The Horns of Moses. Setting the Bible in its Historical Context

Thomas Römer

Leçons inaugurales du Collège de France
Developments in literary methodologies and archaeology have led scholars to question the traditional conception of biblical chronology and historiography. The starting point for Maximalist studies is the idea that the biblical story should simply be taken as true. However this position is indefensible from a scientific standpoint. Minimalists consider that everything began either during the Achaemenid period, around 400 years before our own era, or even later during the Hellenistic period. They claim that the Bible is a purely ideological construct and that the first known manuscripts date precisely from this era. However the material cultures and traditions underpinning the Hebrew Bible are often older than the Persian era.

THOMAS RÖMER

Thomas Römer, for a long time Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Science at the University of Lausanne, is the author of Moïse, “lui que Yahvé a connu face à face” (2002), L’Homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible (2005), The So-Called Deuteronomistic History (2005), and Psaumes interdits (2007). Since February 2009 he has been a Professor of the Collège de France, where he holds the Chair of the Hebrew Bible and its Contexts.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction
Pierre Corvol

The Horns of Moses. Setting the Bible in its Historical Context
Inaugural lecture delivered on 5 February 2009
Thomas Römer

The horns of Moses
The Bible at the Collège de France
The Bible and history
New perspectives on the biblical accounts of the origins
How can a history of Israel and Juda be reconstructed?
The Bible and its contexts
The task of the biblical scholar
Valuing the diversity of biblical texts
Ongoing research projects
Introduction

Pierre Corvol
Translation: Liz Libbrecht

1 Dear colleague,
   Dear Thomas Römer,

2 Hebrew and Greek were amongst the first disciplines taught at the Collège Royal from 1530, thus enabling scholars to understand and interpret the two languages in which the sacred texts were written. Since then, the teaching of archaeology, ancient languages and religions of the ancient Near East has been given pride of place in our institution. It is in this grand tradition that you are situated, but you offer a radically new perspective on the discipline by recognizing that the Bible is not only a core text of several religions, but that it also embodies an additional value as a unique source of knowledge. By choosing as the title of your Chair “The Hebrew Bible and its Contexts”, you put the Bible at the centre of your teaching – something which, incidentally, is a first in the history of the Collège de France Chairs.

3 In Germany you received sound training in Hebrew and Ancient languages (Aramaic, Ugaritic, Syriac and languages of Ancient Mesopotamia), which has enabled you to master the biblical corpus and the related domains of literatures of comparison. Most of your academic career has been spent in French-speaking Switzerland. Early on, you were appointed Professor of Hebrew Bible Studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences, University of Lausanne, and then Dean of that faculty from 1999 to 2003. Your work has been particularly fertile: nine books published under your name, along with numerous reports, papers and other texts.

4 Your research relies primarily on archaeological discoveries in Palestine, on the study of Assyrian texts that are contemporary to the writing of the Bible, and on the analogy between certain biblical accounts and similar episodes in Mesopotamian civilization.

5 Your work focuses on the formation of the Pentateuch, the historical, sociological and ideological situation of Judaism in the Persian era, as well as the study of the conditions and periods, which produced the first historiographical work of the Hebrew Bible. Your discoveries led you to shed new light on many passages in the Bible, which cannot fail to
fascinate, and sometimes disturb, the readers of this book that is said to be the most widely read book in the world.

6 You have thus challenged the hypothesis that a Yahvist document from the beginning of the first millennium already contained the entire narrative framework of the Pentateuch. In fact, the oldest texts of the Pentateuch are believed to date back to the 8th century before our era, and the first book to have taken shape is believed to have been Deuteronomy. Your Habilitation thesis on the occurrence of the expression “Fathers of Israel” led you to investigate the two mythical traditions in order to explain the settlement of the Israelites in their country: one which claims peaceful cohabitation with the native people, this constituted the era of the Patriarchs; the other, a tradition of conquest, which emphasized, from the Book of Exodus to that of Joshua, a people at war against the native population, and which was inspired by Assyrian ideology.

7 Your first lectures at the Collège de France will be on the theme “The construction of an ancestor: the formation of the cycle of Abraham”. Who could not be interested in understanding why Abraham became the ancestor par excellence, in whom all three monotheistic religions meet?

NOTES


AUTHORS

PIERRE CORVOL

Administrator of the Collège de France, President of the Assembly of Professors
The Horns of Moses. Setting the Bible in its Historical Context

Inaugural lecture delivered on 5 February 2009

Thomas Römer
Translation: Liz Libbrecht

1 Mr. Administrator,
Honourable Rector of the University of Lausanne,
Dear Colleagues, dear Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

2 Any self-respecting scholar of the Bible has to examine the question of literary genres, which is one of the methodological tools of biblical research. Therefore, to prepare this lecture that I am giving here this evening with much emotion, I read and studied a significant number of inaugural lectures delivered in this illustrious institution. I then understood that there is indeed a “Collège de France inaugural lecture” literary genre. This genre consists of the following elements: (a) thanks to the professors of the Collège who decided to create the Chair in question, and to the people who influenced the new professor’s scientific career; (b) praise to the scholars who, at the Collège de France and elsewhere, shaped the discipline; (c) a short history of the discipline; (d) a description of its importance and current relevance; and (e), finally, the main research themes that will be treated within the framework of the Collège. I am greatly honoured to undertake this exercise. But first, before embarking on a long talk that may tire the audience, I would like to introduce another element: the captatio.

The horns of Moses

3 I deemed it appropriate to start this lecture with one of the most important figures in the Hebraic Bible, Moses. At this stage it is of little relevance whether Moses existed or not; what we can affirm is that, without him, we would never have had the Bible. In this
respect he is a real “founder”. But why, in many representations, do we see Moses with horns?

Figure 1. Statue of Moses by Michelangelo

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4 The answer that is traditionally given to this question is that Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin – which would subsequently become the Vulgate – made a mistake, or worse, deliberately wanted to diabolize the founding figure of Judaism. But this explanation is probably somewhat simplistic, even malevolent towards Jerome. The Latin “et ignorabat quod cornuta esset facies sua” is a translation of the Hebrew “oumoshè lo yada’ ki qaran ‘or panaw” (Exodus 34, 29): “Moses did not realize that the skin of his face was ‘qaran’”. Almost all translations render the verbal form qaran, that I have not translated, as “shining, radiant”, as the first Greek translators had already done. Yet this root, which appears in the Bible in the verbal form only in this account from the Book of Exodus, is apparently linked to a noun that is used more broadly, qèrèn, which in biblical Hebrew does indeed mean “horn”. It therefore seems that Jerome’s translation was right and that it ought to be rehabilitated, to the detriment of the Greek and Syriac versions, and of the traditional Jewish and Christian interpretations.

5 Why did the author of Chapter 34 of the Book of Exodus have the idea of imagining a horned Moses coming down from Mount Sinai? To answer this question we need to explore the literary context of the episode, that of the well-known golden calf. Because of Moses’ long absence up on the mountain of God, the Israelites decided to build a figure so that they could make visible the deity that had led them out of the Land of Egypt. They chose the form of a young bull. In the Levant the bull is a common way of representing the gods of storms. According to this narrative, by building a bovine image of their god Yahweh, the Hebrews violated a fundamental prohibition of the Decalogue promulgated after their arrival on Mount Sinai: the prohibition on representations of the divine. That was why, on his return, Moses destroyed the tablets of the law and the golden calf. But he then went back up towards Yahweh to secure the renewal of the treaty that God had previously concluded with the Israelites. When he came back down with the new tablets of the law, the Israelites found him to have horns, without him being aware of this transformation himself.

6 In ancient Middle-Eastern iconography, horns are a common way of expressing the strength and the power of a god or of a king representing him. The horns thus express
unequalled proximity between Yahweh and Moses. This proximity is moreover reaffirmed in the epitaph of the Pentateuch: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34, 10). We can take this a little further and wonder whether Moses took the place of the golden calf, of the bull, of which horns are characteristic. In a sense that was indeed the case, for Moses was the visible mediator between Yahweh and Israel. He may not have been the representation of the God of Israel, but he definitely remained His best representative. In this way the very particular status of Moses was affirmed, without which Judaism would never have existed. The horns of Moses should therefore be rehabilitated, but this must necessarily be accompanied by a hermeneutic effort, as for most of our contemporaries a character with horns evokes negative, even diabolical associations. Hence, we cannot simply translate “the skin of Moses’ face became horned” without explaining this translation in relation to the socio-historical context in which the idea of a horned Moses took shape. The teaching and understanding of the Bible depend above all on a knowledge and comprehension of the contexts in which the various texts of this library emerged.

Homage

I am delighted that the Assembly of the Professors of the Collège de France has deemed it appropriate to create a new Chair devoted to research on the formation and composition of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament in Christian terminology. And I am deeply touched by the honour that the Collège has bestowed on me by entrusting me with this Chair. You have taken something of a risk by nominating a German who received most of his training in Germany and has spent his entire academic career in Switzerland, far from the prestigious academic circuits of France, and I wonder with fear and trembling whether I will live up to these expectations. I owe this nomination above all to Professor Jean-Marie Durand who approached me, even though he did not yet know me personally, and who presented my candidature to the Assembly of Professors.

The fact that my work was of interest to him is largely owing to a number of exceptional teachers who enabled me to learn various methods and analytical tools for understanding and interpreting the texts of the Hebrew Bible. This evening I would like to pay homage to three of them: Professor Rolf Rendtorff, of the University of Heidelberg, whose talent as a teacher and whose iconoclastic questions were an incentive for me to focus my research on Ancient Hebrew and the Bible; Professor Françoise Smyth, of the Faculty of Protestant Theology of Paris who, upon my arrival in Paris as a scholarship holder, entrusted me with a teaching position in Hebrew. I thus learnt French by comparing the grammars of Biblical Hebrew in German and in French. My meeting with Françoise Smyth was decisive for my career. Of all the things that I learned from her, on both a human and intellectual level, I would like to mention her contagious curiosity to explore new methods and to approach biblical texts from a comparative perspective that is not limited to the ancient Near-East. Next, I would like to pay homage to Professor Albert de Pury, of the University of Geneva, with whom I worked as an assistant for five years. Under his supervision I was able to complete my PhD thesis, despite his disagreeing with it initially. Among other things, he enabled me to discover a rare quality which is unfortunately often lacking in the academic world: respect for theories which often contradict or conflict with those that one defends oneself, and the courage to question one’s own research results. In the human sciences it is exceptional to find reconstructions or
hypotheses that are entirely “true” or entirely “false”. Rather than anathematizing theories that run counter to our ideas, we should try to understand the basis on which they were elaborated. I furthermore learned, during my university career, that the combination of models which initially seemed antagonistic can further the advancement of research.

I would also like to thank the University of Lausanne and my colleagues at the Institute of the Biblical Sciences who provided me with an ideal environment, both materially and intellectually, for teaching and research – which I cannot conceive of other than in interaction. Research that cannot be taught will easily become incommunicable and autistic, while teaching that is not based on research is dangerous, for it runs the risk of approximations and demagogy.

The Bible at the Collège de France

As you know, teaching and research concerning biblical texts have a long tradition at the Collège. The Chairs of Hebrew were amongst the first Chairs founded in 1530, and many of the scholars who held the Chairs entitled “Hebrew”, “Hebrew and Aramaic”, “Hebrew, Chaldean and Syriac Languages”, “Ancient History of the Semitic Orient”, “Semitic Antiquities”, etc. at the Collège de France have deeply influenced historical research concerning the Hebraic Bible and the Levant.

Yet one of the Collège’s first scholars, whose name will remain carved forever in the history of the biblical sciences, was the holder of a Chair of Medicine. This was Jean Astruc (1684-1766), son of a Protestant clergyman who had reconverted to Catholicism. As one of King Louis XV’s doctors, Astruc entered the Collège Royal in 1731, as holder of a Chair of Medicine. While his role in the history of medicine primarily concerns his demonstration of the reality of the contagion of the plague, disputed by his master Chirac, the biblical sciences owe him the invention of the documentary theory. By this we mean the idea that the Torah or the Pentateuch, the first part of the Bible, is not the work of a single author; instead, it consists of different documents brought together by one or several compilers or editors. In 1753 Astruc published anonymously the Conjectures sur les mémoires originaux dont il paroit que Moyse s’est servi pour composer le Livre de la Genèse. His intention was apologetic: arguing against scholars such as Spinoza and others, he wanted to prove that, despite the apparent “disorder” of the Pentateuch, it was effectively the work of Moses, who, he claimed, had combined two treatises from different sources, together with other fragmented sources. He argued that Moses put together a coherent text but that subsequently, copyists, out of laziness, ignorance or presumption, muddled everything up. Although Astruc lost the battle for the authenticity of a Torah written by Moses, he provided scientific exegesis with a diachronic method of enquiry that it is still eagerly used today.

From the late 18th century, a so-called “historico-critical” approach to the Bible developed in universities of Protestant tradition. Through this approach, the aim was to analyze the Bible with secular methods of philology and literary and historical analysis. France, with the exception of the University of Strasbourg, proved to be sceptical, even hostile, when it came to this type of scrutiny of biblical texts. One of the rare exceptions was Ernest Renan, who was appointed to the Collège de France in 1862. He made the scientific exegesis of the Bible known in France and shaped the discipline through his contributions. Entirely familiar with the work of the leading biblical scholars of his time
(Abraham Kuenen, Julius Wellhausen) and in direct contact with them, Renan wanted to analyze the origins of Judaism and Christianity by way of a strictly scientific approach, which caused him many problems. Criticized and vilified, Renan managed to establish that the Hebrew Bible was the result of a long evolution and that the exclusive Yahwism at the origin of Judaism emerged only in the last two centuries of the Judean monarchy. He affirmed that one could trace the different stages of the formation of the Bible thanks to progress made in the exegetic methods. In the preface to *Histoire du peuple d'Israël*, he rightly stressed the fact that historians of the Bible cannot be content to reproduce the chronology of the authors of the Bible; they have to take into account the distance separating them from the texts they study.

History must perforce extract as much truth as possible from the indications which it has at its command; it is doing a very sorry work when it relates a number of childish stories in a tone of the utmost seriousness.²

13 After Renan’s revocation, the Collège called on Solomon Munk whose religious affiliation had barred him from obtaining an academic post in Prussia. Munk can be considered as the founder of Jewish studies in France. Although his main interest was Judeo-Arabic religious philosophy, he also published a book containing “a geographic and archaeological description” of Palestine.³

14 The period of Renan and Munk was also that of the birth of scientific archaeology, Egyptology and Assyriology, the epigraphic discoveries of which overturned the traditional way of understanding the Hebrew Bible. In Germany the publication of the Flood account found on the tablets of the age of Gilgamesh triggered the “Babel-Bible-Controversy”. By the time this conflict was settled it had become obvious that authors of biblical texts often drew their inspiration from the traditions and texts of the Ancient Near East that had preceded them. Biblical narrative therefore had to be compared to the material evidence of archaeological discoveries. It was Charles Clermont-Ganneau, nominated in 1890 to the Chair of “Semitic Antiquities and Epigraphy” at the Collège de France, who renewed biblical research through his archaeological missions in Syria-Palestine. Clermont-Ganneau furthered the topography of the sites mentioned in the Bible by exploiting the texts of Arabic historians and geographers. In particular, he identified the town of Guezer in Canaan. We are indebted to him notably for rescuing the stele of the Moabite king Mesha, which relates a military conflict between Moab and Israel, also found in the Bible although it is recounted quite differently.⁴ This stele, discovered at Dhiban, former capital of the kingdom of Moab, mentioned the name of the national god of Israel, Yahweh, and bore witness to a theology of history found in the same form in certain accounts of the Bible. For instance, a military defeat was explained in terms of the national god’s wrath against his own people. Until today, Mesha’s stele is still one of the most significant pieces of evidence for the reconstruction of the history of 9th-century Israel. Allow me to point out as well that Clermont-Ganneau identified two major archaeological frauds, thus revealing the fact that, unfortunately, fake documents and objects are as old as archaeology.

15 Alfred Loisy, a historian of religions who joined the Collège de France after his excommunication in 1909, gave biblical sciences a resolutely comparative direction. He affirmed that biblical criticism exists for itself “and does not ask permission to be; no human power can stop the Bible from being in the hands of numerous scholars who study it freely”,⁵ adding that:
The biblical question becomes the religious question in a far broader sense than has
been perceived until now. [...] The relationship between Jewish and Christian
monotheism and other religions is infinitely more complex than it was previously
assumed to be.\footnote{In his work La Religion d’Israël, Loisy showed that the Pentateuch was not a historical
document and that the traditions concerning the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis were
mythical accounts. These accounts did not allow for the reconstruction of a “patriarchal
era”, an approach that was continued for some time in the United States and in Germany.
Loisy’s comparative approach was pursued by Isidore Lévy and by Édouard Dhorme. Although he held a Chair of Assyriology, Dhorme was also an eminent biblical scholar to
whom we owe one of the finest French translations of the Bible, in the Pléiade collection.}

The discovery of the Qumran manuscripts from 1947, as well as other texts found in the
region of the Dead Sea, was unquestionably the most significant event in 20th-century
biblical research. Until then very few material traces had been found of the manuscripts
of the pre-Middle Ages Hebraic Bible, whereas today we have evidence, albeit fragmented,
supporting almost all the books composing it and dating back to the last two centuries
before the Christian era. These documents, some of which diverge quite substantially
from what was to become the official Masoretic text, confirm the wide diversity of the
textual transmission of the scrolls that were subsequently to constitute the three parts of
the Jewish canon: Pentateuch, Prophets and Writings. The importance of the texts from
the Judean desert was immediately recognized by André Dupont-Sommer, who devoted
his first lecture at the Collège de France in 1963 to the Dead Sea scrolls. In his translations
and interpretations, Dupont-Sommer showed the significance of writings of the Qumran
community itself, which enlighten us on the so-called “Essenian” current, on Judaism in
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community itself, which enlighten us on the so-called “Essenian” current, on Judaism in
Roman times, and on the origins of Christianity.}
Another key event for Semitic and biblical studies was the discovery of the Ras Shamra-Ugarit site in 1929. Thanks to the tablets found in Ugarit, mythological texts describing scenes involving gods were available for the first time: El, Baal and many others whose names are mentioned in the Bible – in the case of Baal always in controversial contexts – although without precise information on the myths and rites associated with these divinities of the Levant. The Ugaritic texts from the end of the second millennium describe Baal with functions and titles that are applied to Yahweh in the Bible. This confirms the idea that, from the point of view of the history of religions, the god of Israel was a god of storm and thunder like Baal-Hadad, the god that caused lightning and thunder. Two Collège de France professors contributed largely to the discovery of Ugarit: Claude Schaeffer, regarding the archaeological aspect (he was the first director of the Ras Shamra excavations) and André Caquot, regarding the textual aspect (we owe him the translation into French of the main mythological texts as well as notes indicating the numerous links between Ugarit and the Bible).

Finally, Javier Teixidor emphasized Aramean studies and has recently focused on Spinoza, one of the founders of critical analysis of the Bible.

The Bible and history

I hope that this all too brief overview has highlighted the fact that many Chairs of the Collège de France have not only accompanied the evolution and progress of biblical research, but have largely contributed to it. When I was preparing this short history, I noticed something interesting: unless I am mistaken, the Chair that you have kindly entrusted to me is the first Collège de France Chair that explicitly bears the word “Bible” in its title. How can this phenomenon be explained? Is it simply per chance or does French academia have a problem with the word “Bible”? Can avoidance of the word “Bible” be explained by the idea that, from a scientific point of view, it is acceptable to study Hebrew Aramaic, epigraphy, and Semitic antiquities, but that the Bible and its understanding are supposed to be reserved for synagogues and churches? The Hebrew Bible is one of the main founding documents of the so-called Judeo-Christian civilization, or at least of Western civilization. It is also a key element for understanding the birth of Islam and the Islamic civilization. How can we understand history, literature, pictorial and musical art, as well as a number of current geopolitical conflicts, without in-depth knowledge of the biblical texts and their meaning? The Bible, moreover, unquestionably remains of interest to the public. The recent discovery of the supposed wall of the palace of David by the archaeologist Eilat Mazar, challenged by other specialists, not only kept the Israeli public holding its breath, but also had international repercussions.
Let us also recall the many articles devoted to the Bible that are regularly headlines in the mainstream weekly and monthly media. Yet when we read these articles we are often stunned by the journalists’ naiveness and lack of knowledge on the subject. For instance, a few weeks ago a leading weekly, whose name I won’t mention, presented a theory on the origin of the Pentateuch which the scientific community has disqualified in that form for decades. Moreover, the statement that “the Bible is the truth” is a recurrent theme in popularized publications. One regularly finds fanciful explanations, for example on the historical underpinnings of accounts of the plagues of Egypt and the exodus (eruption of the Santorin volcano) or the horns of Moses (he is said to have had a skin disease), which are presented in the media in all earnestness. To counteract these aberrations and for the understanding of our culture, sound training in the Bible seems more than necessary, whether at school, university, or in the cultural field in general. To this end, we cannot be content just to sum up the contents of the main biblical accounts or to marvel at the beauty of certain poetic texts; the Bible must be examined from a historical perspective. I have little time for the sirens of post-modernity proclaiming the end of history or chanting the wonders of subjective or synchronic readings, to the detriment of rigorous research. I am convinced that the work of historians is essential if we are to understand the Bible. To be sure, the danger of circularity is particularly great, for to reconstruct the historical contexts in which the texts of the Hebrew Bible were written, the most important document is the Bible itself! And for a long time we contented ourselves with a scholarly replication of the chronology of the books, from Genesis to the Books of Kings, and including, for the Persian period, the Books of Ezra and of Nehemiah. To be sure, certain theological comments and apparently mythological accounts, or ones that involved too many miracles, were deleted, but confidence subsisted in the biblical
chronology that constituted the history of Israel and Judea in the following order: the age of the Patriarchs, the age of Moses and the exodus, the age of the conquest, of the Judges, the beginnings of the monarchy and the United Kingdom under David and Solomon, the history of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judea until their disappearance, the Babylonian exile, and the “restoration” in the Persian age. Many books on the history of Israel, of the academic type or intended for a broader audience, still adopt this chronology and thus perpetuate a sort of “scientific catechism”.

New perspectives on the biblical accounts of the origins

Progress in literary and archaeological methods have led to the questioning, from a historical point of view, of the construction of what can be called biblical historiography. I will cite just a few examples. The history of the Patriarchs and that of Moses do not reflect events of two successive periods; they are two founding and initially rival narratives: on the one hand, the construction of an identity through genealogies and ancestor figures in the accounts of the Patriarchs, and, on the other, an identity model based not on kinship but on the acceptance of a law, a contract, in the Mosaic tradition. The chronological arrangement of the history of the Patriarchs as a prelude to that of Exodus is the result of a deliberate intention to combine these two myths of separate origins.

The Israelites’ settlement in the Land of Canaan was not the result of a military conquest, as the Book of Joshua presents it. The narratives in this book are drawn from military propaganda, mainly neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian. Archaeologists such as Israel Finkelstein and others have shown that the birth of “Israel” was not due to invasions of groups from the outside. The transition period between the Bronze Age and the more distant Iron Age was characterized by a sort of economic crisis that is believed to be reflected in the reduction of urban density. This goes hand in hand with a movement of rural colonization – admittedly modest – of the mountains in the centre of Palestine, due to an “exodus” of the lower strata of the population. By settling in the mountains, these groups were apparently trying to escape the control of the Canaanite city-states. It is in the context of this movement of a part of the Canaanite population that the establishment of Israel must be seen. The opposition between Israel and Canaan is therefore neither a historical nor an ethnical given; it is a matter of theological conflict aimed at distinguishing the people of Yahweh from the other inhabitants of the Levant.

The Book of Judges does not reflect a historical period. It is a collection of legends on heroic figures from various Israelite tribes, which were put into a certain chronological order.

As for the United Kingdom of Solomon, who is believed to have reigned over an empire stretching from Egypt to the Euphrates, we have to admit that this idea is a literary construction of authors of the Persian era, who wished to put the entire province of Transeuphratene under the authority of one of the founding kings, David and Solomon, whose history is not beyond questioning (we know of no extra-biblical document from the first part of the first millennium before our era that mentions a King Solomon), must have reigned over a relatively small area. Moreover, according to the archaeologists, in the first millennium Jerusalem became a large town only from the 8th century before our
era. As the Judean capital, it is mentioned for the first time in extra-biblical documents in the annals of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who related the siege of Jerusalem in 701.\footnote{14}

The historical criticism and epigraphic and archaeological discoveries in recent decades converge on the fact that we cannot, at the time of the monarchy, talk of Judaism to describe the religious systems of Israel and Judah. The Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions have confirmed that Yahweh was not a single god. He was associated with the goddess Asherah, of whom the Kuntillet Ajrud site was perhaps one of the sanctuaries, as Nadav Na’aman and Nurit Lissovsky of Tel Aviv University recently suggested.\footnote{15}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{The graffiti of Kuntillet Ajrud mentioning Yahweh and his Asherah}
\end{figure}

\textit{Figure 4. The graffiti of Kuntillet Ajrud mentioning Yahweh and his Asherah}

 Otmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, \textit{Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole}, Freiburg Herder, 1992, p. 241 (with kind permission of the authors).

\footnote{15}{It is also plausible that a statue of Yahweh existed in the sanctuaries of Jerusalem and of the Kingdom of Israel in the royal era. The conclusion of Psalm 17: “As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness: when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form [temunah]” seems to express the desire to be allowed access to the divine statue. The prohibition of images in the Decalogue is therefore not an ancient prescription but an idea formulated at the earliest in the sixth century before our era. In my opinion, the negation of clues to the existence of a statue of Yahweh often stems from the (theological) wish to distinguish Yahweh from neighbouring divinities. This type of distinction does indeed exist in the Bible, but it is the result of a long series of events and not a given from the start. The same applies to the “biblical monotheism” which was not established before the Persian era, when it still contained a dose of polytheism (many texts allowing the existence of other gods were not censored).

\footnote{28}{We therefore have to revise our way of reconstructing the history of Israel and Judah, and particularly the elaboration of the narrative chronology of the first part of the Hebrew Bible. This part was not actually first; it was the result of a theological and editorial effort to bring together, in the same volume, traditions and scrolls from different eras,}
conveying differing and even contradictory ideologies. To illustrate this phenomenon, allow me to mention a film that enjoyed considerable success last year and whose triviality, if you happened to see it, must have struck you. The film is Mamma Mia. The narrative, hence the chronology, of this film is clearly secondary. The only aim of the plot is to bring together and organize a number of songs of the Swedish group ABBA, which originally did not relate a continuous story and have no common thread. The same applies to certain biblical “chronologies”.

How can a history of Israel and Juda be reconstructed?

How can a history of Israel and Juda in the second and first millennia before our era be written? And what is the role of the Bible in this reconstruction? One of the last attempts to write a history of ancient Israel was by Mario Liverani. In his book *Oltre la Bibbia* (whose French translation has a somewhat unfortunate title: *La Bible et l’invention de l’histoire* [The Bible and the Invention of History]), he distinguishes two parts: una storia normale, where he reconstructs this history, as a historian, and una storia inventata, where he examines the invention of the founding traditions of Israel, from the Patriarchs up to Solomon’s temple. In so doing he seeks to show that the first books of the Bible were not historical documents; their function was essentially a matter of identity.

In the, often passionate, debate on the history of Israel and the dating of biblical texts that serve to construct this history, there are two opposing sides: the maximalists and the minimalists. The maximalists believe that one simply has to trust the biblical account, of which the main lines are reliable. As we have seen, this position, ideological underpinnings of which often lie in the conviction that the spiritual value or “Truth” (with a capital T) of the Bible depend on its historical veracity, is not scientifically tenable. For the minimalists, everything started in the Achaemenid period only, around 400 years before our era or even later, in the Hellenistic period. The partisans of this point of view argue that the Bible is a pure ideological construction serving to found Judaism between the 4th and 2nd centuries before our era, and that the first physical manuscripts of the Hebraic Bible (the Dead Sea scrolls) date precisely from that period. Yet the fact that the fragments of certain “biblical” or proto-biblical books of Qumran present significant textual variants indicates that these books were not written for the first time at Qumran but were the result of a long history of transmission and copying. In the construction of the history of Israel and in the dating of the first scrolls of certain biblical texts, we can therefore go back several centuries further. Significant albeit modest epigraphic discoveries confirm this point of view. Silver-leaf amulets dating back to the 7th or 6th century before our era, found in a tomb at Ketef Hinnom near Jerusalem, contain a blessing which is very similar to the priestly blessing of chapter 6 of the Book of Numbers (“Yahweh bless you and keep you; Yhwh make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you... and give you peace”).
An inscription of Khirbet Beit Lei from the 7th century before our era, 8 km from Lachish, can probably be read as follows: “Yahweh is the god of the whole Earth [or: of the whole land]; the mountains of Judea belong to the god of Jerusalem”.

Parallels exist for the different parts of this inscription: the title “God of Jerusalem” conferred on Yahweh could be related to the centralization of the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem, reflected in the Book of Deuteronomy. Another example is the inscription of Deir Alla in Transjordan, from the 8th century before our era, containing the beginning of an oracle by Balaam, son of Beor, who received a message from the gods. He was probably the same visionary found in the narrative and oracles of the Book of Numbers. The authors of this text drew on a tradition that was fairly old when they wrote the biblical version of the history of Balaam. These few cases suffice to underscore the fact that the material and traditions at the origin of the Hebraic Bible are not an invention from the Persian era.

The Bible and its contexts

Unlike the disciplines of Assyriology and Egyptology, which still have thousands of documents to decipher and publish, biblical sciences deal with a “closed corpus”, a “canon”. This canon differs, depending on the religion based on the Bible – Judaism, Catholicism or Protestantism and Orthodox Christianity – but the books constituting it have been published for a long time and it is highly unlikely that they will ever be amended. Biblical research can nevertheless not be satisfied with this canon; it has to examine many other writings and documents, without which canonical texts would never
have been written. The Bible was not born in isolation. The title of the Chair of “The Bible in Its Contexts” is therefore most fitting, and I would like to thank my colleague Jean-Marie Durand for having suggested it. It is the entire Fertile Crescent that, in one way or another, contributed to the shaping of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, the Bible shows this explicitly. Consider the beginning of the history of Abraham in the Book of Genesis. The family of Abram (initially the ancestor’s name) was from Ur Kasdim. From there it moved to Harran, where Abram received the divine call enjoining him to go to the Land of Canaan, which he crossed from Shechem to the Negev before going into Egypt. Thus, from the outset Abraham covered the entire Fertile Crescent. His initiatory journey delineates the geographic space in which Judaism was to emerge during the Persian era, as well as the different cultures and empires that influenced the elaboration of the Hebrew Bible’s texts. Once again, we can only briefly consider a few aspects here.

Figure 6. The Fertile Crescent.

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The abundant documentation of the Palace of Mari offers interesting analogies with customs and themes found in the Bible: sacred steles, prophetic revelations that are written down, the ascension of the young hero to royalty, and so on. These documents, such as those of Ugarit, separated from the biblical writings by more than a millennium, raise the issue of establishing a well thought-out link between them. One can hardly imagine that the biblical authors depended directly on these documents. We have to think more of common anthropological and ideological structures, which could be explained by the concept of the “moyenne durée” (“medium term”) coined by the French Annales School. Egyptology is important for scholars of the Bible, not only because the main founding myth of the Bible relates the exodus from Egypt. A great deal of time and energy has been spent tracking the events of the exodus and the figure of Moses in
Egyptian documents, without much success, and close contact between Egypt and Palestine in the first millennium before our era tends to have been largely overlooked. This was a period often deemed to be “decadent”, according to a certain Egyptological vulgate. Yet the Egyptian influence at the time was immense from a historical and literary standpoint. The third part of the Book of Proverbs, probably dating back to the end of the Judean monarchy, shows striking resemblances with the teachings attributed to the pharaoh Amenemope, with whom the Judean scribe was apparently acquainted. Egypt is presented highly positively in the history of Joseph, which seems to have been written by a member of the Jewish diaspora who had settled in Egypt in the 6th century before our era. The documents from the Elephantine military colony are also particularly significant. Among others, they attest to the veneration of the god of Israel (Yaho) in the company of two other divinities, even during the Persian era, in the manner of Egyptian divine triads. Monotheism and the centralization of worship in Jerusalem clearly had difficulty establishing itself.

Another empire is just as important as Egypt for understanding the birth of the Bible: Assyria. We could almost say that the last book of the Pentateuch is an Assyrian book. The Book of Deuteronomy, in its primitive form, was based on Assyrian vassal treaties or loyalty oaths, and more particularly the treaty of Assarhaddon (672 before our era), of which the author of the first version of Deuteronomy must have seen a copy. In Deuteronomy, it is Yahweh who takes the place of the Assyrian king. He is therefore the sovereign to whom the addressees of the scrolls owe absolute allegiance, and not to the foreign sovereign.

Borrowing a term from Jewish studies, we can characterize this process as a counter-history, an exploitation of the opponents’ historiography by turning it against them: “die Geschichte gegen den Strich kämmen” (to rub history up the wrong way), as Amos Funkenstein put it. This is likewise the case of the first written version of the history of Moses, which also makes use of a number of Assyrian motifs and particularly the account of his birth and exhibition, the closest parallel of which is found in the legend of Sargon. The biblical author wanted to make Moses into a figure that was as important as the legendary founder of the Assyrian dynasties. Although Assyria is abhorred in most of the biblical texts, it did nevertheless provide Judean scribes with the material enabling them to compile “the first history of Israel”.

One of the rare points on which there is consensus in biblical research is the idea that the Torah – the Pentateuch or a Proto-Pentateuch – was published under the domination of the Achemenides, in around 400 before our era. The Bible presents the Persians in a favourable light, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah equate the law of the “king of heaven” with the law of the king of Persia. It has even been posited that the publication of the Pentateuch might have been the outcome of an initiative of the Achemenid rulers, although all things considered that seems hardly likely. Pierre Briant rightly points out that “the importance of Judea is but an optical illusion created by the uneven distribution of the documentation”. Even though, from the Persian point of view the provinces of Judea and Samaria seemed like a sort of “third world”, the Persian Empire was nevertheless a key period for the birth of the Bible and Judaism. The direct influences of Mazdaism on the Bible are difficult to assess, but the integration of Judea and Samaria into the Empire spawned the novel idea of a separation between political and religious power. By granting autonomy to the temple for its sacrificial worship and its management of everyday life and relations with the diaspora, the priestly class and the
secular intelligentsia gave up their political autonomy so that Judaism might have an identity depending on neither state nor politics.

Nor is it possible, for whoever studies the Bible, to disregard the Hellenistic world, and this not only because of the Septuagint, that is, the Greek translations of biblical texts which, in certain cases, were made from Hebrew documents other than those at the origin of the official Masoretic text. Authors of the Hellenistic period such as Hecataeus, Manethon, Artapanus and Flavius Josephus afford us access to traditions, some of which (notably on the wars of Moses) may have existed at the time of the formation of the Pentateuch but were censored by its editors. Moreover, certain biblical accounts have astonishing parallels with Greek mythology. The story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in the Book of Judges resembles a Hebrew version of the tradition of Iphigenia so much that one wonders whether the author of this passage of the Book of Judges – which was very evidently added to an older narrative on Jephthah – was not familiar with the tragedies of Euripides. The visit of the three divine beings to Abraham brings to mind the myth of the birth of Orion in Euphorion or in Ovid. Thus, there is no clear distinction between Greece and the ancient Near East as regards the formation of the Hebraic Bible. Since the 7th century before our era, at least, merchandise has circulated and, with it, myths.

Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece: all are represented at the Collège de France by eminent specialists, and it is a privilege to be able to work on the Bible in a setting of this kind.

The task of the biblical scholar

Interdisciplinary work has become a necessity for biblical sciences, as has teamwork and networks. Research publications and orientations on the Hebrew Bible have reached such a high level of complexity that a single scholar, no matter how knowledgeable, cannot deal with it all from his or her office. We also have to take into account a geographical shift. From the beginnings of the so-called historical-critical exegesis, the “third biblical language” after Hebrew and Greek but before Aramaic was German, because of the predominance of German-speaking universities in biblical research. Over the past twenty years the centre has shifted however to North America, and English has become the new lingua franca in biblical science as well. This shift has gone hand in hand with a change in methods. While German-speaking exegesis focused above all on a detailed diachronic critique – and one that was sometimes vertiginous in its ability to identify in a short passage the presence of numerous authors and editors who all altered the previous text –, English-speaking exegesis focuses more on historical, sociological and anthropological approaches. The idea is not to side with one or the other, but to combine all the methods that facilitate a better understanding of biblical texts. The great biblical scholar Martin Noth qualified the first author of the historiographical texts of the Bible as an ehrlicher Makler (“an honest broker”) because, according to Noth, he had faithfully transmitted the traditions passed down, even if they contradicted his own points of view. I would like to apply this qualification to the description of the biblical scholar's work. His or her job, above all, is to do justice to the text and to defend it against misappropriations and misinterpretations. This is a somewhat tricky exercise since the Bible, in its different variants, is the document on which Judaism and Christianity were founded. In synagogues and churches biblical texts are read and explained from a religious perspective; they are
intended to foster the faith of believers and to give them guidelines. Scientific analysis is therefore sometimes perceived as threatening or even hostile to religious readings because it is believed to challenge the truth of the Bible. The role of scientific work on the Bible is not, however, to assess the spiritual value to be found in these texts. Certain fundamentalist communities nevertheless seem to want to use the Bible as an ideological weapon to defend creationism, inequality between the races or between men and women, the death sentence and other reactionary ethical or political positions. Faced with this harnessing of the Bible to other ends, scholars cannot shirk their responsibility to society. They have to remember that the Bible did not appear from nowhere, and that these texts were written in very different historical circumstances to those of our era.

Above all, it is important to make people aware of the fact that the Bible is not a homogeneous corpus with a single line of thought. One of the findings of biblical research is the unquestionable fact that the Pentateuch is a document of compromise that brings together divergent theological perspectives in the same founding text without imposing a single reading on these divergences. Instead, it leaves its interpretation up to the readers and grants them the freedom to do so. The Pentateuch combines three different legal codes, which precludes the literal application of one code at the expense of the others. In general, the biblical canon confronts its readers with different options, without indicating which one they should choose. Thus, the history of the monarchy from a Judean perspective is related twice in the Hebraic Bible: first in the Books of Samuel and Kings, and then in a “more modern” version, in the Books of Chronicles. By comparing the two narratives, we find a significant number of differences. For instance, for the cult legend in which David invented the location of the temple of Jerusalem, the account in the Book of Samuel (2 Samuel 24) opens with the following words: “wayyoseph aph-yahwe lacharôt beyisrâel wayyâset et-dâwid bâhem lemor lek meneh et yisrâel wet yehudâh” (Again the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, count the people of Israel and Judah"). David carried out a census of the people and was then punished by Yahweh for this act even though Yahweh was its instigator. This is a difficult text: God inspires Man with an idea, but then punishes Man for carrying it out. In the Book of Chronicles the account is similar, except for the beginning: “waya'amod sâtân 'al yisrâel wayyâset et-dâwid limnôt et-yisrâel” (And Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to count the people of Israel). Here, it is Satan who has taken the place of God. Did the author of 1 Chronicles 21:1 want to solve the theological problem posed by the account in the Book of Samuel, or did he want to interpret Satan as the manifestation of the divine wrath? Compared to philosophical problems such as evil, or the question of free will, the Bible’s library does not dictate a single answer. It suggests to the reader different ways of addressing the problem.

Valuing the diversity of biblical texts

The Bible’s huge success also lies in its diversity. In a sense, the birth of the Torah and then of the Bible and Judaism are something of a paradox. Why was one of humanity’s most important documents created by a small group of people occupying a territory considered by the great empires as a largely uninteresting hinterland? Most of the Hebrew Bible can be qualified as “crisis literature”, for the Babylonian exile (even though it concerned only a minority of the population) constitutes both the historical and ideological foundations of the Bible and Judaism. This “exile” was to be decisive in the
construction of the collective memory (Halbwachs) of the elite that organized and transmitted the texts which were to constitute the Hebrew Bible. Some of these narrative and prophetic texts explain the reasons for the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation. Others, mainly prophetic, reflect the hope that those who were scattered may be gathered again and have a peaceful future. But the most important document is the Torah, which built the cohesion of the “post-exilic” community scattered in a non-sedentary, non-political space, entrusting the mediation of the law and the treaty with God to Moses and not to the king. This Torah alternates narratives and prescriptive texts, thus founding the identity of the new religion on a grand narrative of the origins of Man, as well as prescriptions and rituals necessitating constant adaptation and interpretation – which is why the “written Torah” was subsequently completed by an “oral Torah”. Unlike the temple or palace, the Torah is mobile. It can function outside the country – Moses died without entering the Promised land – thus corresponding to the situation of Judaism in a state of diaspora. This de-structuring enabled the Torah to encounter the Hellenistic culture. And the emergence of a Greek Bible alongside a Hebrew Bible definitively established it as one of the foundations of Western civilization.

Ongoing research projects

The task of biblical sciences is to make accessible relevant tools and hypotheses for grasping the meaning of this collection. There is no lack of work, for in the past few decades most of the mainstream theories on the formation of the Pentateuch, of the historiographical books, and of the prophetic corpus which were elaborated in the late 19th or early 20th centuries have been seriously challenged. This does not mean that all the observations and discoveries that founded these hypotheses must be rejected. However, they must be verified using the new computer tools available and in light of new archaeological discoveries, and be rethought with a view to devising new paradigms. The following three lines of inquiry are, in my mind, both urgent and promising:

(a) The history of the formation of the Pentateuch. While some consensus exists on the approximate date of the first edition of the Torah, around 400-350 before our era, there is no agreement on answers to the questions of how, when and by whom the various traditions and documents were collected, revised and combined, and with what objective. Last year a research network was set up (and I think that this was a first), consisting of Hebrew Bible scholars from several German, Swiss and Italian universities and the Collège de France. Although they are working with different models, they are all convinced that the time of “scientific chapels” is over and that the confrontation of divergent hypotheses can spawn a new paradigm. The lecture on Abraham, with which I would like to start my teaching at the Collège de France, corresponds to this quest for a new understanding of the Pentateuch.

(b) A new reconstruction of the history of Israel and Judea in the second and first millennia before our era. As far as possible, this new synthesis should take into account all the documentation that we have, and “free itself” of the biblical chronology. It is by comparing the historian’s history to the biblical authors’ history that the meaning of the latter will appear more clearly.

(c) Comparative work on the founding myths of the Bible: origins of the world, of humans and of the human condition, of civilization, of kingship, etc. The term “myth” often has
negative connotations. Yet we need to rehabilitate the myth, for in the ancient world and in today’s world alike, it serves, in a narrative mode, to express questions, quests, anxieties, and hopes for which other types of discourse are not always available. The Bible, with the exception perhaps of the book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), contains no philosophical treatises and prefers mythical language. Thus, the mythological anecdote of the horns of Moses encompasses, among other things, complex reflection on the inappropriateness of representations of the divine (or the transcendent) while acknowledging the necessity for such representations. This is a fascinating subject that I however cannot pursue here this evening.

Thank you for your attention.

NOTES

1. Literally, “Conjectures on the original memoirs that Moses seems to have used to compose the Book of Genesis”. This book has just been republished with a highly interesting introduction by Pierre Gibert who sets out the life of this great scholar: Jean Astruc, Conjectures sur la Genèse, introduction and notes by Pierre Gibert, Paris, Noésis, 1999.


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