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THE BIOGRAPHIC MODE IN HEBREW HISTORIOGRAPHY

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I

Inordinately fond of apothegmatic, Carlyle once wrote that ‘History is the essence of innumerable biographies’. Biblical scholarship of the 19th century—not to insist in tracing this perspective within the commentaries of medieval Judaism and Christendom—has frequently recognized that the biblical text—and I am now quoting Skinner—‘[treated] the heroes of [legends] as personifications or eponymous ancestors of tribes or peoples, whose history and mutual relations are exhibited under the guise of personal biography’.¹ This scholarship defined its task largely as one which, by fragmenting individual biographies into manageable episodes and by subjecting each of them to rigorous historical analysis, would recover trustworthy evidence in order either to construct a realistic history of Israel or to assess its various institutions. That task, in its manifold permutations and contrasting conclusions, will always remain central to biblical research.

It may be worth our while, however, to supplement these undertakings by delving into the literary processes which convey the past in such a starkly restrictive fashion. While such an inquiry will eventually need to turn to an agenda not too dissimilar from that currently obtaining in historical research, in its initial phases, however, this approach will permit the researcher to shelve judgments regarding the veracity of the Hebrew’s facts and to proceed with analysis without confronting extra-biblical accounts. Thus, it will not be the task of this enterprise to gauge the distance which separates biographies from reality nor to speculate on their totemic or euhemeristic potential. The Hebrew text, in the format that is now before us, becomes the focus of attention; the art of historiographer, the object of our observations; and the structure of biographies, the subject in hand.

Despite the variety of its manifestations, the biographical mode of conveying Old Testament history can be allocated *ex hypothesi* to two forms. At the outset it should be made clear, however, that the Old Testament biographies *gravitate* toward one form or the other, with no example fulfilling wholly the requirements of either. Borrowing for the time being the vocabulary of the drama,² I label these the melodramatic and the cumulative. A more elegant term, the episodic, could also be attached to the second mode. The melodramatic biography tends to occupy larger space and is infinitely more complex than the episodic. Indeed, in some cases shorter examples of the episodic can be framed within a longer melodrama. Although the language used within both differ—with, for example, the episodic resorting less frequently than the melodramatic to visual paronomasia and semantic leitmotif—I cannot claim any earlier antiquity for one form or the other. The fact that appreciably similar literary categories obtain in Ancient Near Eastern, Greek, Roman, Medieval and Renaissance literature should suggest that these two patterns in biographical presentation were probably always coeval, each fulfilling its own purpose even as it addresses the same audience.

II

THE EPISODIC BIOGRAPHY is structured integrally—that is, each tableau contains a narrative which is complete in itself. This does not necessarily mean that a beginning, middle, and end are fully developed in each scene, but it does imply that no information from one episode is crucial to appreciating the dénouement of another. More importantly, the episodic biography is structured disjunctively; that is, the full account is discordant in the sequence of scenes which alternate between tension and relaxation, merriment and pathos, piety and religious obstinacy, etc. Furthermore, this sequencing is artificially chronological, with the possibility of shifting, shuffling, and even skipping scenes without incurring serious damage to the final portrait. Linkage among and between scenes, when it does occur, tends to be rudimentary, and upon closer inspection, sometimes vestigial, satisfying requirements other than those essential to the biography. Cause and effect can rarely be traced among the various tableaux.

The subject of the episodic biography, the one whose *bios*, that is, whose 'mode of living' or 'conduct of life' is to be captured, remains monochromatic within each of his appearances, since complexity and

diversity can only confuse the audience, hindering its capacity to understand the nature of the character within each scene. The emotional range of the hero is, therefore, sharply circumscribed, with introspection and inner enlightenment rarely in evidence. Each scene, however, will deliver a different manifestation of that character, so that, when the series of tableaux about one individual is complete, the hero's portrait will emerge as the sum total of his virtues and failings.

The episodic is filled with secondary characters. Major ones, generally immediate kin to the hero, are sometimes granted their own limelight; but they only supplement the portrait of the main subject by sharpening certain elements of his character. Other actors move in and out of the narrative as needed, without personal past or future. Opposition to the subject is temporary and hardly menacing. However, a major character in the Hebrew *episode* narrative is God. Unlike the melodrama, where his appearance is largely as a *deus ex machina*—providentially resolving or redirecting events from on high—God in the episodic is invariably personally touched by the encounter with the hero. It is not surprising, therefore, that the anthropomorphic passages in the Old Testament tend to be found in episodic narratives.

By way of rudimentary illustration, let me turn to the surface of narratives regarding Abraham. This particular series of scenes is complicated by the fact that the collection is, for theological reasons, allocated to materials concerning Abram and to those concerning Abraham. Because he is bound by the conventions of the episodic, however, the biographer could underscore the major change in his subject mainly by *repeating*, with some variations, the paradigmatic characterizations within three of his selections. Thus, the hero as cunning but eventually successful is developed in the famous wife-sister scenes of chapters 12 and 20; as trusting his wife to make short range decisions about his progeny in 16 and 18; as magnanimous towards Lot in 13 and 18. Other scenes, spread out over the entire portraiture, offer us differing characterizations: warlike and politically shrewd in chapter 14; spiritual if not mystical in chapter 15; obedient in chapter 17; gambling in 22; duped in 23; and decisive in the early verses of 24.

As a literary achievement, the episodic biography has its drawbacks. Because the character of the hero can be captured best only at his maturity, the biographer pays little attention either to the birth of his

hero or, for that matter, to his death. Thus Abra(ha)m's childhood and death are superficially broached, and even when noted, they serve mostly to link various biographies into a chronological sequence or to provide information about burial places. This can be disconcerting, for the hero appears on stage practically unannounced, and leaves it either awkwardly or unobtrusively. Furthermore, because each scene is relatively self-contained, the passage of time is not stressed, and the setting remains purely ornamental. Paradoxically, perhaps, these conditions endow the complete portrait with a timelessness which allows episodes to belong to each and every period in which it is recalled.

But the episodic biography possesses powerful attributes. It forces sharper focus on each scene and thus conveys more immediately a prominent characteristic of the hero. Because the mood alternates as the scene changes, the episodic effortlessly retains the audience's attention. More importantly, however, those who wish to decode the significance of the heroic act must contribute their own interpretation. With its tendency to pare individual acts into instances of exemplary behavior, the episodic biography permits the audience to locate within it embodiments of the national character. Moreover, the paradigmatic behavior within each scene, and the temporal ambiguity it fosters, allow the audience to break from its concern for a specific historical past and to interpret this past as but adumbrative of the present, if not the future. I now find it obvious that when, in his *Mimesis*, Auerbach wished to highlight the spatial and temporal freedom of biblical prose, he selected the most starkly etched tableau, the *Akedah*, from within Abraham's episodic life story. He might not have fared as well had he chosen from melodramatic portraiture.

III

THE MELODRAMATIC BIOGRAPHY is likewise based on the sequencing of scenes of surface depth, that is, ones whose outlines can be grasped through initial familiarity. However, unlike the episodic in which the activities of the subject may easily duplicate idealized behavior, the melodrama explores the hero's inner world. A full portrait of the subject is not realized by conjoining a series of integral attributes, but by pursuing the character of the hero, progressively and deliberately, over a span of time and space. Thus, by the end of any melodramatic biography, the hero acquires a personality which is unique and

untransferable. The biographer employs a number of devices by which to craft his final portrait. In this presentation, I mention four devices, and will refer to the Jacob saga for illustrations.

1. *Delayed-action plotting*. This is the most obvious tactic which develops a narrative about an individual hero. Only if oracular prognostications occur (e.g. at 25.23) does the biographer describe the birth and youth. At any rate, he moves quickly to establish goals for the hero. In the case of Jacob, the famous trickery scenes in which he obtains the *bekorah* (25.19-24) and in which his mother delivers him the *berakah* (ch. 27) will generate interest in the manner in which Jacob will begin to enjoy their rewards. As a structuring device, trickery also becomes a thematic leitmotif binding sundry other narratives located within the Jacob biography. Thus, trickery, successfully negotiated but ultimately corroding to its practitioners, allows the biographers to accommodate sagas regarding Simeon and Levi at Shechem (ch. 34) and ones regarding Judah and Tamar near Timnah (ch. 38). Most brilliantly, the biographer manages to set the well-realized, essentially episodic biography of Joseph within Jacob's life by returning to the theme of trickery, by Jacob's son (ch. 37) as well as by Joseph (chs 43-44). (It is perhaps worth underscoring the fact that from a biographical perspective Genesis 38 does not intrude into the Joseph story, but both are neatly spliced within that of Jacob.) Such long-range plotting, moreover, generates a diversity of perspectives, thus multiplying the levels of irony afforded by the individual's situation.

2. *Bi-partite allocation of biographic materials*. Under this heading I deal with an unusual characteristic of the Hebrew biographical style. Upon taking the audience on a journey, in which the hero survives all odds and succeeds in fulfilling the goals as established in early moments of the narrative, the biographer rather suddenly relinquishes constant attention from his protagonist. Jacob's life story, which properly begins when his mother, like his grandfather, is elected and called to leave familiar surroundings (ch. 24), will not end until the last verses of Genesis (50.13). It is blocked out, slightly indented along its outer edges, by narratives which feature dim-eyed patriarchs bestowing birthrights, blessings, and parting kisses to the younger of two brothers (at chs 27; 48). Within these outer limits are located blocs of narratives. One, framed by otherworldly encounters at, respectively, Bethel (28.10-22) and Yabbok (32.25-33), is single-minded in its interest in Jacob's personal development and prosperity.

The other, switching its focus from one son of Jacob to another, is framed rather artificially by appeal to a 17-year span in which Joseph lived in the promised land and an equal period in which Jacob finished his life in Egypt. In this second section Jacob is but a presence, resignedly witnessing the fragmentation of his own hopes and aspirations. But, even as he loses his power to control his immediate destiny, he grows in omniscience and in his ability to shape the distant future. Thus, one purpose that the second part of a hero's life fills admirably is to define what could be a stunning conclusion to a patriarch's life: death in exile and dependence on the bounties of a foreign ruler and on the mediation of an expatriate son. I can speculate endlessly on this observation, but will only note that death, whenever called upon to fill a melodramatic canvas, is invariably an occasion for the biographer to make his own comments about the tragic dimensions of the heroic life.

3. *Heightening the emotional range of the characters.* This is done with a variety of means. By exaggerating and by repeatedly calling upon an idiosyncrasy of the hero (in this case Jacob's trickery), the biographer succeeds in raising the stakes by which success can be measured. By endowing the hero with primary emotions—love, hate, revulsion, fear, etc.—and by extending them to the characters closest to him, the biographer entangles the hero's feelings and tests his sensibilities. Consequently, the audience must also make an emotional investment in the hero's life story. Finally, by intensifying the eeriness of particular settings—dreams, visions, meetings with strangers, etc.—the biographer expands the consciousness of his hero and endows his activities with psychological dimensions.

4. *Introduction of opponent.* The biographer most commonly explores the hero's inner world by inserting a force of evil or instability into the narrative. This role can be allocated, *seriatim*, to a number of personalities, thus permitting control of the intensity with which the hero is threatened. Curiously enough, the opponent in the Hebrew biography tends to make his debut before the hero. Laban, for example, already appears in the scene where Rebekah is wooed (24.29). The opponent's role is hardly ever depicted monochromatically, but is often shaped to be opposite the hero's various posturings. Thus, by the time that the series of confrontations, on the one hand between Jacob and Esau and between Jacob and Laban on the other, are complete, the biographer has explored the hero's responses to explosive situations. We might note, however, that as

the Hebrew melodramatic biography enters its second phase, when the hero's disintegrating life is mirrored mostly by the activities of his sons and kinfolk, the opponent's role fades into insignificance.

Here I can hardly speak to the melodrama's many virtues as an artistic creation. While it does lack the episodic versatility, transferability and open-endedness—qualities which can readily leaven theological speculations—the melodrama is the stuff by which we measure the passion of the human mind. Sharply edged and untransferable, the portrait drawn in melodrama intrigues us not merely because of its antiquity or venerability, but because of the uncanny familiarity of its experiences. We therefore repeatedly turn back to it in order to better understand ourselves.

IV

The above remarks have centered mostly on the surface structuring of the Hebrew biography. I have rather unsystematically alluded to some of the techniques that entered in the crafting of two identifiable forms. I have not broached the problem of language and the consequences of using Hebrew in biographical literature; I have not touched upon the reasons which compelled a biographer to allocate some traditions regarding a particular ancestor to the episodic, and others to the melodramatic; nor have I described the sequencing of a series of life-stories. I have not delved into the realities—political, theological, and ethnic—which may have guided the biographer's pen, I have not clarified the links between biography and historiography, and I have not even admitted to the presence of non-biographical material in the Hebrew's accounts. This negative confession needs to be uttered, for it should underscore the complexity of the task at hand.³

NOTES

1. J. Skinner, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), xxix. The topic has not attracted much attention ever since it became unfashionable to view the patriarchal stories as representing the personification of actual tribal history. Recently, however, J. Blenkinsopp, *JOT* 20 (1981), 27-46, addresses the 'Biographical Patterns in Biblical Narrative'. The essay, rambling in its format, is really more concerned with suggesting a morphology for biography, and it imposes Proppian functions to analyze what are deemed to be central moments in Jacob's story. I have briefly overviewed the

structure of biblical biography in 'Love's Roots: On the Redaction of Genesis 30:14-24', a paper scheduled to appear in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East* (Pope Festschrift).

2. I have adapted vocabulary used in the drama, but I have been most influenced by the analyses of plays which have been especially prepared for musical settings. Opera aficionados may recognize that the modes to be presently discussed obtain, to some degree, in respectively the baroque and the romantic operas; see Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York: Schirmer, 1970).

3. It may be noted here that the Old Testament contains only three bona fide dramatic biographies, those of Jacob, Moses and David. A particular niche can be allocated to the Samson story. The Joseph narrative is, at best, but a torso of a dramatic biography.