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9 Biblical Historiography

9.1 Biblical Historiography

In the preceding chapters, several forms of historiography in the Hebrew Bible have been discussed and compared to similar Greek texts: genealogies (chapter five), stories about founders of cities and ancestors of peoples (chapter seven), and chronicle entries mentioning kings from Assyria and Babylonia (chapter eight). In this chapter, a characterisation will be given of the historiographical genres to which these texts belong.

The authors of these biblical historiographical texts are not known. It has even been questioned if author is an appropriate term in this context and many scholars prefer to speak of scribes and redactors. Yet, two names of biblical authors – to be clear: modern names for conjectured authors – have often been mentioned in the preceding chapters: the Jahwist and the Deuteronomist (section 1.2; chapter eight). Much has already been said about the Jahwist in chapters five and seven. In this chapter, the strands will be woven together to create a picture of the author(s) of the non-priestly parts of the Table of Nations, especially the Nimrod legend.

Genres in biblical historiography

Most Assyrian and Babylonian kings in 2 Kings are mentioned in connection with a campaign (Tiglath-pileser, Shalmaneser, Sargon) or a political decision (Esarhaddon, Ashurbanipal, Amel-Marduk), of which we are informed in a brief and matter of fact way. It is likely that extracts from a chronicle form the basis of what we hear about these Assyrian and Babylonian kings. *Stories*, in which kings and dignitaries are put on the stage conversing and making speeches – something that the Greeks would have recognised as *history* – are told only about Sennacherib (2K. 18-19; Is. 36-37) and Nebuchadnezzar (most of them in the book of Daniel, which was written in the Hellenistic period). What is told about Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-12) is of a still different character. It seems an antiquarian note, gathering some facts about a legendary character called Nimrod and explaining the saying ‘a hunter like Nimrod’. So, what is written about Assyrian and Babylonian kings is found in texts that belong to three genres: extracts from a chronicle, antiquarian notes and full-fledged stories. In this section a characterisation of these genres will be given.

A typical example of an entry from a chronicle is the description of the campaign of Tiglath-pileser: ‘In the days of king Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel Beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, and Hazor – Gilead and Galilee – all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria’ (2K. 15:29). It starts with a date, which is sometimes vague, as in this case (‘in the days of king Pekah’), sometimes more specific (‘In the fourth year of king Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of king Hoshea son of Elah of Israel’ in 2K. 18:9, ‘In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of king Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month’ in 2K. 25:27).¹ Then the deeds of the king are recounted, short and factual, without explanation or emotion. Sometimes these deeds are conquests or campaigns, as with Tiglath-Pileser III (2K. 15:29), sometimes political decisions such as the pardon and release of Jehoiachin by Amel-Marduk (2K. 25:27). These short notes, originally fragments from chronicles or annals, are mainly found in Kings (2K. 15:19-20; 15:29; 17:3-4; 17:5-6; 18:9-12; 18:13-16; 25:27-30). Unusual are Isaiah’s prophecy against Egypt (Is. 20:1), which is dated by a reference to one of Sargon’s campaigns, and the death of Sennacherib, which will be discussed in more detail in one of the following paragraphs.

At first sight, Gen. 10:8-12 seems to belong in the same category as the texts from the previous paragraph, but on a closer inspection, it is of a different nature. The Assyrian and Babylonian kings that are mentioned in Kings lived in a fairly recent past, from the point of view of the authors of 2 Kings, as the books of Kings are in outline from the exilic period, probably from shortly after the death of Jehoiachin. Gen. 10:8-12 is about a legendary or mythic king from a distant past. The author of this fragment should best be compared with Greek authors such as Pherekydes of Athens and Akousilaos of Argos, who turned poetry into prose and myth into history, i.e. who wrote mythical stories down as if they were history. About Nimrod, four things are stated: he was the first monarch on earth, he was a mighty hunter, he was king of Babylon, Uruk and Akkad in Babylonia, and he has founded Nineveh,

¹ 2K. 25:27 has been subject of much debate, because it is relevant to when *DtrH* has been written, see e.g.: Becking 1990 and 2007; Georg 2001; Frolov 2007; Harvey 2010. Mentioning the month is rare. Such dates are restricted to a few sections of *DtrH*, see: Miano 2010: 108.

Kalah, Rehoboth-Ir and Resen in Assyria. Inventions and city foundings, often by men or women (called *πρῶτοι εὐρεταί* and *κτισταί*) from a mythical or very ancient era, which shade off in one another in Greek thought, are a favourite subject in Hellenistic historiography. For this reason, the Nimrod legend has been analysed in detail and compared to Greek historiography in a separate chapter of this study.

Finally, the Hebrew Bible contains several fully fledged stories such as the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib (2K. 18:17-19:36 = Is. 36:2-37:37), the final years of the kingdom Judah (2K. 24-25), Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a statue with a head of gold and feet of iron and clay (Dan. 2), the worship of the golden statue (Dan. 3), Nebuchadnezzar's madness (Dan. 4), Belshazzar's festival and the fall of Babylon (Dan. 5). The most interesting and probably most studied story is that of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib. It is sandwiched between two short, annalistic entries. The first one (2K. 18:13-16) relates that Sennacherib marched against Judah and took the cities of Judah one by one, and that Hezekiah was forced to pay a huge ransom to the Assyrian the king. This is almost the same as Sennacherib says in his annals about his campaign of 701.² The second one (2K. 19:37) relates that, after his return to Assyria, Sennacherib was killed by two of his sons, Adrammelech (Ass. *Arda-Mulišši*) and Sharezer.³ Of course, Sennacherib was really killed by his son(s), but this happened much later (681) than the biblical text suggests. Between these two annalistic notes, the story of the siege of Jerusalem and its deliverance by an angel of the Lord is found. This narrative has received much attention in recent years.⁴ It is surrounded by controversies. Is this story a unity or is it the result of combining two older stories? What is the relation between the story and the annalistic notes? When was the story created? These questions will not be discussed here, because in recent years so much ink has been spilled over these matters that saying something new about them is almost impossible. The only question that will be discussed here is to which genre the text belongs. The most frequent answer is historiography.⁵ It is a fully fledged story about an event in the past, and it contains

² ANET 288; COS II 303; Cogan 2008: 114-115.

³ Parpola 1980; Zawadzki 1990; Dalley 2007: 37-43. See chapter 2.3.

⁴ Gallagher 1999; Grabbe 2003; Noll 2008; Evans 2009 and 2012.

⁵ Ben Zvi 2003.

speeches, characterisation (especially of the Assyrians), dialogues between servants of the Judean king and Assyrian officials, a prophecy by Isaiah and a miraculous rescue of the city by an angel of the Lord. These elements make it closely resemble Greek, especially Herodotean historiography. Yet, Noll has argued in a paper from 2008 that this story is not to be regarded as historiography. His main argument is that it is almost impossible that its authors really believed that the events happened as described.⁶ According to Noll, it was at first ‘a vivid fictional tale, perhaps a parable’, and only later it was read as history by ‘readers influenced by the Hellenic-Hellenistic genre of history’.⁷ Noll’s reasoning is not convincing. This story of the siege and deliverance of Jerusalem has the characteristics of ancient history writing and closely resembles Greek historiography. In terms of form and genre, making a difference between a fictional tale and ancient historiography is difficult, perhaps impossible. The story from Kings (and Isaiah) was read as history, an account of real events, and there are no indications that its authors meant it as something else.

In this context, three things have to be noted. First, the stories from Daniel differ from most other biblical narratives by their eschatological character. While they seem to speak about specific historical figures such as Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius, they wanted to help their (first) hearers interpret the present, and to convey something about the nature of history and about the events that were to come. In a certain sense, they are philosophy of history in a narrative form, as becomes, for example, clear in the dream of the four kingdoms in Daniel. Second, the genres that have been mentioned are also distinguishable in texts in which the Assyrians and Babylonians do not figure. A typical annalistic note is the description of Jeroboam’s reign (2K. 14:23-28). An example of an antiquarian note is the Lamech fragment (Gen. 4:19-24). Fully fledged historical narratives are for example found in the Joseph novella (Gen. 37-48; 50) and the succession history (2Sam. 7:9-20; 1K. 1-2). Third, it is not possible to draw an exact line of demarcation between short notes and detailed narratives. A telling example is the story how the king of Assyria settled people from Babylonia and elsewhere in the vicinity of Samaria and sent them a priest to teach them how to worship the god of Israel (2K. 17:24-34, 41). It is

⁶ Noll 2008.

⁷ Noll 2008: 56.

more detailed than most annalistic notes, but it lacks dialogues or characterisation, as they are found in the story of the siege of Jerusalem. (Probably, it is best characterised as an ethnographic fragment, which would make it a fourth genre.) It is a continuum, at one hand annalistic notes, probably from a chronicle, and at the other hand fully fledged narratives, but also texts that are somewhere between those opposites.

To sum up, there is a number of genres in 2 Kings which is in one way or another historiographical: first, annalistic notes, chronicle entries; second, *antiquarian notes*; third, stories or narratives as they are also known from Greek historiography; and perhaps fourth, *ethnographic notes*, which are strictly speaking not historiography, although the boundary between historiography and ethnography is often vague in antiquity, as is for example obvious from Herodotos. In the Hebrew Bible, these genres are not found separately, as often in Greek literature, but as part of a larger whole, such as the second book of Kings, or the *Deuteronomistic History* (see section 1.2), or Genesis, or the Pentateuch, or the *Primary History*.

Sources of the Second Book of Kings

Many things are obscure, but some things are clear. The authors of the books of Kings – whenever they lived, and whether Kings was originally written as part of a larger work, the *Deuteronomistic* or *Primary History*, or not – must have had access to written sources from the eighth century and perhaps even to older written sources. The scepticism of Lemche and his partisans (see section 1.2, page 19) is unfounded. As has become clear in the preceding section, the authors of Kings knew the names of most Assyrian and Babylonian kings from Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) to Amel-Marduk (562-560), and they had a fairly accurate picture of the chronology of this period, as they knew which Judean and Israelite kings were contemporary with which Assyrian and Babylonian kings. This shows that they must have relied upon near-contemporary written sources, because as a rule, in oral traditions chronology is vague and names are interchangeable.⁸ The names of some Assyrian kings being

⁸ The most famous example of a story with a great number of different protagonist is the story of the foundling who became king, which is told about Sargon of Akkad, Romulus and Remus, Moses, Semiramis en many others (Binder 1964; Lewis 1980).

written according to the Assyrian pronunciation, and the names of some Babylonian kings according to Babylonian pronunciation, is an additional argument for the composition date of these sources. It is unlikely that the Assyrian pronunciation was still known in the Babylonian or Persian period.

Which sources these authors have used is not easy to determine. At first sight, it seems possible that the 'Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah' and the 'Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel', which are mentioned several times in Kings, have been used.⁹ The chronicles of the Israelite and Judean kings are lost to us, but it is likely that they were still available to the (first) authors of Kings, and that they contained items on the relation to the kings of Assyria and Babylonia. But these chronicles are not mentioned in Kings as a guarantee that what is said is reliable. The authors of Kings refer to these chronicles for the *rest* of the acts of the Kings of Judah and Israel, for example: 'Now the rest of the acts of Azariah, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah?' (2K. 15:6).¹⁰ Yet, much of what is written in Kings about the history of Israel and Judah must directly or indirectly have been based on 'royal records [and] royal chronicles' or other contemporary official documents.¹¹ The as a rule accurate transcription of the royal names and the chronology of 2 Kings make this conclusion inevitable. Whether these chronicles were used directly, or indirectly, through a literary work that was based on these chronicles, is difficult to determine. Many scholars believe that it must have been indirectly. Adam, for example, argues that the authors of Kings used a (lost) *synchronic chronicle*: a document from the reign of Hezekiah that related the history of Israel and Judah, especially the wars and treaties between both nations.¹² But, whatever the truth of this matter is, ultimately the historical skeleton of 2 Kings is based upon older written sources from the pre-exilic period.

To sum up, reliable written sources from the period of the monarchy must have been at the disposal of the authors of the second book of Kings. These source were

⁹ Galil 1996: 10-11; Nielsen 1997: 112-114; Haran 1999; Miano 2010: 108; Frahm 2011: 277.

¹⁰ Leuchter 2010: 132.

¹¹ Leuchter 2010: 132.

¹² Adam 2010.

extracts from one or more (*synchronic*) *chronicles*, which had been based ultimately on royal *annals* or *royal records*. As a result, the chronology of Kings, at least for the period of the late and middle monarchy, is reliable. This distinguishes 2 Kings from books like Daniel and Judith, which are from the Hellenistic period, and clearly show that their authors knew much less about the history of Israel and Judah.

Nimrod and the Table of Nations

As said before, the Nimrod legend (Gen. 10:8-12), which was discussed in chapter seven, belongs to a different genre than the texts discussed in the previous sections. It is part of the Table of Nations, which is discussed in chapter five, but it is of a different nature than the rest of Table of Nations.

First, we have the core Table of Nations, probably written between 650 and 550. This core Table of Nations uses a segmented genealogy as a means to describe relations between nations. The use of segmented genealogies to describe relations between nations or tribes is also found in the Hesiodic corpus, which is roughly from the same period.¹³ The question is how to explain this similarity. According to Van Seters, the Jahwist (in his view the author of Gen. 10:8-12) has combined the eastern tradition of the flood with the western genealogical tradition.¹⁴ He believes that the Jahwist has been influenced by the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, which had reached him through Phoenician intermediaries. Chronologically, Van Seters's thesis is problematic, as Blenkinsopp points out: 'The best estimate of the date of *The Catalogue* would make it either contemporary with or slightly later than the J of Van Seters, and we would have to assume not only that a copy of *The Catalogue* was in Phoenician hands shortly after its composition, but also that it was translated into a Semitic language – unless, of course, J could read Greek'.¹⁵ But if the traditional chronological order of J and P is reversed, and the traditionally Jahwistic material in

¹³ Sparks (1998: 54) explicitly points to the similarity between Greek tradition and Hebrew Bible in using these genealogies.

¹⁴ Van Seters 1988; Van Seters 1992.

¹⁵ Blenkinsopp 1992: 75.

the primeval history is an addition of a later date to an already existing Priestly source, a different picture emerges and this objection loses its force.

Of course, there is no need for the author of this core Table of Nations to have owned or read a copy of the *Catalogue of Women* or any other Greek literary work to have learned this idea from a Greek example. As López-Ruiz rightly says, ‘the rigid scholarly model of *textual transmission*, still defended by many classicists, needs to be replaced [...]. The new model needs to be one of mainly oral and intimate transmission of stories and beliefs [...] between mothers and sons, nannies and children, peers in commercial enterprises, artists and apprentices, religious specialists, and so on’.¹⁶ One should add mercenaries to López-Ruiz’s enumeration. A Phoenician merchant or an aristocratic Greek mercenary, proud of his ancestors, could easily have introduced into Palestine the idea of using a segmented genealogy in the way it is done in the Table of Nations. Greek mercenaries were active in Palestine in this period.¹⁷ We even know the name of one of them: Antimenidas, the brother of the poet Alkaios.¹⁸ He fought in the siege of Askalon by the Babylonian army (604). It is not likely that Antimenidas himself sat down with a Judean scribe or courtier to discuss their relative ancestries, but it is perfectly possible that one of the mercenaries in the pay of a Judean king did so. Therefore, the idea of using of segmented genealogies to describe relations between nations or tribes could easily have come from Greece to Judah, or even from Judah or Phoenicia to Greece. Of course, there is no proof that this really happened, as it is in general very unlikely to find any proof of oral transmission, but it is very well possible.

Second, we have the additions. The lists – the sons of Misraim, the sons of Canaan, and the sons of Joktan – do not provide any clues to their origin, but the Nimrod legend (see chapter seven) does. Nimrod, the first king, resembles the first finders (*protoi heuretai*, as they are called in Greek) mentioned in Gen. 4, the builder of the first city (Cain or Enoch), the ancestor of those who live in tents (Jabal), the ancestor of the musicians (Jubal) and of the smiths (Tubal-cain). Nimrod is a culture hero and

¹⁶ López-Ruiz 2010: 5.

¹⁷ Kearsley 1999: 119-121; Niemeier 2001: 16-19.

¹⁸ Alkaios T1, F48 and F350 (Campbell 2002).

foreign founder, the first king and empire builder, and the founder of four important Assyrian cities. He not only resembles Cain's descendants, but also, and perhaps even more, he resembles Kadmos, who is also a culture hero (introduction of writing) and a city founder (of Thebes). In other words, Nimrod seems to betray some characteristics of Greek history writing. And there are other elements in these texts that remind us of Greek historiography. Nimrod's father is Cush ('Ethiopia', i.e. Nubia), the brother of Egypt and Libya. The Nimrod legend seeks the origin of urban culture in Africa, not in Mesopotamia. It is not the same as the Greek tendency to seek the origins of all civilisations in Egypt, but it comes close. And finally, the phrase the great city (העיר הגדול in Gen. 10:12), which is also found in Jonah, a book that is often dated to the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, recollects the Greek idea of Mesopotamia as the homeland of the largest cities that ever existed. Taken together, these arguments suggest that the Nimrod legend was added to the Table of Nations in a period when some ideas found in Greek historiography were known to the Judean elite, or when at least its influence had reached Judah.

This gives us three layers. It starts with a Table of Nations from the late seventh or early sixth century. P has incorporated this text in his work in the early Persian era. A third author has added the Nimrod legend, and perhaps more. Perhaps we could call this author the Jahwist, because in some respects he resembles Van Seters's J, although he lived after P, not before, but it seems more safe not to do so, because our author differs considerably from Van Seters's J. The hand of this author can also be seen in Cain's genealogy in Gen. 4 and of the Sons of God text in Gen. 6:1-4, but if these text are in any way related to what is commonly called the Jahwist in the remainder of the Pentateuch, is unclear. He is influenced by ideas that we also find in Greek historiography or mythography, not so much in the *Catalogue of Women* (Van Seters), but rather in the works of the early mythographers, or, less likely, of Herodotos. He shares their interest in genealogies, culture heroes and foreign founders. That he has actually read any Greek literary work is unlikely. There are no specific agreements – names or facts that are mentioned both by this Judean author and in Greek historiography – but he shares the interest of many Greek historians and mythographers in stories about origins, founders and culture heroes. Probably, he has not read any Greek literary works, but he could have heard about Greek

historiography in discussions with other scholars or scribes, in the same way as many of us today have heard about Freud's theories, or Wellhausen's source criticism, without ever having read the original works of these authors. This Greek influence does not make his work a Hellenistic book. Probably, he was a learned antiquarian who lived after P, but still in the early Persian period, and who had his roots in Ancient Near Eastern culture and myth. His founder of Nineveh is an oriental king or deity, Nimrod, an echo of Naram-Sin, a Mesopotamian monarch, or of the god Ninurta. Greek inventions, such as Ninos and Semiramis, did not leave any traces in his writing. Nor does this Greek influence mean that history writing in Judah arose as a response to Greek historiography. This anonymous author was not the first Judean historian – it will be seen in the next section that deuteronomistic historiography is older, pre-exilic or exilic – but he was the first of whom we know that he was interested in primeval history. It is tempting to invent a new siglum for this author, perhaps M, because he is interested in myths of origins, but it seems better to leave him for now anonymous, because the number of sigla in biblical scholarship is already too large.

Conclusion

If these conclusions regarding the author of the Nimrod legend are combined with what is said about annalistic historiography, which is based on (royal) chronicles, it is possible to distinguish at least four layers in biblical historiography.

1. A synchronic chronicle or another annalistic document was written in the late eighth or early seventh century. It gave a description of the history of Israel and Judah, especially the wars and treaties between both nations. Synchronic chronicles that describe the history of Babylonia and Assyria are known from Mesopotamia and such chronicles have probably served as an example to the author of the synchronic chronicle of Israel and Judah.

2. The core of the Table of Nations originates from the late seventh or early sixth century, probably from the period between the fall of Assyria and the establishment of Babylonian supremacy (see chapter five). The geographical horizon of the Table of Nations is, in accordance with its period of origin, limited to North Africa and the

Ancient Near East, bounded in the northwest by the Aegean, in the northeast by the land of the Medes, and in the south by Arabia and Nubia. This area is divided into three zones: a northern zone, inhabited by the sons of Japheth, a southern zone, inhabited by the sons of Ham, and a central or eastern zone, inhabited by the sons of Shem. It is impossible to say what its original context was, but its function must have been historiographic or ethnographic: it divides and classifies the peoples of the earth. It is a segmented genealogy. Use of segmented genealogies, is also found in Greek ethnography, a genre that is very close to historiography, and it is possible that the use of genealogies for historic and ethnographic purposes in biblical and Greek literature has a common origin. If this is so, this influence has found its way by oral and intimate transmission, not by textual transmission.

3. The author(s) of Kings, perhaps an individual, or perhaps a group of scribes from the Deuteronomistic School, created in the exilic period a document that, after some additions and changes in the Persian period, eventually became the Books of Kings. This document was based on the synchronic chronicle or another annalistic source from the late monarchy, but it contained more material, and especially more narratives, often focussing on the lives and deeds of Major Prophets like Elijah and Isaiah. These narratives make it look more like Greek historiography than the chronicles on which this document was based, but there are no specific indications of Greek influence. It is possible that it is an autochthonous development, especially because it is incorporated in the near eastern tradition of chronicle writing.

4. Probably in the Persian period, an author who was interested in the origin of peoples and nations and the invention of cultural institutions like kingship, and cultural achievements like husbandry, made a number of additions to Genesis: the story of Lamech and his children, the Nimrod legend and the story of the Sons of God. He shares the interest in genealogies, culture heroes and foreign founders with Greek historiography and mythography, especially with authors such as Akousilaos, Hellanikos and Pherekydes. That he has actually read any Greek literary work seems unlikely. The ideas that are found in their works have reached him not by textual, but by oral transmission. Prominent among these ideas is the idea of the foreign founder, which sets the Greeks and Israelites apart from the older nations like the

Egyptians and Babylonians. There is also one striking difference in the use of this idea of the foreign founder: in Greek historiography, the Assyrians are usually autochthonous, while in biblical historiography, they have their own foreign founder, Nimrod, because they were regarded as a young nation compared with the Babylonians.