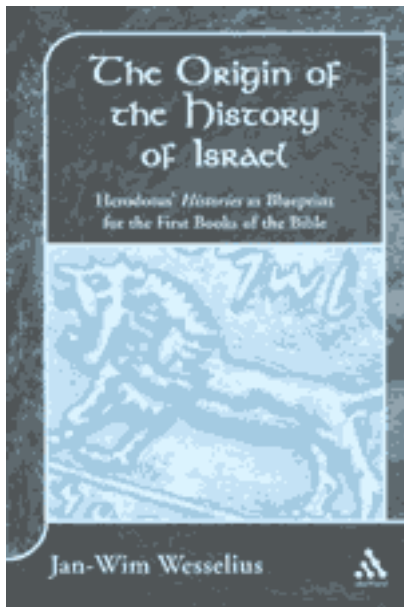


RBL 08/2003



Wesselius, Jan-Wim

The Origin of the History of Israel: Herodotus' Histories As Blueprint for the First Books of the Bible

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
Supplement Series 345

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002. Pp. xi + 175. Hardcover. \$95.00. ISBN 1841272671.

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This is an intriguing book that defends an unusual thesis. According to Wesselius the *enneateuch* or the Primary History (Genesis up to 2 Kings) was composed in the end of the fifth century B.C.E. using Herodotus's *Histories* as a blueprint. This thesis does not come as a surprise, however. Scholars such as Van Seters, Lemche, and Fleming Nielsen already paid attention to similarities between the two literary *corpora*. It should be noted, however, that they were discussing different areas of comparison: Van Seters made clear that there are no age-old sources underlying the composition of Herodotus and that therefore by analogy it cannot be assumed that the Hebrew Bible is based on written or oral traditions that survived the ages. It is important to note therefore, that, Van Seters's insights cannot be used as an argument in favor of the thesis of Wesselius.

Wesselius's argument runs as follows. He starts with the observation that both literary complexes are composed of nine books. Next to that he points at a few dozen similarities. I will mention a few. Both Joseph and Cyrus lived in exile before reaching a powerful position. Both Xerxes and Moses crossed the water border between two continents as on dry land. The structure of the genealogy of

the Persian/Median royal family resembles that of the patriarchs. Joseph and Cyrus are in about the same position in the composition: at the second part of the first book. In a next step, Wesselius transform these similarities at the level of literary *topoi* into what he calls “structural elements” that were taken over from an existing literary work into a new one. Next, he declares that the *Histories* are more original, which would imply a date for the composition of the Primary History after the completion of Herodotus’s work. He then pays attention to the “Jewish” colony at Elephantine in southern Egypt. Aramaic documents from the fifth century B.C.E. make clear that in Elephantine a pluralistic cult for YHWH existed, including the veneration of Anath-Bethel, Herem-Bethel, and other divine beings. By the end of the fifth century B.C.E., however, a letter was sent to Jerusalem asking for instructions as to the correct way of celebrating Passover. The answer to that letter contains instructions that concur with the texts from the Primary History. Wesselius then draws the conclusion that this sudden shift in the religion in Elephantine should be construed as a parallel to a shift that took place in Jerusalem in the end of the fifth century B.C.E. when the Primary History was introduced as a religious text formative for the emerging Judaism.

At first sight, Wesselius’s argument is impressive, but he is not convincing. It is important to note that he does not operate with a clearly defined idea of historiography. Wesselius does not quote any modern scholar who has explained what people are doing when they are (re)constructing the past into a narrative text. This blind spot for theoretical history tallies with the methodological weaknesses in Wesselius’s argument. I will mention a few of them. Wesselius refers to various similarities throughout both literary corpuses. The distribution of these similarities over the two bodies is, however, very unequal. In the Primary History they are mainly spotted in Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Samuel. In the *Histories* they are restricted to the books 1, 2, and 8. The comparison in the depictions of Moses and Xerxes are interesting. Both figures, however, are portrayed at different spots in their compositions (Exodus versus book 7). This observation as such undermines the view that the *Histories* served as a structural *Vorlage* to the Primary History. Next, Wesselius does not account for the asymmetrical character of many of his similarities. Very important to him is the similarity that both Moses and Xerxes lead their people across the sea separating two continents as if on dry land. Apart from the question whether our present-day concept of “continent” suits fifth-century B.C.E. geographical ideas, it should be noted that Xerxes and Moses are not cast in the same role: Xerxes is a conqueror who failed in the end, Moses a successful liberator; Xerxes brought an army to the other side of sea, Moses his own people; The direction of Xerxes was

away from his homeland, Moses was directing to the promised land. These kinds of remarks can be made by almost all of Wesselius's similarities.

In 2001, Hans Barstad published an essay ("Deuteronomists, Persians, Greeks, and the Dating of the Israelite Tradition," in *Did Moses Speak Attic? Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period* [ed. L. L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 317; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001], 47–77) in which he made a clear distinction between "historical" and "typological" similarities. A fine example of historical similarity is formed by the likeness of the curses in Deut 28 and the stipulations in the Neo-Assyrians vassal treaties and loyalty oaths. They function in a very comparable context and are not asymmetrical in character (see H. U. Steymans, *Deuteronomium 28 und die adê zur Thronfolgeregelung Asarhaddons: Segen und Fluch im Alten Orient und in Israel* [OBO 145; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995]). This implies that Assyrian influence on the concept of covenant is more than likely. Typological similarities are of a different character. Job 3 as well as Jer 20 narrates that the "I"-character involved has reached such a miserable position that he wished he had never been born. Here the contexts are different, and literary influence is to be excluded. There is only a thematic similarity. In my view, the similarities displayed by Wesselius are of a "typological" character. Many of them can be classified as literary motifs that are to be expected in these kinds of texts.

Pivotal to Wesselius's argument is his switch from the observation of various similarities to their classification as being "structural elements." It should be noted that this classification is not properly argued. In my view, similarities could be assessed as such when they would have a "historical" character and occur at moments that are of great importance within their respective compositions. It might be that I overlooked something, but as I read Wesselius's book, I do not see an argument in favor of his classification.

Wesselius's reference to the Yahwistic cult in Elephantine is very interesting. It should be noted, however, that a shift in local cult is not documented. The so-called "collection account" (CAP 22; *TADAE* C3.15) should be dated to about the same period as the Passover letter. In this text the divine names Eshembethel and Anathbethel are attested. Although the interpretation of this list is far from clear, the text cannot be construed as a document that reflects a correct form of Yahwism according to the *symbol system* of the Primary History.

In sum, Wesselius has made an intriguing proposal, but as long as his case is argued as weakly as in this book, I will not adhere to his view.