow YHWH’s

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will and those who disregard it or reject it, but also about the “true Israel” and deviations from this theo-ideological notion (see below).

Cultural Hegemony

The concept of “cultural hegemony” builds on the work of the Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) who referred to it, especially in his *Prison Notebooks*, as basically the dominance of a series of ideological concepts and expectations proper of the ruling class over the rest of society, producing a worldview aligned to, subservient of or dependent on, precisely, the ruling class’s ideology.\(^\text{15}\) In this process, those who Gramsci categorized under the concept of “organic intellectuals” are fundamental since they produce and disseminate the aforementioned ideological concepts and expectations which then make hegemony possible over the different lower classes in society.

Gramsci, with the concept of “cultural hegemony,” was naturally thinking especially about modern and industrialized societies. However, there is in effect a potential and heuristic use of “cultural hegemony” as an interpretive and explanatory tool of particular historical situations of ancient societies, especially in cases where scribalism possesses a technical importance as a social and intellectual practice producing and transmitting both collective traditions and particular theological (ideological) messages, which may eventually become hegemonic in certain circumstances.\(^\text{16}\) Without delving into discussions of this concept within Marxist social, economic and


\(^{16}\) Cf., for instance, E. Zucchetti and A.M. Cimino (eds.), *Antonio Gramsci and the Ancient World* (Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies; London: Routledge, 2021), essentially dealing with Greek, Etruscan and Roman antiquity, but including several insights to further thinking about other situations in East Mediterranean antiquity; and most recently S.M. Thompson, *Displays of Cultural Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in the Late Bronze and Iron Age Levant: The Public Presence of Foreign Powers and Local Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2023), dealing as the title indicates with the period ca. 1550-550 BCE.

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historical analyses, we may attempt a first exploration and see how it contributes to the relationship of patronage and sectarianism in Second Temple Judaisms, always taking into account the limitations intrinsic to the concept’s historicity and its related interpretations and the historical particularities of southern Levantine societies and religious communities.

**Patronage in the Hebrew Bible**

Under the correct analytical predisposition, patronage relations in the Hebrew Bible can indeed be found everywhere, from Genesis to the wisdom literature (and even beyond that). One needs only attend to the textual evidence as an anthropologist (or better, an ethnographer in the field) would. The key question is to acknowledge that the ideal social order in the biblical world—namely, the mythic and narrative worlds structuring biblical stories—is not the outcome of a popular agreement but, quite the contrary, a command “from above” impacting on the people. If one can summarise this key point: YHWH establishes what is right and wrong, good and bad, accepted and forbidden in the world. Therefore, justice in the Hebrew Bible is not a collective social and horizontal pact, but rather what is good in YHWH’s eyes (cf., e.g., Deut 6:18; 1 Sam 3:18). It is—ultimately—an arbitrary decision made by a powerful (divine) patron. This is in effect YHWH’s patronage over humanity—and in particular over certain chosen humans, namely personal servants (clients) of the divinity.

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17 For a general background, see V.H. Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250–587 BCE (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); and further J. Georges, Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Interpretations (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); and the literature in footnote 5 above.


19 Thompson, The Bible in History, 305–317
In the context of the previous assertion, the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22–23:19), which used to be considered as expressing a kind of normative law, should be actually understood as a constitutive part of religious or wisdom literature, not a section in a juridical archive of a kingdom in antiquity. Unless extra-biblical evidence is presented (which so far has never been found), one cannot say that it constituted the cornerstone of some possible Israelite legal system of the Iron Age in Palestine (ca. 1150–550 BCE). From a strictly textual point of view, we could assume that the Covenant Code is at least exilic in form and origin and that it created the bases for the self-understanding of early forms of Judaism. But here we can go further and think comparatively of the many examples coming from previous periods of the ancient Near East, like treaties and loyalty oaths. These textual artefacts expressing the bonding of two parties (a few times symmetrically, but most of the times asymmetrically) may in effect be regarded as manifestations of a particular comprehension of political reality in terms of patronage. We ought to remember the aforementioned integrated understanding of society: concrete separations or delimitations of reality, such as “religion,” “politics,” “economics,” etc., were conceptually non-existent in ancient Near Eastern societies. Therefore, it is not improbable that the Covenant Code was conceived of, in form and content, with a patronage perception of the socio-political reality in mind. This perception of patronage, involving both divine and human realms, dwells implicitly in the formulae of the...

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22 See the discussion in J. Van Seters, A Law Book for the Diaspora: Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); also E.T. Mullen, Jr., Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity (SBLSS; Atlanta, GA, Scholars Press, 1993). To speak of an “Israelite national identity” during these periods of multiple Judaisms seems to be at the least misleading but also conceptually anachronistic.
code. Taking the whole of the Hebrew Bible, the interaction between YHWH and different humans clearly responds to a logic consistent with patronage as found in different ethnographic contexts.

In this sense, it may be possible to affirm that patronage and covenant constitute in fact two interrelated modes of expressing an ancient form of alliance—or better, we can state that covenant relationships are a kind of patronage relationship. It is the socio-political practice that creates the ontological order, which is projected as the correct and just manner in which the world is to be set.24 Thus, apart from such an order, patronage establishes political legitimacy in society: no external laws to the personal relationship of patronage were needed, only the authority of a mighty lord and his word.25 In spite of the particularities of the biblical covenant, which involve a pact between a deity and a people—something quite unique in comparison to other treaty formulas in the ancient Near East—the operative logic of this relationship is fitting with a patronage model: YHWH commands as a patron to his clients, the people of Israel, usually by means of divinely appointed individuals, which act as brokers between patron and

24 The idea of the practice of justice and righteousness, especially with the god or the king as warrant of these factors, ought to be related to ideal instances of patronage in the ancient Near East, including the Hebrew Bible. Cf. the original study by H.H. Schmid, Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung: Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffes (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968), who however did not have patronage on his interpretive and analytical horizon.

clients. What we may therefore justly call a “theology of patronage” is consistent with a socio-cultural background proper of patronage kingdoms or societies: higher powers ruling over them and dyadic relationships of protection, loyalty and unequal reciprocity taking place in Palestine since the Bronze Age and existing well into the mid-first millennium BCE and later periods.

Projections of a Sectarian Society and the Socio-Historical Background of the Hebrew Bible

The idea of the existence of sectarian characteristics in the early manifestations of Judaism can already be found in Max Weber’s Das antike Judentum (published as a book in 1923), where the key distinction of sectarianism is the voluntary membership to a sect by means of qualification. However, and without discarding a Weberian approach to the issue, my interest resides with a more historical and anthropological approach to the question of sectarian perspectives in

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Judaism from a general and broader outlook and the hypothesis that the creation of the Hebrew Bible occurred during the second half of the first millennium BCE. In this sense, any typology and any conceptual model are only tools for arranging our textual (and archaeological) data and being able to analyse and understand them.

If we follow the biblical narrative, the remnant who returned from the exile in Babylon, as narrated in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, constitutes a pious community (the b’ne haggolâ), the chosen ones, the “true Israel” who are to take over the land of Palestine to fulfill YHWH’s promise to Abraham. In the Hebrew Bible, the implicit sectarian distinction creates in fact a double sectarianism, towards the outer world and within Judaism: in a general manner, there is those who know and study the law, and live according to it, and those who do not (cf. Psalm 1); in a more particular manner, and within the first pious group, there is those who worship YHWH in the correct place of worship, i.e., the Jerusalem temple—and Nehemiah here acts like the “chief sectarian”—and those who worship in the wrong places, i.e., the Mt. Gerizim temple.

Now, what could the appropriate socio-historical context for the development of this sectarian view in biblical literature be?

Without making an extensive survey of current approaches to the question, it may suffice to briefly mention as a start a position that is becoming widely accepted in Old Testament scholarship. Over two decades ago, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman proposed the

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29 See, e.g., Chalcraft (ed.), Sectarianism in Early Judaism; Stern (ed.), Sects and Sectarianism in Jewish History; and especially Jokiranta, Social Identity and Sectarianism.

30 Precisely, as Jokiranta (Social Identity and Sectarianism, 33) notes: “Sociology of sectarianism is not a given, a package that either fits or does not fit the material at hand. It is a tool that highlights certain features over others and provides empirical and theoretical elements for hypotheses.”

31 I owe the bon mot to Martti Nissinen (pers. comm., October 2023).

late Judean monarchical period as the time of the initial composition of the biblical texts. The main problem with this hypothesis is that the dating of the core of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic History to the seventh century BCE (during Hezekiah’s and Josiah’s reigns) does not actually depend on extra-biblical evidence but instead relies essentially on biblical data and historical probability alone, reflecting the very same problems that one encounters in much older historiography which claimed very early contexts for the rise of the historiographical practice in Israel: for instance, Gerhard von Rad’s dating of the beginning of biblical historiography to tenth-century Palestine, in the court of kings David and Solomon.

It could on the other hand be possible to suggest that the Persian period (550–332 BCE) might provide us with a better earliest probable context for the appearance of some traits of biblical historiography, namely a biblical discourse about the past of Israel (which however cannot be necessarily equated with a proper dealing with the historical past of the region, in spite of a number of archaeological and epigraphic convergences in some cases). It is rather during the

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Hellenistic period (332–63 BCE) in the Levant (and extensively in Southwestern Asia) that we find socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions which could best explain the development of biblical historiography, such as the presence of scribal or theological schools and other intellectual and academic realms. In fact, the Hellenistic period also accounts for the spread of older Near Eastern and especially Greek intellectual (mythic, literary, religious) influences and borrowings that have been identified in many stories and tropes of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, we could propose a scribal process that was perhaps ignited by a Persian exilic condition—or better, its ideology—then had its peak during the Hellenistic period, and whose resolution may well have lasted, in its final arrangements, until Roman times. This does not mean, of course, that the biblical narrative was created out of nothing in the Hellenistic period. It is clear that many traditions and motifs in the biblical stories are originally older in their first literary attestations, dating in fact from the Persian or the Assyrian periods, and equally from much earlier times and related to different locations in the Near East. What I contend instead is that both the


intellectual motivation and the necessary material resources for beginning the writing of what later would become the Hebrew Bible find a more appropriate context during the Hellenistic period; yet, the mythic pattern contained in biblical traditions, memories and stories comes from centuries, even millennia of intellectual development in the Near East.

According to Lemche, the authors of the Hebrew Bible “belonged to the well-educated societal elite in possession of a definite socio-religious programme. The elite knew the Mesopotamian law and university tradition but it was also acquainted with religious and historical traditions from Syria and Palestine.”

Lemche also characterized—maybe somewhat mischievously—the Hebrew Bible authors as “Taliban,” and from a comparative point of view the analogy would indeed be not totally incorrect (cf., e.g., the worldview expressed in Ps 1:1-2; Isa 4:2-6; 5:8-24; 6:1-13), albeit the historical background for both religious sectarian groups is of course quite different. The relevant fact is that both the Hebrew Bible authors and the Taliban aspired to live strictly according to the order sanctioned by God (YHWH/Allah), and they were willing to fight and exert violence to make that happen. Sectarianism, as a matter of fact, usually involves some kind of violence, at times physical but mostly symbolic in its discursive construction and expression, and such violence seems to be condoned when perceived from within the sectarian worldview: the conquest of the Promised Land and its implicit genocide, as told in Josh 2-12, is a clear example of this, far from any consideration for “the other” or

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their human rights (a most anachronistic expectation, however). Finally, the religious programmes of both religious communities elevate the submission to God’s word and command as a most important factor. For explicit biblical examples, let us think of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22:5–8 (or of Ishmael, as it is evoked in the Islamic tradition), or the different situations narrated in the story of Job.

Let me rapidly sketch now a possible historical development for the constitution of this sectarian condition, following Thompson’s reconstruction of the matter. The period from the ninth to the fifth centuries BCE in the southern Levant is one of local political fragmentation—something coherent with Palestine’s topography—with autonomous patronage centres interacting diversely with, but mostly subordinated to, imperial powers (Assyria, Babylonia, Persia); this is a historical scenario where the cult of inclusive Yahwism, as Thompson has called it, may well have developed. The following period, from the fifth to second centuries witnessed a process from inclusive Yahwism to exclusive Yahwism and a competition between cultic centres, notably those of Samaria and Jerusalem. More recently, Diana Edelman has proposed a similar development,
although adopting the already mentioned possibility that biblical texts were produced during the Iron Age II (ca. 970–550 BCE):

Many scholars argue early forms of Judaism only began in the Hellenistic period [...]. However, the texts of Tanak espousing the beliefs and practices were created before then, signalling at least one group already was hoping to implement the new changes in its own social setting and likely did so within limited circles. If one feels a need to distinguish these earliest forms of Judaism from what emerges under the Hasmoneans, one could distinguish the transitional period between monarchic Yahwism and Hellenistic Judaism by referring to intertemple Yahwisms from 586 to ca. 450 BCE and Second Temple Yahwism, once the temple is rebuilt, until the Hasmonean dynasty arises [...].

After a period of “intertemple Yahwisms,” Jerusalem eventually prevailed, and we must note accordingly that the final shape of the ideology of the Hebrew Bible, with Jerusalem as a “mythic chronospatial centre,” seems to reflect clearly a “centralization of religious and secular power in a single place (Jerusalem),” which in this context is to be found (outside the biblical texts) in the rule of Palestine by the Hasmonean priest-kings in the second century BCE. This would mean that, after the intellectual process of creation, including

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Hjelm, Jerusalem’s Rise to Sovereignty, 3 and 1, respectively. The following builds closely on the interpretation originally offered in Pfoh, “Ancient Historiography.”

influence and borrowing from the wider intellectual world of the East Mediterranean and Southwest Asia, of the biblical narrative from Genesis to Kings and the wisdom literature in the Hellenistic centres of Southwestern Asia and Egypt (e.g., Babylonia, Seleucia, Alexandria), there must have been a theo-ideological arrangement of this collection of stories in Palestine to fit the political situation in Hasmonean Jerusalem. Such a necessary arrangement, in its textual messages, reflects in fact a sectarian worldview or ideology, even though it shares Hellenistic literary features. The narrative pattern is clearly discernible: a chosen lineage, which develops into a people; a migration to a foreign land; the return and conquest of the land; etc. This pattern appears not only if we compare the narrative of the Primary History or the Deuteronomistic History with, for instance, Herodotus’ Histories, but also with other “national historiographies” (most anachronistic as the term “national” may be for premodern times) of the second half of the first millennium BCE: Berossus of Chaldea (ca. fourth century BCE) and his Babyloniaca, the Egyptian priest Manetho (ca. third century BCE) and his Aegyptiaca, the later Dionysius of Halicarnassus (ca. late first century BCE) and his Antiquitates Romanae, as well as Philo of Byblos (ca. first century CE) and his history of Phoenicia.

Lastly, we may differentiate the activity of biblical writers producing texts and traditions under imperial (Assyrian? Babylonian? Persian, Hellenistic) contexts from those writers editing and readdressing older traditions under the Hasmonean rule of Palestine: it should be clear that while in both instances these writers perform as intellectuals within their own communities, under the Hasmoneans these writers could in effect be understood as “organic intellectuals” in the Gramscian sense, enforcing a “nationalistic” ideological worldview over their own people and other peoples under Hasmonean
domination—although one may better see this phenomenon in terms of an ancient imagined-community building under the idea of “Israel” in Hasmonean times rather than tracing what are properly modern nationalistic sentiments in ancient contexts.

In sum, the intellectual environment of Greco-Roman Southwestern Asia may have been then an appropriate background where the Hebrew Bible creators found its socio-cultural place and in which a process of “Hellenistic enculturation” and of “education-enculturation” as formative of the Hebrew Bible took place—as David Carr has proposed. And in this sense, not only Babylon in an initial phase but, as noticed before, also Seleucia and Alexandria in subsequent periods, ought to be deemed as appropriate centres where biblical intellectuals may have shaped the traditions, myths and stories coming from earlier times in the Near East into the narrative that we find today in the Hebrew Bible, between the (sixth-)fifth and second centuries BCE. In Jerusalem, the Hasmoneans would have added a final sectarian understanding to this “national historiography,” standardising a series of rituals and religious norms that would have constituted the finalized performance of Judaism—or at least, a certain kind of Judaism now culturally hegemonic from this period onwards.

In this context, and as Eyal Regev has noted: “Their identity was based on commitment to the Torah and hatred towards the idolatrous

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47 See the discussion in A.M. Cimino, “The Author as Intellectual? Hints and Thoughts towards a Gramscian ‘Re-Reading’ of the Ancient Literatures,” in E. Zucchetti and A.M. Cimino (eds.), Antonio Gramsci and the Ancient World (Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies; London: Routledge, 2021), 329–340, which albeit being focused on Greek and Roman authors, it is heuristically useful for thinking the issue comparatively in Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic (Ptolemaic and Seleucid), and Hasmonean Palestine.

48 For the latter, cf. the interpretive perspective in D. Mendels, The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism: Jewish and Christian Ethnicity in Ancient Palestine (2nd edn; Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1997).


51 See Adler, Origins of Judaism.
Gentiles. A new ‘nationalistic’ sense of Jewish collective identity was created.”52

**A Closing Comment**

Out of an intellectual condensation of southern Levantine socio-political practices, both patronage and sectarianism would have created a marked social and ideological identity polarity within many Eastern Mediterranean societies: people attached to a particular individual or deity, and people who do not fall into such bonding, that is, the sociological factionalist dichotomy of “us” and “them.” The coexistence of these factors, besides being interrelated, might have been especially developed in an age of redefinitions and creation of what we may now call ethnic identities (i.e., “Judaeans,” then “Jews,” etc.) during the second half of the first millennium BCE. In this context, the textual traditions produced mainly by Judaeans in centres of Southwestern Asia but also in the Levant, and also by Samaritans and then Jewish (Hasmonean) elites—namely, the tension between the different manifestations of biblical tradition through its competing traditions—during these centuries were all transmitted through expressions of sectarianism originating in the socio-politics of patronage, a practice existing for millennia in the region.53 The cultural

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hegemony ultimately achieved by the Hasmonean control of biblical tradition contributed to transforming YHWH, originally a lofty god among others in the Iron Age, into a “national” god of Judaism, and perhaps more importantly, to a personal protector to whom one owes individual loyalty.54 Thus, in a profane world of patrons and clients, the best—if not the only—way of portraying the absolutely powerful nature of God is to conceive of Him as the ultimate cosmic Patron, ruling over His earthly creatures and disposing over at divine will over His exclusive clients: the Children of Israel. This is one of the socio-anthropological pictures that may be obtained from reading the Hebrew Bible historically and, most importantly, its cultural worlds as an anthropologist would.