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Notes on Ethnographic Method and Biblical Interpretation

Emanuel Pfoh

The following thoughts and arguments are definitely not a compact exposition of analysis and conclusions but rather a set of preliminary reflections, not only about ethnography and the Bible – their potential relationship, what the first one may contribute to understand the latter – but also about historical epistemology and methodology and, especially, in view of attending to the question of writing histories of "ancient Israel" without disregarding the text of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament as a source, although secondary, for such a history.[1]

<div align="center">1.</div>

Let me start this presentation with some considerations on the discipline of ethnography. Ethnography was originally, between the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, built mainly upon the experiences of Western scholars being out there in the field, living for a considerable amount of time in a foreign culture and displaced from their usual or common locations – and this is a key issue in ethnography's epistemology: the displacement of the interpreter from his (later on, her) cultural milieu. During the second half of the twentieth century, ethnography / social anthropology together with the rest of the social sciences and approaches, including history writing, underwent revisions and changes of paradigms, about which is beyond the point to refer to in any detail in this opportunity.[2] What can be said with confidence, however, and as a result of such revisions and changes, is that even though fieldwork is in fact a most important and constitutive factor of the ethnographic perspective on culture and society,[3] ethnography may indeed be expanded to other areas of inquiry

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[1] This short paper was read, under a different title, at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in Buenos Aires, 20-24 July 2015. It is presented here revised and with bibliographical references. I use "Bible" throughout the paper in a general manner, meaning in broad terms "Hebrew Bible / Old Testament". I thank Susanne Maier (Tübingen) for her assistance while preparing this paper for publication.

[2] See in general the key discussions in Bourdieu / Chamboredon / Passeron, Métier, passim; Clifford / Marcus, Culture, passim; Munslow, History.

[3] See the reflections in Watson, Introduction, 1-15.

when viewed essentially as a particular epistemology for analysing society
and its cultural and material expressions. Thus, ethnography becomes "[…]
an approach to experiencing, interpreting and representing culture and so-
ciety that informs and is informed by sets of different disciplinary agendas
and theoretical principles. Rather than being a method for the collection of
'data', ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge
(about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own
experiences".[4] In this sense, the ethnographic method appeals basically to
an epistemological awareness of those doing the description of culture or
explaining society, which in turn forces us to think about how we create
knowledge and how this knowledge is conditioned not only by the nature of
the data we analyse but also by our interests, cultural perspectives and
social locations.

When dealing with the biblical stories and literary motifs, and according
then to this perspective, the procedure aims at performing a sort of *ethno-
graphy of a dead culture*, because any attempt to read ethnographically the
biblical texts would mean that we are interpreting forensically the remnants
of a long gone cultural context. In spite of the seemingly paradoxical
character of this approach, since of course there are not "biblical natives"
around to arrange an interview and let us know the details of their world-
view, I think we can indeed approach the Bible from the point of view of
ethnography, which in this sense implies to treat the biblical data as a
cultural expression to be deconstructed in order to comprehend the biblical
writers' worldview and the assumed context of the text, to proceed later
with any kind of historical interpretation.

<div align="center">2.</div>

The proposed research perspective must deal first with the modern
intellectual matrix of the creation of knowledge about the biblical world.
The first explorers and biblical scholars doing fieldwork research in Otto-
man Palestine would see the Bedouin and the *fellahin* of the land more or
less as frozen remnants of an ancient biblical past, a past they were con-
fident could be approached and recovered by producing sociological
analogies between that present and distant, older times.[5] The spatial dis-
placement of these explorers from Europe to the Palestine of the *fellahin*
was also a displacement through time, since scholars were certain that any
past culture could actually be directly observed and described by means of
analysing the ethnographic present. This procedure is part of what has been

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4   Pink, Ethnography, 18. Cf. also Lang, Introduction.
5   Cf. Shepherd, Intruders, 11-106; van der Steen, Tribal Societies, 18-37.

described as the "denial of coevalness", or also as a condition of *allochronism*, by the German social anthropologist Johannes Fabian in his notable book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* from 1983.[6] It is interesting to see, from an epistemological point of view, how such allochronism has survived in contemporary biblical studies, although in a somewhat inverted manner: it is indeed not so much that we may look from the modern West into an ancient past present in the Bible, as it is such biblical, literary past that has been appropriated by us as cultural lenses through which to shape the past of ancient Palestine historically.[7]

It is therefore understandable that, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, social-sciences approaches to the Bible, for example, would paraphrase the biblical scheme of biblical Israel's literary development as a sketch for writing the history of *historical* Israel. This is very much true, for instance, of two works I otherwise consider important in current biblical scholarship, both using social anthropology and social history approaches to inform a historical reconstruction of the past of an "ancient Israel".[8] I am referring to Paula McNutt's *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* from 1999 and Rainer Kessler's *Sozialgeschichte des alten Israel* from 2006.[9] Both of these works, especially McNutt's, are sensitive to methodological questions and it cannot be said that they are conservative in terms of their specific historical methodology. Yet, in their concrete historiographical outputs, neither can break completely with the biblical view on the ancient past, especially with the general diachronic framework from the time of the Judges to the Exile and beyond. The problem here is not so much one of historical methodology but of epistemology. This perspective only "corrects" the biblical text with social anthropology or sociological views and models, namely modern research tools, to present an explanation we modern westerners, laymen and academics alike, may understand in a rational manner. However, it is certainly possible to transcend this metahistorical approach in order to construct a problem-oriented history, more sensitive to epistemological issues of history writing and the particularities of the primary and secondary data,

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[6]   Cf. Fabian, Time, 37-69.

[7]   The most explicit current example of this in Old Testament studies is Provan / Long / Longman, History. See the critical address in Whitelam, Death.

[8]   I follow the seminal distinction between "biblical", "historical" and "ancient Israel" found in Davies, Search.

[9]   McNutt, Society; Kessler, Sozialgeschichte. I have dealt with the epistemological problems involved in the methodology of works like these in Pfoh, Emergence, 69-86.

namely archaeology and epigraphy and the biblical text respectively, and their particular and differentiated value as historical sources.[10]

The origin of this problem in biblical scholarship, namely, the paraphrasing of the biblical text to produce history, started – I would propose – with the rise of modernity more than two hundred years ago.[11] In effect, seeing the biblical text as the expression of a revealed truth started to mean, in modern times, that such truth had necessarily to be inscribed in *History* in some way – hence, for instance, the inception of biblical archaeology and its quest to unearth the materiality of the biblical truth.[12] And this was, also, the basic ground for the development of historical-critical methods in western Europe: if the biblical text is referring to a certain historical past, even if blended with legends and mythic features and after successive redactions and corrections, there must be a way of rationally sift history from myth to recover the historical referent of the text and learn too how the biblical text was produced.[13] However, both the Old and New Testaments present us an illusion of historical recollection: the Bible in fact is not expressing "history" in a historicist fashion, but *we, in the modern West,* are culturally conditioned to understand history in its pages, thus enabling a theoretical possibility of retrieving a distant past through historical-critical methods. I believe, however, that, from the ethnographic point of view, there are at least two interpretative alternatives to this procedure.

The first of these alternatives would seek to read and understand the biblical text *in toto* from Genesis to Ezra-Nehemiah, and even further into the New Testament, *as myth*, in the socio-anthropological sense of the term.[14] The biblical myth represents a chain of theological discourse that projects a certain worldview in the form of narrative, going beyond any putative historicity of the narrated events. Indeed, the biblical myth refers here and there to historical events of the history of the ancient Near East, but such references are secondary to what we may assume, ethnographically, are the goals of composing and narrating a biblical story. The cultural world producing the biblical text is in essence alien to us, it has little to do with our modern worldview – in spite of modern theology, which has the duty of updating the meaning of such ancient message – and as such

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10   See the relevant discussion in Liverani, Sviluppi.
11   Cf. further the important study by Frei, Eclipse.
12   See, for a historical overview of "biblical archaeology", Davis, Sands; for the problems this approach poses to a critical historical understanding of ancient Palestine's past, see most recently Thompson, Archaeology.
13   Cf. Pfoh, Myth, 199-201.
14   Pfoh, Myth, 201-203. See also in this respect, Lemche, Europeans.

it has to be culturally decoded and deconstructed.[15] As a token of this research perspective, I have in mind Mary Douglas's *Leviticus as Literature* as a marvellous example of an ethnographic reading of a biblical book dealing with social prescriptions and rituals, unravelling hidden meanings in the text by attending to comparative ethnographic data.[16] The question of the historicity of biblical events is therefore secondary to this kind of analysis.

The second of these alternatives deals with how to use the biblical narrative as a historical source. It is clear that the biblical stories are not direct or primary sources for the Iron Age in ancient Palestine (ca. 1200-600 BCE), and that condition alone should prevent us to start any historical reconstruction with the Bible and instead to attend to the archaeology and the epigraphy of the period. It is only after archaeology and epigraphy that the Bible is placed among the sources for writing history.[17] As noted above, the Bible does mention, especially in the books of Kings, a series of personal names and events that can clearly be linked to some historical names and events of the Iron Age of which we have little doubt of their factuality or of which a secure confirmation exists.[18] But this only means that the biblical authors had sources, which could have been written or even oral (traditions) – attending to the recent appearance of cultural memory studies in Old Testament scholarship, which represents another discussion[19] – and only that.

Biblical data cannot then be directly used for filling in the gaps of our archaeological and epigraphic histories of the land. If we remember and paraphrase Julius Wellhausen, the Bible is primarily a source not for the time it evokes but for the time it was written.[20] And we may find an ethnographic analogy in this if we recall that the ethnographic native informant's word cannot simply be taken at face value: it must necessarily be interpreted within the context of intersubjective communication between the informant and the ethnographer.[21] The native informant has his / her

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15   Matthews / Benjamin, World, xiii-xxiii.

16   Douglas, Leviticus.

17   See, for instance, Niehr, Weg, 59-63.

18   Cf., for instance, Römer, Historiographie.

19   See, for instance, Barstad, Maurice; Carstens / Hasselbalch / Lemche, Memory.

20   Wellhausen, of course, was referring to the biblical Patriarchs; however, we may extend his dictum to the whole of biblical narrative: "Freilich über die Patriarchen ist hier kein historisches Wissen zu gewinnen, sondern nur über die Zeit, in welcher die Erzählungen über sie im israelitischen Volke entstanden…" (Wellhausen, Prolegomena, 316).

21   Jackson, Ethnographica, 1-36.

own understanding of why things work in the way they do in his/her
society; he or she may even lie to, willingly or not, or mislead the ethno-
grapher and tell him / her the things he / she wants to hear. So the ethno-
grapher must consider very carefully the testimony of his / her informant/s
in order to correctly understand why such testimony is presented in any
particular manner.[22] And we have a rather similar situation with the Bible.
Indeed, in the Bible we find theological perspectives about how things were
imagined to be in the past and why they happened in such a way. But we
cannot use that biblical native's point of view to directly create a historical
past. The biblical narrative is most probably not a direct witness to ancient
events but rather an ancient reflection about the meaning of collective and
individual actions placed in a past reality, which can be both historical and
mythic, and as such it is rather a source for thinking about the writers of the
biblical texts, instead of a source for the history of the ancient southern
Levant.[23] It is both epistemologically and methodologically wrong to use
such biblical perspectives about the nature of creation and humankind and
the fate of the chosen people, strip them from the mythic parts, correct their
errors, and employ them as a template for our rational understanding of the
past of Israel in ancient Palestine.

3.

From the point of view of ethnographic research, we should understand the
Bible in its own cultural terms, not ours – at least we should seek those
primeval cultural terms; even if it is a most difficult attempt, it is the proper
historical procedure – and that applies also to questions of representation of
realities, past and present, for the sole situation that we may read Biblical
Hebrew and *koine* Greek does not necessarily means that we fully under-
stand not only the texts we read but also their cultural and symbolic uni-
verses and their intended audiences and readerships.[24] Finally, we may also
make a plea for writing our own versions of Palestine's past, and stop
paraphrasing the Bible's version, which belongs, at least in its final form
and with the canon in view, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the
Eastern Mediterranean.[25]

    To conclude, we should also have in mind the important developments,
especially within the field of Old Testament studies during the last five

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[22] Cf. the discussion in Bloch, Language; and especially Salamone, Significance.
[23] See, notably, Thompson, Past, passim. I have presented an example of an ethno-
      graphic interpretation of a biblical story in Pfoh, Mafioso.
[24] I treated, although briefly, this complex question in Pfoh, Emergence, 58-68.
[25] See the essays collected in Thompson / Wajdenbaum, Bible.

decades or so, a progress that has transformed the history of ancient Israel into a much less dependent version of the biblical narrative and more open to other views and interpretations.[26] Nowadays, it would be very difficult to consider most of the Pentateuch as properly historical, together with the book of Joshua and Judges. Some scholars still see in the books of the so-called Deuteronomistic History, especially in Kings, some data to work with in professional historical terms. Nonetheless, it is in fact most problematic, and proper of a flawed historical methodology, to take at face value the general layout of biblical Israel's story for history writing, as it has been pointed out. But, beyond this, another question that results very much pertinent for intellectual and cultural history is the following: in spite of the epistemological and methodological problems of current "biblical histories of Israel", we must also note how the Old Testament still remains to be our first template to conceive of the past of ancient Palestine in Western society, not only in some academic quarters but also, and in general, among the non-specialist public. This situation also deserves to be approached systematically by ethnographers: what is the place of the Bible and biblical scholarship in Western but also in non-Western cultures,[27] and how the Bible continues feeding, in part, our modern myths and cultural representations, so we may keep understanding – or searching to understand – who we are.

Summary

These observations offer some thoughts about the epistemological and methodological character of the ways social information found in biblical stories is commonly interpreted from a social-science perspective in contemporary Old Testament scholarship. The use, however, of biblical narrative as some kind of historical ethnographic record of the society of "ancient Israel" during the first millennium BCE ought to be challenged on two basic fronts: first on the ethnographic front, where issues of cultural representations, ideological and symbolical constructs, ancient epistemological matrices, etc. are investigated, and secondly, the historical front, where primary and secondary sources for history writing are harvested and where further reflection is needed on how the data from these sources ought to be analysed and used.

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[26] See further on these developments, Pfoh, Search.

[27] Cf., for instance, albeit from within biblical scholarship, the discussion in West, Historicity.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Beobachtungen bieten einige Gedanken über den erkenntnistheoretischen und methodenorientierten Charakter der Art und Weise, wie soziale Informationen in biblischen Geschichten aus einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Perspektive in der zeitgenössischen alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft gedeutet werden. Die Verwendung von biblischen Erzählungen als eine Art historische und ethnographische Datensätze der Gesellschaft des „alten Israels" im ersten Jahrtausend v.Chr. sollte auf zwei grundlegenden Ebenen in Frage gestellt werden: einer ethnographischen Ebene, die sich mit Fragen der kulturellen Repräsentationen, ideologischen und symbolischen Konstrukten, alten epistemologischen Matrizen, etc., beschäftig, und einer historischen Ebene, die die primären und sekundären Quellen der Geschichtsschreibung behandelt und darüber nachdenkt, wie die Daten aus diesen Quellen zu analysieren und zu verwenden sind.

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