

Similarities between the Primeval History in Genesis 1-11 and the Greek Historiographers, Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus of Halicarnassus

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ABSTRACT

Consideration of the writings of the Greek Historians, Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus of Halicarnassus, in comparison with the Primeval History in Genesis 1- 11, indicates that the Greek and the biblical authors shared a number of historical concerns, including a discussion of human accomplishments, the memory of the creation of a post-flood vineyard, three sons of the flood hero and their descendants, segmented genealogies, ethnographic concerns, the beginning of languages, and the transition to more recent history from a primordial age.

INTRODUCTION

It is a fascinating study to compare the narrative accounts in Genesis 1-11 with the writings of Greek historiographers, especially Hecataeus of Miletus (550-475 BCE), author of the very fragmentary *Periegesis* or *Periodos Ges* (“*Journey round the World*”) and *Genealogiae* (“*Genealogies* or *Histories*”), and Herodotus of Halicarnassus (484-425 BCE), author of “*Histories*.” Herodotus has commonly been called the “father of history” due to his consideration of human events without recourse to explanations involving the intervention of the gods. However, Hecataeus has likewise received the same title from some classical scholars (Bury 1909: 8-18), but he does not receive it in our popular imagination because most of his writings have been lost. Hecataeus lived in the sixth century BCE and Herodotus lived in the fifth century BCE. Herodotus is responsible for recalling many of the observations made by Hecataeus (Van Seters 1983: 12). In fact, Herodotus may have plagiarized some of Hecataeus’ writings, but the extent to which he did that remains uncertain. This is especially true with the descriptions of Egypt by Herodotus (Pearson: 90; West 1991:144-60). The famous quote by Herodotus that Egypt is the “gift of the Nile” was probably first articulated by Hecataeus (Pearson: 83-85).

Perhaps contemporary with these Greek historiographers are the epic historian, the

Yahwist, from the sixth or fifth centuries BCE, and the Priestly Editors, from the fifth or fourth centuries BCE. The Yahwist and Priestly Editors are both responsible for crafting what we call the Primeval History in Genesis 1-11. The similarities between the narratives of the Primeval History and accounts provided by Greek historiographers deserve attention. Biblical scholars oft have turned to Mesopotamian stories for insight into the narratives of Genesis 1-11, and I myself have done this extensively in the past (Gnuse 2014). But perhaps we should turn our attention to the west and look to Greek accounts. John Van Seters has recommended this approach for many years now (Van Seters 1983; 1992).

A consideration of the biblical narratives in Genesis 1-11 that are attributed to the Yahwist Historian and Priestly Editors in comparison with the writings of Greek historians, such as Herodotus and Hecataeus, can provide interesting and valuable insights. The Primeval History in Genesis 1-11 is the prelude to recalling the tales of the patriarchs in Genesis 12-26, 38 and the story of Israel’s birth in the exodus experience recounted in the book of Exodus. Herodotus told much of his history as a prelude to the wars between Greece and the Persian Empire. Thus, both Genesis and Herodotus were meant to be preludes to the story of the Israelite and Greek peoples respectively. My suspicion is that the biblical

author may have been familiar with the writings of Greek historians, especially Herodotus.

The first and most significant observation to make is that the Greek historians were incredulous about some of their received stories, especially those that spoke of the gods and divine intervention, while the biblical authors still worked with the belief that God was active in the lives of the Israelites. Thus, Greek historians were more concerned about human events rather than the biblical concern with the relationship between God and the people. For this reason we correctly view the Greek historians as being much closer to our assumptions of history writing, and we call one or several of them, “the father of history writing.” But the question we wish to ask is whether the biblical author was familiar with those Greek historians and addressed certain topics because those Greek historians had spoken about them.

Only in the past generation have some biblical scholars begun to pursue an analysis of biblical texts in the Primary History (Genesis through 2 Kings) and Greek texts. Such considerations were not undertaken when early dates were given for the biblical literature. But with the increasing tendency over the past thirty years to lower the dates for the origination of biblical texts, it has become feasible, even advisable to look for connections between Greek texts and biblical narratives. Studies have compared the writings of Herodotus with the Primary History, Genesis through 2 Kings, often analyzing particular biblical texts (Bolin 3-15; Nielsen; Wesselius 1999: 24-77; 2002: 1- 103; Stott: 52-78; Gnuse 2010a: 31-45). This inclines us to more readily consider the connections between Herodotus and the Primeval History.

For many years critical scholars located the Yahwist traditions of the Pentateuch in the era of the United Monarchy, specifically in the court of Solomon, and they spoke of the Yahwist as a bard who crafted an epic oral narrative. The Yahwist Narrative constitutes most of the text in Genesis 1-11, and includes Gen 2:4b-25; 3:1-24; 4:1-25; 6:1-8; 7:1-5, 17-24; 8:6-12, 20-22; 9:18-29; 10:8-19, 21, 24-30; 11:1-9, 27-32. Priestly narratives are believed to include Gen 1:1-2:4a; 5:1-32; 6:11-22; 7:6-16; 8:1-5, 13-19; 9:1-17; 10:1-7, 20, 22-23, 31-32; 11:10-26. However, in the past generation increasingly scholars have suggested an exilic or post exilic date for this material, calling the

Yahwist a historian rather than a bard. John Van Seters in several works has defended this position (1975; 1992; 1994). I have contributed an article defending the same notion by suggesting that the Yahwist account of the Tower of Babel in Gen 11:1-9 is a parody on the uncompleted ziggurat building efforts of Nabonidus who fell from power around 540 BCE (Gnuse 2010b: 229-44). Thus, like Van Seters and others, I date the Yahwist to 500 BCE or later. If we date the Yahwist to 500 BCE or later, and the Priestly materials in Genesis 1-11 are already dated by us to that same era, then comparison with the Greek historians of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE becomes feasible. In the past I have observed the continuities between Hesiod and the narratives in Genesis 1-11, which I believe are truly significant. In this essay, I would like to consider more closely the continuities between Genesis 1-11 and the Greek historians.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GREEK AND BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

Human Accomplishments

In both traditions significant accomplishments are achieved by human beings (Genesis 4) rather than being gifts from the gods, as is so often the case in the Mesopotamian traditions.

Greek historians often attribute significant inventions and cultural achievements to human beings. Herodotus mentions Arion of Corinth who composed the first dithyramb (*Histories* 1.23), Glaucus of Chios who discovered how to weld iron (*Histories* 1.25), Philon who established weights and measures, and numerous inventions originated with Egyptian and Babylonians (Van Seters 1992: 83-84).

This is comparable to the individuals in Gen 4:17-22: Cain who built the first city, Jabal who invented pastoralism, Jubal who invented the lyre and the pipe, and Tubal-Cain who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The biblical author implies that leaving the garden in Genesis 3 may have been a necessary prelude to the emergence of civilization, for quickly in the next chapter we see the description of significant cultural contributions.

The Flood

Both the Greek historiographers and the Bible know of a great flood. Hecataeus has a tradition of Deucalion and his three sons surviving the flood (Gnuse 2014: 191), but we have no

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tradition of a flood account itself in the fragments of his writings (Pearson: 99). The biblical narrative, by contrast, is expansive in Genesis 6-9, seeking especially to respond critically to Mesopotamian versions of the story. According to Hecataeus the sons of the flood hero gave rise to the three Greek races, the Ionians, Aeolians, and Dorians (Pearson: 99-100), but the biblical author makes their progeny the peoples of the known world.

The flood in the Greek traditions and the biblical text is brought about by human sinfulness, and not rebellion or “noise” as in the Mesopotamian accounts. According to Ovid the cause for the flood was the proliferation of evil in the Iron Age (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.125ff) (Van Seters 1995: 81). Of course, Ovid is late and not truly a Greek historian, but perhaps he was familiar with earlier sources unbeknownst to us.

Post-Flood Vineyard

In both Greek historiography and the biblical tradition, the flood hero plants a vineyard after the flood (Genesis 9). No such story exists in Mesopotamia. It is truly significant that we have a story shared by the Greek and biblical sources, not found in Mesopotamian texts, for it strongly implies the connection between the Bible and the Greek tradition. In Mesopotamia wine existed prior to the flood, for it is mentioned in the flood narratives as a form of payment. In the Gilgamesh Epic Utnapishtim gives wine to the workmen who craft the ship. But both the biblical and the Greek tradition portray the appearance of wine as a post-flood phenomenon. In the biblical tradition Noah plants a vineyard after leaving the ark (Gen 9:20-27), which produces wine that he then imbibes excessively. The story appears to be disconnected from the flood account, for the persona of Noah is quite different. The only continuity is the presence of the three sons, who, however, live with their father and no mention is made of their wives. The flood story and the vineyard planting appear to be artificially connected. Furthermore, the three sons play no role in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, even though they are the chief progenitors of the races in the Table of Nations of Genesis 10.

According to Hecataeus (*Genealogiae*) Orestheus, the son of Deucalion, discovered the vine after a dog gave birth to a piece of wood, which Orestheus then planted. The wood turned

into a vine that produced grapes. He then named his son Phytius and his grandson Oeneus after the vine (Pearson 99-100; Bertelli 85; Darshan 527). Other Greek sources speak of how Amphictyon, the son of Deucalion and brother of Hellen, invented the Greek custom of diluting wine with water, which supposedly Dionysius taught him to do (Darshan 529).

Three Sons of the Flood Hero

There is reference to the three sons of the flood hero in Greek historians and the Bible. In Mesopotamian accounts the flood hero, Ziusudra or Utnapishtim, becomes immortal and is taken to live in a divine realm, thus having no children to repopulate the world.

In the biblical tradition Noah sires Shem, Ham, and Japhet, who are the ancestors of all the people in the known world according to Genesis 10. In the Greek traditions Hesiod and Hecataeus have a tradition of Deucalion and his sons surviving the flood (Gnuse 2014: 191). Hesiod posits that Deucalion had a son named Hellen, who was the father of three sons, who become the ancestors of the Greeks. Hecataeus has a genealogy similar to that found in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*. But according to Hecataeus, the sons of Deucalion were Pronoos, Orestheus, and Marathionius, and they sired the Ionians, the Dorians, and the Aeolians. Hellen was the son of Pronoos, and thus Hecataeus makes the three great ancestors of the Greeks the direct sons of the flood hero (Pearson: 99; Darshan 521-23).

Greek logographers also attribute the emergence of peoples in Greece to the flood hero; so generally the narrative of Genesis 10 and Greek traditions agree over against Mesopotamian traditions that turn the flood hero into an immortal being with no descendants (Darshan: 523-25). Guy Darshan concludes that if this tradition of the flood hero as the human ancestor of all people is found in Greek and biblical sources, but not Mesopotamian sources, its origin must be on the periphery of the ancient Near East in the area of Syria and Phoenicia, because the possibility of Greeks and Jews learning the story from each other is most unlikely. I would suggest that perhaps the biblical authors indeed may have known the Greek versions and been influenced by some of their narrative plotline.

In *Histories* 4.45 Herodotus describes the three great land masses and notes how they all have

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women's names: Europa, Asia, and Libya. In similar fashion the genealogies in Genesis 10 describe all of humanity as descended from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It has been suggested by some scholars that the biblical author was inspired by this passage in Herodotus (Wajdenbaum 108-109).

Segmented Genealogies

Both the biblical text and the Greek historians have what we would call a "segmented genealogy," that is the author traces descent through several sons of a significant personage. The flood heroes in the Bible and Greek literature have three sons, who, in turn, give rise to a great number of people. The Mesopotamian genealogies simply trace from an ancestor to one descendant generation after generation, as can be typified by the list of descendants of Hammurabi in the old Amorite Babylonian texts in the early second millennium BCE. The former is a horizontal genealogy; the latter is a vertical genealogy (Darshan: 533). The concurrence of the biblical and the Greek traditions on this type of genealogy over against the Mesopotamia model is significant. Furthermore, genealogies in Mesopotamia focused upon the lineage of kings; the biblical and Greek ones are interested in detailing the origins of all people, either in the world or in Greece (Darshan: 534).

Ethnographic Concerns

In more general terms, it should be noted that the ethnographic concerns of tracing the various races of people to primeval ancestors, as it is found in Genesis 10, is also of interest to Hecataeus and Herodotus (Gnuse 2014: 241, 245). Greek authors and the biblical authors created familial or kinship genealogies. They mentioned persons who were descended from each other and included wives, siblings, and descendants, thus creating segmented genealogies (West 1985: 13; Darshan: 532). John Van Seters points out that the Yahwist version of the genealogies in Genesis 10 are most like Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* (Van Seters 1992: 177). The Yahwist's attempt to combine geography and ethnology is also like the writings of Hecataeus (Van Seters 1983: 27). Scholars reconstruct the geographical observations of Hecataeus in his work *Periegesis* from fragments and from references in other Greek historians, most notably Strabo and Herodotus (Pearson: 34-96). We have over three hundred fragments of *Periegesis* but only

thirty five fragments from the work *Genealogiae* by Hecataeus (Pearson: 96).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus described Hecataeus as a writer who recorded the genealogy of many heroes and their deeds, and also recounted the history of different regions and the founding of cities (Toye: 288, 299). This reminds us of the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, and in particular the references to Nimrod in Gen 10:8-12. In general, Hecataeus is more interested in geography and the customs of people living in various regions of the world, whereas the biblical author is more interested in the genealogical relationships between the various descendants of the flood hero, Noah.

Beginning of the Historic Age and Language

One can find the literary and historical motif of describing the transition from the primordial age to the historical age with a story describing the emergence of languages. Herodotus tells of the origin of language in *Histories* 2.2.1-3.1 after an initial discussion of Egyptian traditions and other accounts from the ancient Near East. Likewise, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, which also tells the story about the origin of languages, provides a transition from the Primeval History to the story of the patriarchs, which is the more specific memory of Israel's beginning. It appears that both authors use an account of the origin of languages to move from something akin to "prehistory" to something akin to "history" (Mandell and Freedman 164-65).

Fall of a City

Both Herodotus' *Histories* and the Primeval History end with the demise of a city. Genesis 11 tells how people left the city of Babel after their languages had become confused. Herodotus ends his grand history with the account of the fall of Sestos in *Histories* IX, 115, 118-120. The actual details of the story in Herodotus, with the capture of the fleeing king once the city has fallen and the execution of his son before his eyes, makes the account in Herodotus even more similar to 2 Kgs 24:20-25:7 than the account in Genesis 11. However, there is the same sense of closure in the Primeval History with the demise of a great city, Babel, as there is in the history of Herodotus.

Prelude to History

Both Herodotus and Genesis 1-11 provide a prelude to the real history with a large segment

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of their narrative. For Herodotus his initial sections form a prelude to the Persian wars with Greece, and Genesis 1-11 is a prelude to the stories of the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt under Moses. It has been suggested by scholars that Hecataeus may have done something similar, but too much of his writing has been lost (Bertelli: 93 et passim).

CONCLUSION

There appears to be no specific biblical text that could be said to be inspired by some passage from the Greek historians. Rather, the connection appears to be more general. It seems as though the biblical authors are familiar with the agenda of the Greek historians and the accounts they presented. The biblical authors do some things in very similar fashion: the discussion of human accomplishments, the planting of the post-flood vineyard, the three sons who are great progenitors, segmented genealogies, and the ethnographic concerns appear to be narratives or concerns that the biblical authors shared in common with their western intellectual counterparts, and they did not share them in common with Mesopotamian sources. Although I cannot make a conclusive statement to this effect, it seems to me that these common elements shared by the Greek and biblical authors over against their Mesopotamian predecessors indicates that biblical authors were at least familiar with the writings of Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus of Halicarnassus, and common concerns are to be found in the Primeval History of Genesis 1-11.

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